

# **The Interdisciplinary Nature of Research**

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## **Abstract**

How does a researcher move from an interest in Sociolinguistics to Discourse Analysis and to topics which are normally considered within the realm of Social Psychology? Are these disciplines really distinct and separate? In this presentation I would like to discuss my research first starting on an important topic in Sociolinguistics - Language Maintenance and Language Shift and the resulting focus on attitudes to heritage languages (attitudes are subsumed under Social Psychology). In observing language choices it was inevitable that discourse and politeness norms of the communities studied came under the scrutiny of the researcher. The interdisciplinary character of research between Sociolinguistics, Discourse Analysis and Social Psychology are closely interwoven and the aim of this presentation is to provide examples of studies undertaken to demonstrate the space shared. The effect of knowledge gained from these disciplines can contribute to one becoming a more creative, innovative and effective language teacher.

## **Introduction**

In many calls for Conference papers, writers are requested to send papers related to the themes of Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Discourse Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, Psycholinguistics etc. These are often seen as disparate fields of linguistics even though there are close links between these disciplines. In this paper I would like to present my personal academic professional development and the studies I conducted to demonstrate how the links between these disciplines were made. Knowledge from these disciplines are useful to the language teacher.

## **Sociolinguistics**

In the 1990s my research interest started with a passion to study my own community language to determine if the community, a minority ethnic community in multilingual, multicultural, multi-religious Malaysia had maintained or shifted away from its ethnic language. The methodology used to collect the data was comprehensive and included a questionnaire administered to about 300 respondents, interviews with grandparents, parents, children of varying ages and leaders of the community, transcripts of recordings in the home domain, home visits and observations of how language was used at religious, social and official functions. Analysing the huge data qualitatively was no easy task as we then did not have electronic tools to help in the analysis of the transcripts. The study resulted in a detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis demonstrating clearly, the movement away from the habitual use of the ethnic language (David, 1999, 2001). What was interesting is that the shift had not brought about a lessening of ties between members of the community. Close and dense networks did not necessarily result in language maintenance as had been claimed by Milroy (1987). Another interesting feature that became clear when collecting data was the responses to questions like "What language do you use when you speak to your children?" The answers given by respondents were not necessarily reflected in real time interactions with their children. For example, a 70 year old grandmother once told me she spoke in Sindhi with her 40 year old daughter and when observing their interactions it was manifestly clear that English was used often, albeit it was pidgin English on the part of the grandmother. Questionnaires asking subjects for their selected language choices with different respondents in different domains, must in my view, always be validated by real time observations of such interactions.

I then moved on to the study of the same community in different locations - in Singapore (David, 2000) and in London (David, 2001). As an insider it was easy to get access to members of my community located in different geographical settings. The sample and sites in these locations were small and only qualitative research based on observations and interviews was conducted. In addition, in London, in order to determine the proficiency in the mother tongue or heritage language, I asked respondents from different generations to tell me the same story in the heritage language. Much hesitation and codeswitching occurred when younger community members attempted this task. It was clear that language proficiency in the heritage language had fallen perhaps due to the lack of use of the language.

In Malaysia we have many minority communities. I moved on to study the same phenomenon in the Portuguese community (David and Faridah, 1999), the Tamil (Naji and David, 2000; David and Dealwis, 2011) Telugu (Dealwis and David, 2010, David and Dealwis, 2007), Sino-Indian (David, 2008), Pakistani (David, 2003), Bidayuh (Dealwis and David, 2007), and Punjabi (David, Naji and Sheena Kaur, 2003, David and Baljit Kaur, 2004) communities. Eventually this interest in language choice of minority communities in Malaysia led to the publication of a volume entitled *National Language Planning and Language Shifts in Malaysian Minority Communities: Speaking in many tongues* (Mukherjee and David, 2011) by Amsterdam University Press. What became manifestly clear from the research was that many of the Indian communities in Malaysia, like the Punjabi, Sindhi, and, Malayalee (Nambiar and David, 2002) communities, had shifted away from the habitual use of their heritage languages (Mukherjee and David, 2007). Language choices and issues of identity of children from mixed marriages was discussed by Dealwis and David 2010) and issues of identity when a community shifts away from its ethnic language was discussed in David, 2008 when researching Malaysian Sindhis who although have shifted to the English language have maintained other aspects of their cultural identity.

