

## CHAPTER 7

### CULTURE , VALUES AND LANGUAGE IN E-MAIL

#### 7.1 CROSS - CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

( In the business world today, the crucial factor in negotiation and sales is not the superiority of the product as much as the skill of the seller. ) In technology - driven business communities, many products are now of almost equal quality. The ready availability of state of the art technology has enabled better precision and therefore better made products. ( What is important then, is the skill of the seller in understanding the dynamics of the transaction between himself/herself and the potential customer. Malaysians who are expected to function successfully in the multicultural international arena of business need to be well prepared for the task. )

( International business success is maximised if there is a good command of the language as it is used in the community as well as the culture within which one is conducting business. Language and culture go together and are inextricably bound together. ) The language proficiency will enable the international business person to participate and understand the communication patterns, and the knowledge of culture will enable the business person to communicate effectively

within the cultural contexts, thereby increasing the general rapport with the foreign business counterparts.

The success of a Malaysian company abroad depends to some extent on how effectively its employees can exercise their skills in a new or different cultural setting. This depends not only on the job-related expertise of the person but also on how sensitive the individual is to the new cultural environment. Many times, failure in the international business setting is the result of inability to adapt to foreign ways of thinking and acting, and is not the result of professional incompetence. Technological development has brought the world closer in the physical sense but not necessarily in the cultural sense. Being culturally sensitive is a crucial factor in effective business communication. This analysis of one e-mail business transaction (consisting of three texts) between two culturally different groups would provide some insights on the cultural factors and assumptions made by the two parties. These three e-mail texts have been chosen because they are an example of a business transaction between the Perdana discourse community and a business person in America. The texts are restricted to three because it took only three texts to complete the negotiation and clinch the deal. The analysis that follow can be regarded as suggestive but not necessarily conclusive.

If communication between people from different cultures is to be truly successful, each party must understand the cultural assumptions and cultural backgrounds of the other. To maximise our chances of successfully understanding the cultures of different international business persons, we need to examine the cultural values of not only the counterpart but also our own and see how they conform

or contrast with whom we are negotiating, and also how they in turn affect our own communication. One can begin to understand the cultural stand by analysing actual business communication between two culturally different groups and see how they communicate within the constraints of their culture to achieve their individual business interests. This analysis of the e-mail transaction is an attempt to understand both the foreign and the home cultural assumptions and preoccupations. Besides culture, for successful business practice, one should also consider the variety of language used in the business negotiation of this nature. The details of e-mail discourse will be discussed later in this chapter.

### **7.1.1 RULES OF INTERACTION AMONG THE MALAYS**

While one cannot predict the exact cultural values of every resident of a country with absolute certainty, one can view statements about cultural traits as a heuristic framework to help identify some basic value differences between cultures.

According to Asmah,(1992), Malays have a set of cultural rules which inform what one should or should not do when interacting with another person. One aspect of the rule of speaking stressed by Asmah is that of indirectness in speaking. She has identified four ways of speaking indirectly, namely: beating about the bush, use of imagery, contradicting, and the use of a surrogate. This analysis of e-mail is about communication, between a Malay business person and an American. Asmah's research on the Malay cultural ways of communicating therefore becomes relevant and crucial in the understanding of the Malay psyche in this communication. These

cultural insights are necessary to better inform our perception of the cultural values influencing the communication of the Malay business person with someone in America.

According to Asmah, in the first type of interaction mentioned, the beating about the bush type, the speaker takes the time to talk about other matters and not directly the issue at hand. The other matters talked about may not be related at all to the main issue to be discussed. For example, if a wife wants her curtains changed, she does not broach the subject directly but informs her husband indirectly that it would be embarrassing, if there were guests and they saw the dishevelled curtains in their home. The wife is actually asking for consent to change the curtains but does this obliquely and not directly. The beating about the bush technique is not only used for requests as the above example has shown but also but also for getting information from people.

Use of imagery is another form used in conversational discourse. Imagery is used to elicit information, for example to confirm a rumour about a friend getting married. The way to go about eliciting information is by using images traditionally associated, with in this case the social event of marriage. One would then ask the person concerned if one would be eating rice cooked in ghee soon. This rice preparation is usually reserved for weddings and celebrations. To ask the information directly is embarrassing and considered uncouth. By asking for information in this indirect way, the party is forced to confirm or deny the statement thereby providing the information asked.



The contradiction technique of indirectness is used in both amicable, and antagonistic situations. In the positive, situation, the function of the contradiction is to suppress one's self importance because such attitudes are not condoned by society and is contrary to the teachings of Islam. For example, praise is not given directly if one wants to compliment a person's cooking ability. One says that it must have taken a long time to cook such an elaborate meal. The host on the other hand, replies that the meal is actually not tasty and is nothing much thereby superficially contradicting the praise. The non-verbal message transmitted by the joy on her face would indicate to the visitor that the compliment is accepted with the modesty required. This mode of accepting compliments and praise is totally different from Occidental culture where a prompt thank-you is the accepted response.

