

UNDERSTANDING NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION OF FILIPINOS

A Traditional Form of Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This research highlights how nonverbal meaning is conveyed in Filipino communication and when it is appropriate to use nonverbal communication. This unique form of communication is a cultural and traditional form that is practiced by Filipinos not only in the homeland but also in the diaspora. Evidence from this research suggests that nonverbal communication among Filipinos is just as powerful as written and oral literacy, enriches dialogue and interacts with other forms of literacy such as the written and oral forms. What remains inconclusive is to what extent Filipino nonverbal communication can be defined as a literacy practice in the same way as oral and written communication. An equally important research question is whether this important form of communication will survive the succeeding generations of Filipinos in the diaspora particularly in the United States.

Significance

Filipinos in the United States currently comprise 2.2 million of the nation's total population (U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2004), the second largest group following the Chinese among the Asian immigrant community. Understanding some of their cultural and traditional practices, including forms of communication, contributes to a greater appreciation of and better interaction with this huge community. The activity of the Filipino community in government, education, and business in the San Francisco Bay Area points to the importance and need of gaining a basic understanding of Filipino nonverbal literacy. For the following research, I use the term "discourse community" to mean a form of interaction that is utilized by a specific group of people to connote a shared sense of culture, family, or awareness. This study of the Filipino discourse community addresses the need to understand a component of an important Bay Area culture.

Rationale and Key Research Questions

The rationale for selecting the Filipino discourse community for the research came as a result of several personal experiences. Although I am not of Filipino descent, through marriage I became familiar with Filipino nonverbal literacy as a specific form of communication. I had made the assumption that I could recognize and utilize this nonverbal literacy, but I had little understanding of how it developed or why it is so significant in communication. Many of my friends and professional colleagues are of Filipino descent, and one of them is my primary research subject. The central research question of my study is: How can Filipino nonverbal communication be defined? The sub questions are the following:

1. How can nonverbal communication be interpreted as a literacy practice?
2. What are the uses of nonverbal communication, such as facial animation, in creating Filipino cultural identity?

Methods

The research methods used for this study are primarily qualitative, anthropological observations; open ended interviews; and interpretation of texts within a theoretical framework. The theory that informed this research is that other forms of communication are commonly used outside of the realm of written and oral communication. Moreover, forms of communication beyond oral and written forms may not necessarily function as a component of either, but rather can stand alone as a form of expression within a discourse community. The key influences and literature reviewed for this study are from American, other Western, and Filipino scholars in the fields of cultural anthropology and communication, as well as sociological research on exchanges among multicultural societies.

Review of the Literature

Literacy has been defined as a mode of communication with a guide or system universally recognized by its users (Bakhtin, 1986). Literacy has come in the form of written symbols as well as oral communication. Similarly to the way written communication establishes symbols as a form of literacy practice, Filipino nonverbal communication also relies on a series of facial animations and movements that are consistent and universally understood within its community of users.

The nonverbal literacy practice of tapping someone's arm in the Filipino community is understood as an acknowledgement of humor or joy. It is the contention of this researcher that this practice is wholly different from, for example, the pat on the back gesture used commonly in some parts of the United States (Korukonda & Hunt, 1989). The purpose of this literacy practice in the Filipino community is to present an existing understanding of friendship and camaraderie (a defined meaning), in contrast to the pat on the back that has been known to carry many different meanings depending on the situation in which it is used.

Oral communication as a literacy practice represents a form of expression that can be more intimate and personal than written literacy (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987; Ng & Bradac, 1995). Oral literacy, like written and nonverbal literacy requires an audience or receiver of information in its discourse. However, oral communication, like nonverbal communication, is often a physical activity that takes place in the presence of its target audience. (Radio and television broadcasts are common exceptions to this theory).