Noticing from the transcripts that much code switching occurred in the shift away from the ethnic language (David and Dealwis, 2009), we began to also notice and to study code mixing and code switching and code shifting in many domains - not only in the homes (David, 2010a and 2010b) but also in the classrooms, courtrooms (Powell and David, 2010) and official meetings (McLellan and David, 2008) and even in newspaper headlines (David, McLellan, Kuang and Ain, 2009) and emails (Kuang and David, 2008). An edited volume on *Codeswitching in Malaysia* by Peter Lang was the result of such research-based studies (David, McLellan, Shameem and Ain, 2009). These studies showed fairly conclusively that in multilingual, multiethnic Malaysia, codemixing and codeswitching has become a norm in both official and unofficial domains (David and McLellan, 2011b).

As the focus of the studies of minority communities emphasised on language choice, I moved on to determine language choices in the linguistic landscape. In one co-authored study, 400 photographs were analysed to determine the strategies used by businesses to circumvent official government policies in Malaysia, regarding the national language policy. These strategies included code mixing and a certain degree of accommodation (see David and Mannan 2015; Mannan, David, Dumanig and Channa, 2017) including the use of American brand names like KFC and McDonalds.

## **Discourse**

### **Discourse of the elderly**

All these studies clearly fell within the ambit of Sociolinguistics. However, in analysing the transcripts where my previous focus was on Language choice in minority communities, I moved

on to study the discourse norms of different groups- the elderly and the youth (David, Yee, Ngeow and Gan 2009 and David 2010d)) and these discourse norms of the elderly included off target verbosity, painful self-disclosure and self- handicapping talk.

### **Politeness Norms in Discourse**

Norms of what was deemed polite or impolite discourse of some ethnic communities in Malaysia was also studied (see David, 2008, David and Dumanig, 2009). Slowly I shifted away from community and family studies (see David and Kow 2008 edited volume *Politeness in Malaysian Family Discourse*) to examining and comparing politeness norms as seen in the discourse at service encounters in government and private hospitals in Malaysia (Kuang, David, Lau and Ang 2011) and in government departments like the post office, income tax department (David, Kuang and Dealwis 2012) and in parliament (David, 2007; Ngeow, Kuang and David, 2010). Politeness as seen in the address forms used by Filipino house-help to their employers was recorded and reported (see Gan, David, & Dumanig, 2015).

### **Gender and LGBT Discourse**

Gender Discourse on how successful men and women represent themselves in interviews (David and Yong, 2008), media representations of the elderly (David and Ponmalar, 2013) and the discourse of the LGBT community (Dealwis, and David, 2011) was also the focus of some research studies. Where in the first two we used written discourse, in the case of the LGBT community our data consisted of spoken discourse.

### **Discourse and Religion**

Religion and language choice became the focus of other studies and resulted in research papers focussing on conversation narratives and construction of identity among Christians in Malaysia (see Dumanig, David and Dealwis, 2011). Moves and lexical choices used in the narratives in the form of testimonies were used to analyse the data. Religious and national identities represented in the narratives of migrant Filipino Muslim migrants in Malaysia (Dumanig, David, Orcullo, Hanafi, Jubilado, R. 2016). were analysed using Self Categorisation Theory (Turner, 1985). In the case of majority Islam in multi-religious Malaysia we (David and Yoong, 2011) examined the anti-apostasy rhetoric in the Lina Joy case. Lina Joy was a Malaysian Muslim girl who wanted to convert to Christianity and the case had to be taken to court as this was considered illegal in Muslim dominant Malaysia. Content analysis was used to discuss the anti-apostasy rhetoric used.

### **Relational and Power Concerns in Professional Discourse**

Much of the discourse selected resulted in studies on Relational and Power Concerns in Professional Communications (see David, 2006) which included the discourse of our current Prime Minister (David, 2010c, David and Dumanig 2011c). Ideologies affect power and language plays an important role in constructing and deconstructing ideologies. Presuppositions and implicatures were used by the Prime Minister in his many speeches to sustain the ideology of national unity in multicultural Malaysia.

### **Discourse in Legal Judgements**

We also studied the stance taken by judges as seen in their judgements on rape cases. The excessive use of pathos or emotional appeals in some of the judgements studied led to the further victimization of the rape victim. (logos or the use of logic or factual arguments were not seen in the judgements examined).