In the category identified as use of a surrogate, there are three parties involved in the communication, namely; the person who initiated the message, the person used to transmit the message and finally the receiver, or the person for whom the message is intended. The verbalisation in this speech event is only between two persons, the one used as the transmitter of the message and the receiver of the message. The originator of the message remains silent. The surrogate situation is used when there is a big gap between the originator and the receiver of the message. The gap could be due to status, age, etc. The necessity of a surrogate can also arise because of a sociolinguistic reason when one feels one does not have the knowledge about the rules of speaking in that particular context.

These various forms of indirect communication are evident in the communication of the Malay, identified as F in this e-mail

communication. Similarly, the American cultural values are also found in the communication of the American, identified as B in this e-mail communication.

### 7.1.2 CULTURAL VALUES OF THE AMERICANS

Ferarro, (1990) has identified nine characteristics of the average American. He says that the United States places a high value on:

(1) individualism, (2) a precise reckoning of time, (3) a future orientation, (4) work and achievement, (5) control over the natural environment, (6) youthfulness, (7) informality, (8) competition, and (9) relative equality of the sexes. " (Ferraro, 1990:94).

Ferarro says that in American culture, the value of the individual as supreme and as having the capacity to shape his or her own destiny is very strong. The individual is seen as capable of assessing his or her own actions and at the same time is responsible for them. To be autonomous and a fully functioning individual in society is the aim of education in the United States. While American stress individuality, the researcher's own observation of her Malay friends reveal that the Malays, on the other hand, reveal that they stress conformity and group orientation as opposed to individual orientation.

Time plays a central role in the life of the American, so that no matter where they are, they know the correct time. Promptness is highly valued in the United States, whereas the researcher's observation of Malays show that do not see any merit in punctuality for its own sake but look at time through social events, like harvesting time, fasting time, praying time etc.

Another feature of American culture is the high value that is placed on human energy and action. In America, one's occupation, is a powerful force in shaping one's individual personal identity. In American society, when meeting someone for the first time, after the initial exchange of names, the second piece of information received is usually the occupation. This culture with its emphasis on "doing" demands activity that results in accomplishment.

An assumption of American culture is that nature and the physical environment can and should be controlled. They always want to and feel the need to be in the forefront of anything. This is unlike the Malays, who deemphasise self importance and the self (Asmah,1992). This researcher's observation of the Malays in this country shows a non preoccupation with the need to dominate any physical environment.

Americans tend to emphasise what is new and young by keeping up with new trends and maintaining a youthful spirit. The US can be said to a future -oriented society. The Malays, on the other hand, revere age, tradition, highly specialised rules of speaking etc. For example, there is a very specialised code for speaking with royalty. (Asmah,1978).

Informality is another important theme in the United States. Through the years, they have developed an informal speaking etiquette, and placed high importance on interpersonal relationship and having no barriers across status and positions. This view is different from the Malays who have highly specialised codes of speaking for different strata of the society. The language used to the vendor in the market will be very different to the language used to the

ruler of the state. It is not just to do with formality and politeness but actual differences even at the level of specialised lexis. (Asmah,1978).

North Americans frequently assume that informality is a prerequisite for sincerity. They feel uncomfortable when faced with ceremony, tradition, formalised social events and they also have a general aversion for rank. This American propensity for informality is reflected in the structure of their language. They go out of the way to play down status and rank and there is usually a strong desire to establish friendships quickly with a strong emphasis on the interpersonal function. Closely associated with individualism is the emphasis placed on competition. There is a strong desire for victory, to be the winner, the one who is ahead. Finally in the United States, Ferarro has indicated that women have a greater degree of equality in America than in many other countries.

The rationale behind providing these cultural insights into the two communities engaged in this e-mail negotiation is for the purpose of awareness raising. It aims to demonstrate the differences, and in the process, increase understanding. This cultural awareness allows us to see how our own cultural orientations differ from that of others, and by discovering the basic cultural difference, how they affect communication. Such an awareness can contribute to individuals making the necessary adjustments necessary for meaningful cross-cultural communication.

The shared meanings of business include business techniques, that is, procedural knowledge as well as conceptual knowledge. Knowing how to perform actions in certain ways is a strong feature of business discourse. Knowing how to communicate effectively in business really means knowing how to do it the accepted way. The accepted everyday happenings in business are actions that are repeated many times in the community. The method of carrying out the business activity is as important as the result one expects to achieve because of the activity. Actions such as these are ways of making meaning in business communication. Knowing how to do business the correct way involves semiotic practices that make sense in the business community. These semiotic practices are also an important part of what presently constitutes business practices.

Particular kinds of activities require particular kinds of language. Very often, the nature of the activity can be determined by the style of language use. In this sense, language reflects the activity. At the same time, language can help to create a situation. A change in style, tone, or vocabulary of language can signal a new type of activity. The linguistic term "register" refers to the particular kind of language used in a specific situational context. Halliday uses the term, register, to describe " a set of meanings that is appropriate to a particular function of language, together with the words and structures which express these meanings" (Halliday, 1978:195). The business register is made up of specific uses of language for business purposes. This

includes the words and structures of business, both spoken and written, and the meanings they express. In the business community, there is an implicit requirement to use language in certain kinds of ways. These words and structures are privileged over other language forms. Learning business discourse involves learning its register. Register is characterised in three ways : field, tenor and mode (Halliday 1978).