Filipino nonverbal literacy is based on many of the same principles as written and oral communication, but on some levels it is able to occur without the assistance of either. For example, sign language for the hearing impaired is a form of nonverbal literacy that is prevalent in many parts. This form of nonverbal communication has its own system of

information that is understood within its communities. However, it can be argued that sign language is rooted in the written language with regard to its country of origin (e. g. American Sign Language, Chinese Sign Language, or Columbian Sign Language). Oral communication can be seen as an extension of written language or as a part of written literacy that is chosen in certain situations to better express emotions or ideas. The fluidity that can exist between written and oral literacy is different from Filipino nonverbal literacy in that this form of communication can be taught and preserved without necessarily acting as a transition to a written form of its expression (Vygotsky, 1978).

Uses of Facial Animation in Filipino Identity

Nonverbal communication can be as predictable and consistent as written communication. Like oral communication, it is recognized that nonverbal communication does not occur within a vacuum, devoid of other literacy practices. The difference nonverbal communication represents in contrast to oral or written communication is that it is a literacy practice defined and utilized by being a member of that discourse community. In other words, nonverbal communication in the Filipino community is not readily available without a true understanding of the how, when, and why of movements and facial animations.

Nonverbal communication as a literacy practice in the Filipino community is unique because it serves as a grammatical indicator in oral communication without necessarily representing a word or phrase. In the research conducted with the Filipino community, it seemed more appropriate to define Filipino nonverbal literacy as indicators of transition in time or direction in communication. During observations of a Filipino discourse community at lunchtime, raising one's eyebrows and puckering lips functioned not only as modes of Filipino nonverbal literacy but also as a different conversation from the verbal discourse occurring simultaneously. Still, it is important to note that Filipino nonverbal literacy is familiar in that it serves to denote transition in conversations (eyebrows)

or to identify the position of objects (lips), and that there are indeed words in oral and written literacy practiced for the same purpose.

Yet, Filipino nonverbal practices are distinctive as cultural modifiers of literacy. There appears to be limited research in terms of published texts that could help demonstrate the use of these practices to someone outside of the discourse community. However, through multimedia sources, specifically web casts, individuals within the Filipino discourse community have developed videos to share their culture beyond their community (Verdes, 2006).

At this point, a distinction should be made between Filipino nonverbal communication being inclusive of its community and its use being seen as exclusive of others. The function of nonverbal literacy in the Filipino discourse community studied was neither to measure the strength of a fellow Filipino's cultural ties, nor to covertly express oneself in the presence of people who may not be a part of the discourse. This may explain why Gloria, the representative of the Filipino discourse community that was the subject of the interviews and observations, refrained from using the literacy practice in the presence of others unfamiliar with Filipino nonverbal literacy.

Moreover, there is also a question of legitimacy or lack thereof in considering how Filipino nonverbal communication is a form of

literacy. In short, this question could be answered by those outside of the Filipino discourse community, concluding that nonverbal communication is little more than a habit or oddity that is practiced in various communities and that it has little to do with literacy. At the same time, those within the discourse community, using nonverbal communication, may very well be oblivious to the prior conclusion drawn and not at all preoccupied with that theory.

Again, there is the reintroduction of the discussion that tries to decipher defined literacy from cultural practice. Although it functions as a component of communication, nonverbal literacy in the Filipino community does not seem intended to be a substitution for written and oral literacy. There is a long history of defining and explaining diverse forms of literacy that have specific guidelines and can be adopted by multiple discourse communities. How does Filipino nonverbal literacy need to be defined by other established literacy practices in order to be recognized as such? How important is that recognition? Friction over how to grapple with such issues extends to oral and written literacies that have been viewed as little more than extractions or degradations of already existing and broadly used literacy practices (Crozier & Smith, 1998; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). Interestingly, the effectiveness of Filipino nonverbal communication as a literacy could be determined by discourses outside of its own community.