### **Discourse and Human Rights**

Issues of citizens and non-citizens being deprived of basic human rights relating to language resulted in an edited volume on *Language and Human Rights* (David, 2007). Intentional

mistranslation by an interpreter in a courtroom sometimes led to some injustice meted out to the accused. (David and Baatinathan, 2007)

### **Discourse and Speech Acts**

In examining spoken discourse, I noted the use of Speech Acts. Speech Acts, i.e., what we do when we speak, for example “hello” can be a greeting and “I am sorry to hear this“ can be a speech act of condolence. Responses to the speech act of compliments vary across cultures and the use of literary texts was used to depict such differences (David, 2002 and 2008, David et al 2016). Even obituaries reflect cultural and religious norms (David and Yong, 2002) as does the language of condolences (David, 2018). In the research on obituaries, our initial data came from newspapers but in 2018 the data came from Facebook and other social media. In more recent times our data base has broadened to encompass data from what’s app, emails, twitter etc.

### **Discourse and Dementia**

Today I am moving on to research on the discourse of the elderly and have encouraged my students to focus on the study of parents experiencing dementia. This has helped them to understand and be patient with parents who ask the same questions again and again. Such studies have utility, and hopefully result in better interpersonal relationships due to understanding the effects of dementia.

### **Sociolinguistics and Social Psychology**

Whilst interviewing grandparents and parents on their language choice in the home domain I often heard statements like, “What is the use of their ethnic language in Malaysia? Or “The teacher asked me to use English’. It was clear then that attitudes to the value or utility of a language played a pivotal role in determining the language used. In any book on Social Psychology one will find a chapter or two on attitudes. There is therefore, a clear link between attitude and language maintenance or shift (see David and McLellan, 2011) on motivations for language shift.

Another subject that emerges in Social Psychology is the notion of assimilation, both the assimilation of Language and Culture. I was then motivated to conduct a commissioned study of the Indian community in Malaysia (David, 2012 ) where communities can move away from their language but can yet, maintain their cultures (David, 1998; David 2008), or at times assimilate some aspects of culture of the larger majority of the community (David and Dealwis, 2009).

### **Sociolinguistics, Discourse Analysis and Social Psychology- Impact on Language Teaching**

As a Language teacher I could make the links between attitude, motivation, and language learning. Consequently, as a language teacher my research interests moved on to studies in the field of Applied Linguistics. Capitalising on Language Contact and Borrowing (David, 1993), I was able to produce a paper to demonstrate to Language Teachers how such borrowings could aid learning. Noticing the use of Communicative Strategies (David, 2002, 2006) in the community experiencing shift, I realised that this could be used as a strategy by learners when they faced communication challenges in the target language. Communicative Strategies and Cross-Cultural Awareness were then proposed to serve as core components for the teaching of Business English (David and Govindasamy, 2002). In relation to this, data collected from codeswitching in the courtroom became the raw material for a paper promoting Action Research, and the use of authentic data for the ESP practitioner (see David, 2005).

Our Sociolinguistic research on gender discourse in parliament (David and Ngeow, 2007, 2011) also resulted in an interest on investigating the male voice in an ESL classroom (Govindasamy and David, 2004) and in a paper on gendered discourse and ramifications for English language teaching (Zuraidah and David, 2003). In short, my specialisation in Sociolinguistics heightened

the awareness on language choice and the norms of politeness, both of which are useful when teaching languages.

What I am trying to show in this paper is that as researchers, we should not constrain and limit our interests and studies in one field of linguistics. They are intertwined. As professionals, we will grow and develop as researchers, as language teachers and as educationists if we are flexible and attempt to see the connections between the different subdisciplines of linguistics.

### **Current Research**

These days I am working on research which is cross-disciplinary and cross-country and which has some practical value to professions. For instance, we worked on government published brochures and leaflets in two countries which aimed at encouraging diabetic patients to eat wisely and carefully, and to exercise. We showed these to the public in both countries and asked if such information encouraged them to follow the advice given. They critiqued the information and they were obviously not following the advice provided. Such input could result in better publications which have greater impact and which could reduce diabetes which takes a toll on government resources and the life of many (Azirah Hashim et al 2018)

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