**Field** refers to the social activity that is happening, in which language plays a part. It describes what people are doing and includes topic and subject matter. **Tenor** refers to the roles and personal relationships or participants in the social activity. Thus, it includes power, status, feelings and attitude. **Mode** refers to the means of communication, the way in which the interaction happens and the way it is organised. This might be speaking, or writing, or using a symbolic form of representation. Acquiring a register requires facility with each of these three aspects. What this means is that it demands more than learning the appropriate words and structures. It also involves being able to predict the kind of language appropriate to field, tenor and mode for a particular context of situation.

Lemke (1982) asserts that, "what characterises a particular **register** is the way its "meaning potential" is restricted within the " meaning potential " of the full language" (1982a:32). If familiarity with a particular context of situation allows us to predict features of its register, then we can say that the register has a 'meaning potential.' The meaning is conveyed through the choice of words and/or structure that is different or more specific than the meaning potential in the language as a whole. There are possible uses of language and

possible meanings for every situation. These possibilities are enabled and constrained by the situational context.

The language used in the business community cannot be regarded as fixed or as having a distinct set of words. Words alone do not carry the meanings of business discourse. To operate and control the register of business discourse, learners need to master its complex systems of meaning relations, and its ways of thinking within the context of everyday usage. The term "semiotic formation" (Lemke, 1987) like the term "discursive formations" (Foucault, 1970) describes the repeated, institutionalised ways of talking and doing in a community. A semiotic formation is a pattern of meaningful action that uses semiotic resources such as language. For example, all subjects draw on language as a resource, yet each has its own ways of speaking and behaving.

The following very brief transcripts of e-mail communication (texts 1, 2, & 3) exemplify ways in which members use language appropriate to the context of situation. The point I am making here is that, in order to understand the language practices of the business community, it is important to examine the way in which something is said as well as what is being said.

Taking up Lemke's notion that every act, including talk, has both an interactional and a thematic meaning, we can say that it contributes to two interdependent discourse structures: activity structures and thematic structures. **Activity structures** are the routines that make up business life. They are "recurring functional sequences of actions" (Lemke 1987:219). These actions can be verbal or non-verbal. Business dialogue typically includes activity structures such as board

meetings, client - customer contracts, negotiations etc. These are the routines that typically occur in a business community. Different business communities specialising in different types of products may have their own slightly different activity structures.

**Thematic structures**, on the other hand, are sometimes also referred to as thematic formations. They are the:

recurring patterns of semantic relations  
among the themes and concepts of a  
particular way of speaking about a subject  
(Lemke 1987:219).

These are the familiar ways of speaking about a particular topic or theme. Texts that construct the same patterns of meaning relations have the same thematic structure. A thematic structure can be the theme in single transaction even if that single transaction consists of many texts. Certain elements in all the texts involved in the transaction would have a basic similar theme or commonality. For example, within a business negotiation, the different stages ie. a verbal discussion, the written follow through and the actual contract drawn up might all share the same thematic system. To quote another example, after a sale has been secured, the resultant purchasing order, the delivery order and the invoice would have the same thematic structure. The assumption underpinning this view is that everything that is said or done in business contributes to both of these structures, that is, meaning cannot be separated from action. An important implication of this view is that in order to understand the use of language in the business community it is necessary to consider its role in both the



enactment of activities and in the development of the content matter of the activity.

The activity structures and the thematic systems within this technology - driven business register combine to produce the particular discourse that I have called computer mediated business discourse. Consider as an example of the interrelation between the activity structures and thematic structures in language, the following business negotiation between two interested parties. (Texts 1,2 & 3).

## **7.3 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

This piece of communication (text 1, 2, and 3 is situated within business discourse as e-mail (computer generated) from one business person to another. The text is constrained and constituted by the logonomic system it is in. These three E-mail texts form one successful business transaction with a business partner half way across the world within one and a half days and without anyone having to leave the confines of their own office rooms.

### **7.3.1 E-MAIL DISCOURSAL CHARACTERISTICS**

What is striking about these e-mail transactions in this community is that all communication in and outside the office is in English and not in Malay, even though more than seventy -five percent of the employees of Perdana are Malays One reason for this change could be that the socio-linguistic structure of the Malays in this organisation is most times governed by western business practices. Another possibility could be that the constant interaction with many

western cultures may have made English the primary language of communication and this predominant medium in the social processes has transferred into communication patterns within one's own home ecosystem as well. Technology could be another reason for this change in pattern of communication. English is the language of technology and since this is a technology-driven community, it would be natural to adopt the predominant medium into all their interaction.

The logonomic rules of E-mail are still not fixed because it is a relatively new genre and is still in the process of change. However, culling from current usage, the discursual features of this genre are better understood when compared with that of the traditional persuasive business letter as this e-mail transaction falls in the same genre and thematic category as persuasive communication in business.