Nonetheless, Filipino nonverbal literacy, much like the written and oral Tagalog language, adapts to the environment in which it is used. Throughout the research, facial animations and arm taps were used to make oral communications into complete thoughts by acting as punctuation, nouns, and prepositions. Tagalog, the most widely spoken language in the Republic of the Philippines and the sixth most widely spoken language in the United States, includes words and phrases from the English and Spanish languages. It is not uncommon to hear a conversation in Tagalog that may include commonly used words in English and Spanish to formulate statements. Tagalog is not unique in using words from other languages. Many languages do this, including English, which has absorbed words from French, German, and Latin. Still, the use of Spanish and English speaks to the culture of the Filipino discourse community because clothing, religion, and food have been taken from the nation's former occupiers (Spain and the United States) and has become a part of its own culture (Rafael, 1993; Martin, 2004; Smolicz & Nical, 1997).

Participants

The principal research participant for this study is a Filipina-American residing in northern California who agreed to be identified by her first name, Gloria. Included in the research are five other individuals with whom she interacted on professional and personal levels demonstrating her use and non-use of the form of communication under study. Gloria is in her mid-forties and immigrated to the United States from the Republic of the Philippines as a teenager. Within a year her arrival in the United States, she married a fellow immigrant from the Philippines and made her home in California. Gloria has worked as an administrator at a university in California for over two decades, and she has supported her family in their collegiate careers. Gloria is planning ahead for retirement and is facing difficult questions about whether to stay in California or to return to the Philippines to better support her extended family. Outside of work,

Gloria enjoys reading novels, listening to Christian music, and participating in community-oriented events affiliated with her church.

Observations

Observations were conducted at Gloria's place of employment. The first two observations captured Gloria's experience in her office, first assisting a federal officer and then conversing with a university student. During the two observations in the office, I attempted to blend in as a co-worker focusing on an employee manual as I took notes on the conversations and Gloria's mannerisms. Due to the modest size of the office, I was unable to continue writing notes throughout my observations without arousing suspicion from the people she spoke with. As a result, there were periods in during the observations for which I had to recall from memory conversations and Gloria's nonverbal literacy practices. Because of my inclusion in Gloria's discourse community outside of work, I was not able successfully to play the role of observant as I had imagined. After several unsuccessful attempts to play the role of spectator, I decided to join in the conversation with Gloria and her friends during the lunch observation, and to observe her body language and nonverbal literacy practices.

Interviews

My first interview with Gloria was conducted in the employees' break lounge during her lunch break. Follow up questions were asked via email. By showing what I felt would be seen as a respect of boundaries, I hoped Gloria would feel compelled to bring up specifics about the observations without being prompted directly. Although I am not certain of the significance of her activities, Gloria repeatedly cleaned her glasses as we spoke and shrugged her shoulders when completing her responses to my questions.

Discourse Community

Gloria describes her discourse community as consisting of many layers. For example, although she feels most comfortable with her family, she also considers her Filipino colleagues at work as a part of her discourse community too. The ability to speak Tagalog at a very elementary level with Gloria has strengthened our friendship, while at the same time allowing me access to an extensive community of people associated with her.

Showing Respect and Nonverbal Literacy

Showing Signs of Respect and Nonverbal Literacy

Signs of Respect: An important part of my relationship with Gloria was my ability to show respect. Yet, the definition of respect in the context of my research goes beyond behaving cordially in conversation or offering assistance without being prompted to do so. Being adept in verbal and nonverbal communication is very important in Gloria's daily life. For example, when I introduced Gloria to my wife, who is also a Filipina, there was an instant warmth and communication between them that I did not expect. Their communication was almost exclusively in Tagalog and was later explained to me as a sign of my wife's respect to Gloria's family and community (Wolf, 1997).

