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522

Managing informal interaction

Stancetaking and alignment in Dutch and Indonesian

Whenever someone makes a statement, they take stance on what they are talking about. Their utterance presents the propositional content of their message and at the same time shares their position regarding the subject of talk. They convey their support or opposition, affiliation or disaffiliation, their like or dislike of the topic of talk. Subsequent, related, contributions similarly not only react to the content of the earlier message, but to the associated stance taken by the other participant as well. Every interaction thus requires careful management of both the content discussed and the interpersonal relations between those involved. Generally speaking, interlocutors aim to construct and maintain a favorable relationship. This would, for one thing, be reflected by them taking similar stances on the same topic of talk, expressing their mutual understanding and shared position on the matter at hand. This would establish alignment between them, emphasizing their overall likeness and reinforcing their positive relationship.

This dissertation investigates how people manage their informal interactions by means of phatic communicative structures. The study is contrastive in nature, comparing Dutch and Indonesian informal interaction. It explores to what extent the choices made by speakers are cross-linguistically stable or language specific, as differences in conversational style could affect intercultural communication and understanding. Three types of linguistic behavior are addressed: offering support and agreement, reproducing meaning (and form), and collaboratively constructing a single message. The preferences across and within these three types are contrasted for Dutch and Indonesian speakers. While both groups of speakers are shown to use all of the phatic structures under investigation, their preference for one or the other suggests a stronger (normative) orientation toward explicitly negotiating stance and alignment in Dutch interaction.

ISBN 978-94-6093-307-3

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