On the surface it seems that the codes and numbers used to identify persons in computer mediated business communication, create confidentiality and anonymity. On the other hand, these very codes and numbers enable one to precisely pinpoint to the author of the correspondence. This seeming anonymity is only a cover up for actual responsibility and accountability in unscrupulous business practice. These nondescript numbers and codes enable the corporate powers to identify, pinpoint and single out capable managers by their communication skills and ability and just as easily axe non-performers.

These e-mail texts have institutionalised legitimation, because they have an identity number, time and institution name on them, plus they have been saved on the office storage system, implying that

they can be recalled by the powers that be for scrutiny at any time. This may not happen at all but the provision for that possibility is inbuilt into the system. These texts, though seemingly superficial and social in content, are obviously very much business routine and practice and can be viewed as important institutional property, that is available at the stroke of a key. It presupposes good communication skills as necessary for business practices. Good communication skills become crucial for success and achievement in the business community. (Estad and Ferryman, 1990; Chan and Goh, 1991; 1993 ; Chan, 1993).

7.3.1.1            DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TRADITIONAL BUSINESS LETTER  
AND E-MAIL

The discorsal features of electronic mail and that of the traditional business letter are itemised in table 7A below. Traditionally, the rules of letter writing in business specify: a set format; date, reference number, salutations, identification of business at hand, the body of the letter, and finally the complimentary close. All these features are written in grammatically correct, formal English, following what is commonly taught by schools teaching Business English. In these e-mail texts, some of the logonomic rules of letter writing are partially held and some rules have partially undergone modifications. These modifications have come about as a result of the demands of technology. Now that technology is used as an enabler in the communication, the time of the correspondence to the nearest second seem more crucial than the traditional date because messages can now be communicated across seas within seconds. The date is present in most e-mail but what has become important is that the time of correspondence is also given.

Table 7 A

## Discourse Features of E-mail and the traditional business letter

TRADITIONAL LETTER	E- MAIL
Date	Time 13;49 PST
Reference number	item number 9749835 This is computer generated and computer controlled by the software.
salutations (formal)	Salutations (informal)
person identified by name or title	person identified by code FEpool, VALDEZ2
subject identification- intention is said directly	subject identification but intent can sometimes be misleading and not said directly
body of letter in paras (formal, complete , grammatically correct, with all the relevant cohesive devices))	body of letter does not follow the traditional rules of letter writing in terms of complete sentences, cohesive devices, punctuation marks, etc A combination of formal and informal structures are present. Texts organised not in paragraphs, or in meaningful chunks but are cut randomly following the idiosyncrasies of the underlying software
complimentary close (formal)	complimentary close also present but informal
Usually not advised to write a PS, an NB. sometimes. Again function in letter is specific and definite.	PS. an after thought, in this e-mail has a very important function though it appears to seem casual. (details in discussion later)
"with reference to ....."	FWD> B **** Means instructions based on what has been forwarded by B ***** Such headers could vary according to in house requirements.
Confidential/Non confidential indicated on cover	Password needed to read Doc. Not open to all.

In text 1, note spelling error in subheading, use of punctuation marks !!!, and truncated phrases at the least expected places. Such features are not a reflection of lack of proficiency on the part of the writer but probably due to the constraints imposed by technology. The advancement of technology and the software used at this point in time allow a certain number of characters to appear in a string and it automatically shifts to the next line once the maximum number of characters is reached, regardless of semantics.

This discourse is obviously constituted by the technology it is encoded in. Sentences do not need to be punctuated and none of the sentences in these texts are punctuated in the traditional sense. If punctuation marks are used at all it is for emphasis or to replicate some of the features of face to face conversation. The other ways that it transgresses the socio-cultural norms of written discourse are by the use of spaces, new lines, use of highlights, creative spelling as in YEEEEES etc for emphasis. All these have come about as a result of the technology. Another possible reason for classifying these texts as informal is because, no effort has been made to correct misspelt words nor is time taken to punctuate the text as has been formally taught. It is accepted in such communication, that the meaning is more important than grammatical accuracy as time is a precious commodity and costs money. One does not waste time tidying up little slips. Note also writer's creative use of punctuation marks, for example, ?!!! in text 1

**Text 1 (F to B )**

Item 4083019

7- Mar- 93

23.01PST

From: FEP0011

Perdana

Malaysia, JDV

Sub: CONGATULATIONS!

Dear B \*\*\*\*\*

*Congratulations on your new role (Promotion?)!!!*

*It s a pity I couldn't meet you at your last assignment in Singapore  
but A \*\*\*\* did go instead.*

*Of course we are just as excited that you are now at ESD As A \*\*  
and R\*\*\*\**

*(of Every Where and Butler) may have told you we are working hard to  
get our*

*EIS product out the door. This is the version that was rewritten in "C"  
instead*

*of 4D. We have been talking to R\*\*\* to possibly handle the product  
for overseas*

*markets but are still looking round for other potential partners. The product  
will ship 3rd Qtr 93.*

*For your information Mac EIS V2 (codenamed executive desktop)  
now also has some true 4GL features including its own applescript like  
language. The motorola chip factory over here has agreed to be a beta site and  
probably future user.*

*The project in the prime minister's office is also now on the pilot user's desk.  
Now isn't that a good excuse for us to remain in touch!*