The next time I met with Gloria, she shared with me a report she had written in one of her college courses about the Philippines. She explained to me that this would be a way for me to become more familiar with the country and its history. Although I was familiar with much of the historical material in Gloria's paper, it also contained very personal information about her own life and community. Not sure whether to thank Gloria for allowing me to read the paper or hand her something I had written about my own discourse community, I sought advice from my wife. She explained to me then that Gloria's gesture was meant to help me to prepare for future conversations I may have with my in-laws about the Philippines and to ensure that I could to some small extent hold a conversation about the communities and cultures of the country. Whether or not I knew some aspects of Filipino history was not important; what was important was that I was acquiring information from an elder, and that with this information came support, friendship, and inclusion.

Nonverbal Literacy in Filipino Culture: A unique aspect of Gloria's discourse community is the interplay of nonverbal literacy in communication. In Filipino culture, what I call "facial animations" and hand movements are used within oral literacy. I decided to use the term facial animations instead of facial expressions because facial movements in this context of Filipino literacy are not necessarily an indication of mood or feelings. Two examples of facial animation that were prominent in my observation of Gloria in her discourse community involved eyebrows and lips.

The raising of one's eyebrows is used either to indicate agreement or to continue on to another phase of a conversation. For example, when I checked in with Gloria to see if we could begin our interview, I did not receive a verbal yes or no response, but rather she raised her eyebrows. Admittedly, I turned to walk away from her office because I thought she might have been busy. My actions left her perplexed, and Gloria explained that she had said yes in response to my question and only had to make a phone call before meeting with me.

Instead of pointing with a finger to show direction, Gloria and her friends puckered their lips to indicate location. I had noticed Gloria's discourse community using this nonverbal literacy practice during the several lunch sessions I attended. Throughout the duration of those sessions, the practice was used to prompt the exchange of food and the distribution of utensils, as well as to bring it to everyone's attention that their lunch break was almost over by pointing out the wall clock. Although I was unable to determine a pattern of use, there were times when a word or phrase would precede the nonverbal literacy practices. It is possible that these words or phrases were used for my benefit.

The use of hands in Gloria's discourse community represents respect for elders and camaraderie among friends. What is interesting about the use of hands in Filipino nonverbal literacy is that it has been affected by immigration to the United States. In the Philippines, it is customary, especially within family, for a youth to bless an elder of the family by taking the hand of the elder and touching it to his forehead. In my conversations with Gloria and my experience with my in-laws, it has become apparent that many in the Filipino discourse community no longer adhere to this tradition. Instead of blessing her or his parents, the child, arguably influenced by U. S. culture, now opts to greet parents with a hug or kiss. The use of hands that was more common among Gloria's discourse community was what I could best describe as a tap on the arm. I have noticed in other discourse communities the use of hands for celebration or comfort. Yet, in

Gloria's community, this particular practice almost always involved someone using a hand to make contact with another's forearm to indicate humor or joy.

Results

Observations at Work: During my first observation of Gloria in her office, I spent half an hour watching Gloria exchange courtesies with her colleagues and performing her daily operations before I was able to see her in an extended dialogue with someone. This observation included several distinct interactions. A gentleman introducing himself as a federal officer came into Gloria's office and requested information about a particular student. In a much louder tone than I had heard Gloria use in conversations in before, she turned away from her desk to greet the officer and ask him what he needed from her office. After another exchange of information regarding verification of the officer's identification, Gloria turned back to her desk to search for the data requested as the officer continued to speak.

After a span of five minutes, during which the officer was conducting what seemed to be more of a monologue than a dialogue, Gloria turned and stood to face him, handed over the information, and asked if there was any additional data he needed. The officer smiled, thanked her, and left. Initially, I was surprised by the way Gloria had interacted with the man. Immediately after he left, she explained to me that those guys really are not into small talk and prefer to get what they need and move on. It was an interesting perspective, since I had internalized the idea that the officer was making an effort to speak cordially with Gloria to no avail.

A few minutes after that observation, Gloria received a phone call from one of her friends. She began to speak in a low voice over the phone in Tagalog. Upon reflection, I had thought that Gloria had lowered her voice because she was speaking in a language other than English in the workplace. However, when I questioned after the observations, she responded that she had not even noticed the change in her voice.