*Warmest regards and good luck in your new role.*

*F \*\*\*\*\**

*p.s. If you are interested,*

*we could send you the latest beta version of Executive Desktop.*

In informal letters, the PS. is sometimes added as an after thought but one does not as a rule find a PS in business letters. In this transaction, the PS. has very important implications even though it is given a seemingly unimportant space. F puts it at the end because it will be the last item that B will pay attention to and the one that will therefore linger and be the first thing in her mind. This particular piece of news is very important to the transaction and in a sense F has chosen the best position for the information, psychologically, physically and linguistically for maximum impact in the business negotiation. This analysis of the e-mail business transaction shows that there is conscious manipulation of persons and events and things. In this particular transaction, B can read the mixed contradictions in F's text (will be explained later in the chapter) and can reply in the same genre. It would seem that new members should learn this art. One has to be aware of all the rival voices involved and also the relationship between the rival voices within a situation in the negotiation and meaning-making practices of every dialogic text in business.

Business wheeling and dealing is traditionally associated with the male, the dominant, yet the whole negotiation is enacted in language that is commonly associated with "feminine" and "trivial" This electronic chatter 'negotiation' is high on the interpersonal function, filled with many pronouns and is punctuated with modality structures of perhaps and maybes and other possibilities. There is also a contradiction of rule in the logonomic system. This is supposed to be a formal business letter to a market potential, yet this particular negotiation can be seen as electronic chatter - a contradiction to traditional rules in written business discourse. But, this very rule is sometimes honoured and sometimes negated in practice depending on

the intention, person and context of situation as is shown by the discourse in text 3.. (refer to the differences between text 1 and 3)

#### 7.3.1.2      FORMALITY VERSUS INFORMALITY

With reference to table 7A, the E- mail texts seem more informal than formal when compared to the traditional business letters. In fact, these e-mail texts do not conform to the formal structure of the received traditions of written business discourse. Values, in terms of written communication, held dearly by the business communities of the past seem to be blatantly violated and obviously without any ill effects as proven by this successful negotiation between these two business persons.

There is an air of informality and friendship in the text written by F . (For example, the misspelling of the word congratulation, the excessive punctuation marks ?!!!, the use of contractions, could'nt, isn't etc.). F is a Malay officer working for Perdana. He comes from a culture that is steeped in tradition, formality, and indirectness. Yet, he has managed to put on or rather take on the culture of the host country (America) of the person with whom he is communicating (refer text 2). Informality and a strong desire to establish friendship is very much a part of the value system of America. (Ferraro, 1990). The Malays are also considered friendly but their way of doing things is different from the Americans.



Text 2 (B to F)

ITEM 9749835

8-MARCH-93

13.49 PST

FROM: VALDEZ2

Valdez, B

To: FEP0011

Perdana

Malaysia, IDV

Sub: Re: CONGATULATIONS!

Hi (F \*\*\*\*\*)

*I was hoping to see you when I was there... My new position won't have me travelling quite so much but I'm sure to get back to Singapore occasionally.*

*Why don't you send me a demo of your EIS and I can show it off for you.*

*I've got a nice big hardware /software lab to use these days.*

*Also you may want to make sure to show this at the Singapore AECC (planned for August).*

*I'm especially interested in your applescript -like environment. We may be able to sell the product for you faster than you'd like !*

*Best wishes to all,*

(B \*\*\*\*\*)

(full address is given)

This ability of F to take on the values of the host country is an indication of his cross-cultural sensitivity. It is only a “put on” culture because F reverts to the norms of his own culture when he communicates with his fellow Malaysians within the organisation. Consider the text 3 that F, had written to his fellow mates within the organisation.

### **Text 3 ( F to subordinates)**

*Can you arrange to send a copy. Finalise with John on how to word the non-disclosure agreement for this case.(see sample re R \*\*\*\*\* W)*

When communication is within the organisation, in home ground, there are no salutations and no need for polite formalities. F’s communication within the organisation is completely different from his communication to someone outside the organisation.

In the home ground, the cultural values within the sociocultural context is basically Malay. Malay culture stresses status, honorifics, positions, age, etc. (Asmah, 1987). There could be a cultural reason for the change in key by F. F has switched to his own cultural norms and values when he communicates with his fellow staff within the organisation. (This change shows that discourse type does construct social relations). F is obviously higher up in the hierarchy when compared to the persons he is talking to within the organisation. Hierarchy is communicated directly through discourse in home ground but implied by strategy and selective revealing of “high powered details.” when the communication is outside the immediate discourse community.

The selective high powered details (refer to text 1) include information like : Prime Minister's office, (which implies that it has the approval of the government) Motorola, (a respected name in the telecommunications industry. This implies association with the giants) the product will ship 3rd Qtr 93, (implies that they are in the forefront of innovation and that it is almost ready for the market) etc. Directions and orders are given within the organisation without any thought of creating this "sense of social nicety" even though the Malay race, as a rule, are a polite group of people. It appears that communication at a distance, electronically, has more intimacy. This is a paradox. It seems that when further away from home there is a need to inscribe social roles effectively, but there is no such need within the home environment.

The disregard for the social niceties in the home environment could be because social niceties are not expected in the home discourse community.. One reason could be that within the organisation everyone knows his/her role, position, status etc and therefore, there is no need for the social niceties. This example shows that relationships do determine communication types. Participants who want to function effectively in business practice need to do things within the overall system and also know how to balance and use discourse according to office and context. This air of informality in the communication (refer to text 1, and text 2) creates a sense of camaraderie and bonding. Use of words like ESD, EIS, C, 4D, MacEIS (Strongly coded transaction) are probably used as a kind of anti language in the sense that acronyms are used to create solidarity through anti language among community members in the

telecommunication world. This has the effect of creating allegiance as both are united by their expertise. The bonding through a common language and common interests brings both nations closer.

#### 7.3.1.3 GRAMMAR

“Machine language” such as used here (refer texts 1,2 & 3) does not draw attention to language competences at the superficial level but at the same time it does not display, rather it hides, language incompetence at the level of lexis. What it does show, though, is that meaning is important and literary ‘high culture’ is not necessary. The contents are communicated in simple English. This seemingly simple English carries very strong implications of intent as evidenced in these texts. Such language differs from, in fact contradicts, the kind of teaching for business discourse that has been traditionally going on in Malaysia. A tradition which stresses formality, and grammatical accuracy. On the surface it seems as though sentences are simple and straight forward in these electronic texts but a closer inspection shows that words have been carefully structured together to produce the desired effect collectively and not at the level of lexis. Obviously grammar is going to be very important in this new electronic discourse. There may be a renewed interest in the teaching of grammar because of the demands placed on communication as a result of technology. Refer to example 1A below:

### Example 1 A (from Text 1, F to B)

*we are working hard to  
get our  
EIS product out the door. This is the version that was rewritten in  
"C" instead  
of 4D. We have been talking to R\*\*\* to possibly handle the  
product  
for overseas  
markets but are still looking round for other potential partners. The  
product  
will ship 3rd Qtr 93.*

If one analyses the text above using Halliday's semiotic systemic analysis, F, in terms of Transitivity choices relies heavily on material processes (underlined in Example 1A) above - thereby giving the impression of being active, busy and very much involved in business processes, a cultural trait that is valued in America (Ferro, 1990) and this probably makes him a respected person by American standards. He has also placed himself in the position of giving, or telling information, hence giving himself the competitive edge over his communication partner. His sentences are in the present tense as if whatever he says is absolute truth. This again another trait that is respected by the future oriented American society.

On the other hand, refer to example 1B below, where B, in terms of transitivity choices is also concerned with material processes but her sentences are equally high on the mental and relational processes.

## Example 1B

(B to F)

*I was hoping to see you when I was there... My new position won't have me*

*travelling quite so much but I'm sure to get back to Singapore occasionally.*

*Why don't you send me a demo of your EIS and I can show it off for you.*

*I've got a nice big hardware /software lab to use these days.*

*Also you may want to make sure to show this at the Singapore AECC (planned for August).*

*I'm especially interested in your apple script -like environment. We may be able to sell the product for you faster than you'd like !*

*Best wishes to all,*

Even though she holds a position as senior as F, in her own organisation, she has placed herself in a weaker position, negotiation wise, by virtue of F's ingenuity in his choice of discourse. She is receiving and asking for information thus she puts power in favour of the giver of information. It shows by her choice of using material processes that she is influenced by her cultural values of her society. She is also a rather competent player in this negotiation game as she has replied to F in a genre similar to his complete with contradictions and all. The contradictions mentioned earlier in the chapter, refer to the change in tone and role or voices portrayed. The contradicting tones and voices in his e-mail include : the air of friendliness / the unscrupulous business person, the individual voice / the voice of the

institution, etc. These various roles that he plays affects the tone which, creeps in and out of his discourse as his role changes. However, in terms of gender, the male **F**, is cleverly using the controlling code and the female **B**, therefore is "forced" to be in the responding code. (Poyton, 1985). In this transaction, the male **F** is controlling, things, events, and even people. The female **B**, shows instead responsiveness to things, events and most of all people. In **B**, there is greater use of modality structures indicating that she may not be so confident of the reality she is projecting. In a sense this places her in a weaker position in the negotiation as she is dependent on her ability to convince him of her capabilities, for example, "sell it faster than you'd like" (refer text 2). Kress and Fowler (1979) however, argue that those who perceive themselves as more powerful often compensate by over-modalising.

#### 7.3.1.4 COHESION AND COHERENCE

There is an absence of cohesion in the traditional sense. Within text discourse seems to be truncated partly because of the technology it is enshrined in. Degrees of explicit cohesion (as in these E-mail texts) is missing but implied (logical) coherence is present and is therefore going to be very important in such communication. This logical coherence is seen in the way the text unfolds to fit the context of situation. As pointed out by Ventola:

when a social process unfolds, from element to element, each element is 'fine tuned' separately to fit the dynamically changing context of situation. That is, as the generic structure unfolds constant reorientation takes place in respect to different possible Field, Tenor and Mode options (Ventola 1986: 5).