As I was preparing to leave Gloria, another brief but telling conversation that occurred. A colleague rushed in to Gloria's office. When Gloria attempted to introduce the lady to me, she turned to face me, nodded, and then turned her attention back to Gloria. Immediately, I noticed Gloria staring at her colleague with what I interpreted to be dissatisfaction. Just as quickly, the lady took a deep breath, turned to face me again, and introduced herself. There was an exchange between them in Tagalog. Then, the colleague told me that it was nice to make my acquaintance and departed.

My second observation of Gloria in the workplace was conducted over a period of time when there was little if any interaction between Gloria and another individual. Unlike my first observation, I tried to notice Gloria's use of literacy practices without speaking to another individual. For example, I learned that Gloria listens to Christian music each morning as she begins her workday. Interestingly, much of the music is sung in Latin or Italian; more than likely the languages are a connection to her Catholic faith. I also noted that many of Gloria's emails were written bilingually in English and Tagalog.

The exchange between Gloria and her first client that morning indicated a possibility that people outside of Gloria's discourse community could learn Filipino nonverbal literacy practices. A colleague had directed a male student to Gloria's office. The first observation I made about the student was that he was wearing an iPod, and that the volume was so loud that I could comprehend some of the lyrics from the music. The student then commenced to yell over the noise from the iPod to ask a question concerning his account. Calmly, Gloria motioned by waving her hands over her ears for the student to lower the volume or to remove his earphones. When the student had removed one earphone, Gloria asked him to repeat his question. At that moment, it was my interpretation that the student began to repeat his question in a loud, halting manner as if he was going through great pains to announce each letter of every word he spoke. After he finished his question, he glanced over to me, smiled and winked.

Although I am uncertain, I think that the student picked up on my sense of shock at what I thought had just occurred. One of Gloria's colleagues, whom I had forgotten was even in the room, had just completed a phone conversation and had turned to face the student. Gloria did nothing but stare at the student since he had not moved from the doorway of her office. Gloria went on to ask the student for identification, which he handed over and then returned to the doorway. After telling the student his next steps to get his question resolved, he repeatedly thanked her, now with his music turned off, and left the office.

Observation at Lunch: The final observation I conducted was recorded during Gloria's lunch break in the presence of people who were all in her discourse community. When I walked into the break room to find Gloria's table, she raised her eyebrows at me and waved. Gloria introduced me to everyone at the table, commenting that, "We are all Filipino," in response to which one of the ladies asked me, "You too?" They all laughed, and Gloria tapped me on my forearm. Because I wanted to explain my presence at the table, I told them that I was studying how Gloria communicated with people in her work place as well as during her leisure time. Upon further discussion, I mentioned that I was interested in learning more about Filipino history. After that, a wealth of knowledge and information began to flow from all of the women at the table.

As everyone began to eat, Gloria raised her eyebrows and began to tell me the story of how she first came to the United States. During the conversation, I was asked if I had eaten and was offered food by several of Gloria's friends. After Gloria finished her story, she puckered her lips at her friend sitting across the table. Many stories were told about immigration to the United States. Some of the stories recalled the challenges of adapting to a new culture; most recounted humorous events that had made the transition easier. When all of Gloria's friends had shared their stories, I was again asked if I was hungry, and then Gloria raised her eyebrows in my direction. Hoping that I was interpreting her correctly, I decided to shift to another topic of conversation and asked if anyone was familiar with the history of martial law in the Republic of the Philippines. Multiple conversations began to take place about that moment in history, accompanied by with the Filipino nonverbal literacy practices of pointing with lips and transitioning conversations by arching eyebrows. I had become so entranced by their personal histories that it was not until Gloria had pointed with her lips at the clock on the wall that I realized that their lunch break was over, and that I had been with them for nearly an hour.