For example when the interactants in these texts are establishing attention in the beginning, selections from Tenor seem more important than Field for example. Then, when it comes to a stage where they are negotiating for some kind of goods and services or information, a whole range of Field choices become relevant. Finally, when a decision has been made overtly or covertly as in this case, mode selections become important as in Text 3, where F asks for a hard copy - the non disclosure agreement to be sent. So, as the social process unfolds there is constant selections stage by stage for the different register values in the context of situation.

## **7.4 CULTURAL FILTERS IN E-MAIL**

### **7.4.1 THE TRAIT OF INDIRECTNESS**

The rules in terms of power of the individual is changed to a certain extent. The personal is displaced by the business organisation as in text 1, congratulations etc are only superficial phatic communication because business negotiation on behalf of the organisation is the main issue. This indirect business negotiation is very much a part of the Malay culture. According to Asmah,1992, the "beating about the bush" sign of indirectness refers to a speaker taking some time to talk of other things before arriving at his real intention. Asmah uses the Firthian term " phatic communion" to explain this concept.

This indirect negotiation which is a part of Malay culture is really a very sophisticated business technique for negotiation and its



effectiveness is shown by this successful negotiation. This negotiation has resulted in the deal being clinched in favour of Perdana at the end of one and a half days although the business persons are half way round the world from each other.

If this transaction with its seeming air of informality is judged by American occidental values and criteria it would seem that in the Malaysian business arena there is conscious manipulation and deceit carried to the level of sophistication through its politeness and superficial social etiquette. On the other hand, if one were to look at this particular transaction in terms of Asian culture, it would seem culturally appropriate for F (a Malay) to negotiate "indirectly" because indirectness is associated with refinement in Malay culture. F does not negotiate directly with B because it is considered to be "kasar" (in Malay) or crass (in English) by Malaysian cultural standards to negotiate directly on a delicate matter such as this negotiation. This perception, is confirmed by Asmah (1992) who says:

To complete the well bred gesture, their verbalisation should not have any indication of "directness." That is to say, whatever they wanted to put across to the other person should be done in an indirect way, whatever the intention was, and this was considered refined (Asmah, 1992: 176).

One is not supposed to be blatant and transparent as preached in American Occidental business culture because such behaviour is considered culturally inappropriate by Malaysians. In this case even the American counterpart is obviously culturally sensitive and very aware because she has managed to reply in a similar culturally

appropriate vein of indirectness while still holding on to all the seven moves of a typical persuasive sales letter genre. (Refer Bhatia 1993 for a detailed explanation) The moves that Bhatia refers to are: establishing credentials, introducing the offer, offering incentives, enclosing documents, soliciting response, using pressure tactics, and ending politely. Although one sees the separate cultural values or variations colouring the moves within the genre of both interactants, the participants have still adhered to the business conventions of the genre of the persuasive business letter. The generic practices of the business communities are still adhered to despite these cultural interferences. As found in this particular genre of negotiation via the E-mail, all the elements of a persuasive sales letter as identified by Bhatia (1993) are present in one form or other and by one name or another in these texts.

There is a significant rise in individual initiation of business activity ever since technology became transparent, a given in this community. It is obvious that F has initiated this communication for self interest that is, the interest of the institution he represents. With technology, there is a cut down in red tape in business and selected individuals have been given the authority to use their discretion in initiating negotiation. This emphasis on the self is very much a part of American culture. The idea and value of the individual is supreme in American business companies. The individual has the capacity to shape his /her own destiny and be responsible of his or her own actions and be competent to assess the effects of his or her own actions. F seems to display all these characteristics of the American value system as well. This shows a temporary breakdown in the Malay

cultural values that he comes from. As reported by Asmah (1992) on Malay youth:

directness in the modern form of communication in which Malays are involved, for example in advertisement, political campaigns, where self-acclamation is the rule of the game, is something new to the Malay culture and way of life.

Indirectness as a rule of speaking is also an explanation to the reticence among Malay youths at interviews for jobs. Their culture and upbringing demand that they should not be direct, and in doing so they appear inhibited and not forward enough to people who interact with them. Here we can see what is finesse in culture may be construed as backwardness in achievement (Asmah 1992: 186).

#### **7.4.2 SURROGATE SITUATION**

The interpersonal function is very strong in transactions of this kind. Throughout the whole interaction there is no mention of the institution that each represents yet one can plainly see that the institution is very much in the forefront and very visible despite its apparent invisibility. This is because, firstly, the very exercise of this communication is taken on as part of business routine and practice (part of the job) and thus anyone in higher authority can call up the actual communication that is stored in the institution's storage system to check exactly what is going on. It is really the institutions negotiating in the guise of two friendly individuals. Since this is very much a Malay business discourse community, it could be exhibiting the "surrogate situation" that (Asmah 1992) talks about:

Hence, verbalisation in this particular speech event comes only from the transmitter and the receiver of the message, but the originator is all the time present. The situation can be likened to one in a law court, only that there is no cross examination of the originator of the message. The message transmitter is then the surrogate. The surrogate situation arises when there is a gap between the message originator and its receiver. This gap may relate to status, age, camaraderie, etc. (Asmah, 1992:185).

In this situation, a person is appointed to act on behalf of another party. In Perdana, it may seem beneath the dignity of the owners of the company to talk business at this lower level, so they may have given the mandate to F to act on their behalf. This is confirmed by the way F uses privileged information boldly and openly. He can do that because he is not speaking in his own capacity but on behalf of the institution so he is really voice of the institution, in the guise of the friendly individual. Words and phrases like : it is in the prime minister's office, Motor Rola, beta site etc are all instances of privileged information. He is actually revealing private and confidential information as the product has not reached the market yet and as such this inside information is only available to a privileged few. The individual, F, knows he can divulge these bits of information probably because he has the institution's blessing and therefore given the mandate to be the "surrogate." .

### 7.4.3 USE OF IMAGES

These carefully selected images by F in his e-mail also indicates a skill that he has picked up for the culture he comes from. Use of imagery is a common form of communication among the Malays. (Asmah,1992). The images F selects to disclose (Prime minister's office, Beta site, probable future user, Motor Rola etc in text 1) conjures up images of success, importance and power. For example, MacEIS V2, prime minister's office, Motor Rola chip factory etc are all strong images as already discussed earlier to a potential business partner in the same trade.

### 7.4.4 DE-EMPHASIS OF THE SELF

F's text is also high in the interpersonal function. In his short text (refer text 1) there are 15 interpersonal words where the individual is emphasised. There are also many direct references to himself. These direct references appear in almost every line. This is again very unlike the culture he comes from, a culture which de-emphasises the self. This perception is corroborated by research findings by Asmah :

The insignificance of subject in discourse-sentences is a reflection of a society that de-emphasises the individual, as the case is with the traditional Malay society in general. A discourse that protrudes the self or the individual is evaded as it is considered to be impolite (Asmah, 1987: 155).

If one looks at the two texts by F and B at a deeper level, it seems that a very important negotiation is going on in the seemingly trivial social theme of congratulations. On the one hand, one has the sense of "buddy " (solidarity) in the interaction and at the same time there is

also the hardcore, unscrupulous business person (power) at work beneath this veneer of friendship. There seems to be no evidence of overt power struggle, yet it is obvious there is some sort of power struggle going on in the sense that one is pitching to be accepted as an agent and the other is offering the possibility of getting the contract without really committing himself. Business negotiation is obviously being carried out.

#### **7.4.5 FLATTENING OF THE HIERARCHY**

The flattening of hierarchy in this discourse community is seen from two perspectives, the technology and the mandate given to selective individuals in the community. In terms of technology, as shown in chapter six, many of the routine decision making processes even important decision making processes have been taken over by technology. The quantitative tables given after each activity centre described in chapter six indicate the extent technology has taken over decision making and thus flattened hierarchy.

In these e-mail texts, there is an indication of flattening of hierarchy in the sense that important negotiation usually done by the owners of the company is now left to the initiative of members in the community. The new office technologies have flattened hierarchy and given more emphasis to individuals to make decisions and negotiation. Individuals at the management level of this organisation have a desktop computer that is hooked up with E-mail facilities. These facilities indicate that these individuals, by virtue of being given this facility, have the authority to communicate directly with business links within and outside the organisation. They also have full knowledge

that all communication while seemingly personal and private because it is done on their own desktop in the privacy of their own office room, can actually be public, institutional property because their communication is done as part of their job. For these people, the selection of what to include and what to omit will be a function of the social/business roles of informing and socialising as well as upholding the ideology of the institution and its value systems. Individuals must know directionality and system to succeed in business negotiation and practice.

## 7.5 CONCLUSIONS

This analysis has prompted the researcher to view business texts as dynamic open systems just as business organisations are viewed in this study. Viewed this way, one can then map multiple voices (the voice of the individual, the voice of the institution, the voice of the business person, the voice of the male, etc.) into each text and thereby produce a discourse that can be characterised by many levels of contextualisation to produce a new range of meaning possibilities. Seen this way texts in business are actively constructed but not replicable in the sense of the kind of texts taught in Business English text books. What one can do at most is to reconstruct the text after its creation and certainly not before.

The texts here are analysed as both product and process. They are held still as instances of the system to discover their discoursal features and they are analysed as dynamic when the meaning potential is actively negotiated in the semiotic sense. Individuals wanting to be

members have to confront uncertain outcomes and learn to sensitise themselves to the many meaning possibilities of technology generated texts to become expert practitioners of business routines in a technology- driven business community.

This suggestive and not necessarily conclusive analysis of computer mediated business discourse should not be looked at as a debate as to whether technology is good for the business world or for business discourse in general but must be looked at with the view of working out the language and meaning possibilities in business discourse in order to train potential members to become effective members of such a community. The objective is enable Malaysians to be culturally sensitive and to enable them to communicate internationally as equal partners with all other participating countries via the information highway. In teaching literacy for the workplace, this analysis suggests that members should not only know how to use the language but must also be critical about how it works and what it constructs. This critical dimension of language awareness is a necessary part of progress and successful participation in the community.