Analysis

There are several conclusions about the use of nonverbal literacy in the Filipino community that I draw from this research. It is important to acknowledge and be sensitive to the fact that Gloria and her discourse community are but one example of the greater Filipino community. Moreover, Gloria's group of friends at work is but one dimension of her own discourse community. Yet, there are some aspects of the study that have become clear. For example, Gloria's colleague in the first observation, who seemed inclined after making eye contact with Gloria to introduce herself, was in fact the daughter of a friend. In a separate conversation, Gloria explained to me that she worked with the colleague's mother for over 20 years. My inclusion in Gloria's discourse community seemed to require another member of her community to greet me. Though Gloria never looked angry or annoyed during the exchange, there was a type of nonverbal discussion that prompted the individual to realize that Gloria was displeased with her (Church, Katigbak, Reyes, & Jensen, 1998). I wondered if Gloria used her nonverbal literacy practice (e. g. raising her eyebrows) to get the attention of the lady, but I was not able to confirm it.

Although I did not question Gloria directly about my second observation concerning the student, I was able to get some important feedback about how she approaches such situations, and how she feels about them. Like the first observation, it seems that eye contact let the person she interacted with understand her discontent with the situation. Yet, reacting with anger would have been unacceptable, since Gloria might view it as an embarrassment to her or her employer. It should be noted that Gloria's reaction to the student's statement was as close as I came to witnessing the possibility of someone outside of her discourse community learning her nonverbal communication practice. By looking at Gloria, it was my perception that he acknowledged that what he had done was wrong. Still, there was no evidence of Gloria having used one of the nonverbal literacy practices I researched in the study.

During the course of my research and upon reflection, I was very surprised to notice how Gloria's nonverbal literacy practices were muted in her work environment. After completing my research, I believe I now understand why Gloria did not make use of her nonverbal literacy outside of her discourse community: The use of many of these practices is personal and is confined to a family environment. If Gloria were in a social context with people like me, who are outside of her discourse community, the use of these practices would neither be appropriate nor advantageous due to a lack of understanding of their purposes.

Moreover, it is my belief that Gloria would not use her facial animation literacy within a social situation made up of people in her discourse community as well as those outside of her discourse community. The previous analysis gives voice to one of my determinations in the study. Throughout my study, Gloria's Filipino nonverbal communication rarely happened outside of her discourse community.

Conclusions

Filipino nonverbal communication can best be described as a form of discourse that extrapolates meaning from oral and written literacies that occur in the Filipino community. The very nature of Filipino nonverbal communication resists characterization in the same way that other forms of communication have been defined. Although Filipino nonverbal communication carries a distinctive set of motions as its "alphabet," it is a form of literacy that has been learned through a discourse community with little evidence of deriving directly from an oral or written tradition.

Instead, Filipino nonverbal communication is unique in that it acts as a third component of communication that links oral and written literacy to form complete thoughts and enhance meaning. Nonverbal communication is also unique in that while it could potentially stand alone as a literacy practice, its use becomes compromised without the inclusion of oral and written literacy as demonstrated in the observations recorded.

The potential implications of Filipino nonverbal communication can be generalized to other discourse communities and forms of literacy. For example, it is important to note that an established form of communication among a discourse community, whether or not it is initially inclusive of everyone who encounters it, should be seen as a form of knowledge in an educational context. Although the previous statement sounds basic and reasonable, educators have the privilege to acknowledge an individual's ability to navigate through life with a certain set of literary skills while still scrutinizing their capacity to read, speak, and write. As a result, an educator's or a government's judgment of how a discourse community may or may not be able to acquire literacy skills can have an impact on their individual lives in the realms of education, employment, and health. Finally, it is significant to note that nonverbal communication in discourse communities has rarely if ever been a vehicle to promote separation from mainstream society. On the contrary, literacy and communication have always been components to encourage an expansion of ideas and an exchange of knowledge. If one were confronted with an unfamiliar literacy practice, hopefully the first reaction would be to take steps toward understanding the discourse community (through whatever means are comfortable) rather than shunning its use along with those using it.

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