

# **Observations on Cross-Cultural Discussion Dynamics – Case study: American-Moroccan Students**

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## **Abstract**

*The article at hand seeks to unveil the different patterns of communication between Moroccan and American students. The article is based on a conducted experiment in which a group of American students were put together to converse freely under the topic of social media. The same experiment was replicated with a group of Moroccan students. Each group used their native language (Moroccan Arabic for Moroccans and American English for Americans). The results are drawn from the observations made by the researcher during the experiment for each group discussion. The experiment was audio taped which allowed the researcher to make observations after the experiment.*

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural Communication, Inter-cultural Communication, Speech Pattern, American English, Moroccan Arabic, Comparative Study, Observational Study

## **I. Introduction**

This article is the result of an experiment that seeks to highlight the pattern differences in communication between Moroccan and American participants. The article mainly focuses on observations made during the experiment that highlight apparent communication dynamics between the two groups. The experiment is in the form of two group discussions. Each group discussion had participants of the same culture: Moroccan participants converses among themselves and same goes for American participants. The discussion duration is 60min. Those group discussions were recorded for a duration of 60 minutes each.

The two experiments conducted in two different settings. One group discussion took place at a local café in Rabat (Morocco) while the other one took place at a language institution in the city of Kenitra (Morocco). Participants in every group discussion are complete strangers to one another. This is a crucial aspect that helps in determining the conversation dynamics in initial conversation that is unaffected by personal relationships.

Both group discussions had social media as a topic of conversation. This topic has the potential of being neutral in the sense that it is a topic of controversy to both cultures and will engage both groups equally. This is because social media is a new social phenomenon that is penetrating every culture. Every culture has its own experience with this new technological landscape. It is also a hot topic that every culture handles it in its own way. That is why we saw that the topic is objective and does not necessarily appeal more to

one cultural than the other. Furthermore, participants were encouraged to leave the main topic of social media if needed in order to ensure a natural flow of conversation and so that they do not feel constrained. This would make the experiment more like day-to-day conversation.

## **2. Participants**

Participants in this experiment were randomly selected. Every group encompassed 6 participants. Most of these participants are students from various levels and majors. The Moroccan group discussion has students from Ibn Tofail University (Kenitra, Morocco). The American group discussion has students from various universities in the United States. These American students are in a short visit to Morocco, mostly in the city of Rabat where study abroad programs take place. In regards to gender, the Moroccan group discussion has 2 female participants to 4 male participants. The American group discussion consists of 2 male participants and 4 female participants.

## **3. Asymmetry of Turn-taking**

It has been observed in both group discussions that participants that spoke the most (duration wise) tend to maintain their speaking turn for the longest time despite interruptions. In reverse, the participants that spoke less did not face any resistance or interruption when they spoke. In regards to differences, American participants experienced a natural progression of conversation in a manner that one idea led to another. Moroccan participants on the other hand seem to struggle in staying in one topic. Many unrelated topics were touched on. The future of the discussion seemed unclear. Another observation in regards to turn taking is that a leader of the discussion arose within the Moroccan participants. No such leader appeared in the American participants. Instances of struggle in maintaining the floor were observed but the latter was not as salient as among the Moroccan participants.

The struggle in maintaining speaking turns within Moroccan group discussion resulted in less silence pauses in the group discussion. This observable fact could also be due to the dominant participant who spoke the most. The social structure in Morocco also calls for a dominant figure like the king or religious leader like the Imam. This aspect of the wider context of the Moroccan social fabric could have had an influence on the context of the Moroccan group discussion. Although this may be true, American participants seem to have no emigrant leader of the discussion. This, too, could be due to the social and political structure of the United States (the United States is a republic where a leader is assigned by the majority, but does not naturally arise.)

Maintaining speaking turns is done in different ways when contrasting the two group of participants. Moroccan participants use high voice amplitude to obscure anybody else's voice. This forces other participants to become silent and listen to the one asserting their speaking turn. Conversely, American participants simply go on speaking at the same voice pitch despite interruptions. This brings about a prolonged speech overlap among participants. Eventually, participants abandon their speaking turn in favor of one speaker.

In addition to the above are two modes of speaking turn insistence, Moroccans seem to jump in the conversation once they hear something that interests them. The urge to share their take on the idea being

discussed is strong. American participants wait for a crack in the conversation before they insert themselves into the discussion. These cracks could be syntactic boundaries, a prolonged in-turn lapse, or hints that a speaking turn is about to end. Further, turn projection are also used to predict an opening for a new speaker to initiate a speaking turn. Finally, it seems that turn taking exchanges are different from one group discussion to the other. Moroccan participants rely on topic relevance to one's self to initiate a turn taking, whereas American participants rely on physical boundaries like silence to engage. Temporal structure is respected among American participants. This could be due to the subtle cultural differences such as those between industrial cultures and nonindustrial ones, more specifically monochronic and polychronic societies (Hall, 1959). Our observations also include that Moroccans speak about more than just one topic at the same time. They engage in a circular discussion whereas American participants use a block structure in discussion. That is to say, Moroccan participants hover from one topic to another while maintaining all these diverse topics in the back of their mind since they always come back to previously mentioned topics. In a sense, they are managing multiple topics simultaneously. American participants tackle one topic at a time. When topic A is finished, the discussion then can proceed to topic B. These differences seem to manifest themselves in turn-taking mechanisms mentioned earlier for each group discussion.

#### **4. The Implementation of Silence as a Linguistic Device and a Structural Boundary**

The use of silence differs from one group discussion to the other. For example, Moroccan participants use silence to make a point or stress an idea. This aspect was absent in the American group discussion. American participants mainly used silence pauses to indicate that a speaking turn has ended. Further, interruption of speaking turns seems to be frequent among Moroccan participants which resulted in less silence pauses. The latter was not observed among American participants. American participants seem to have an even distribution of speaking turns with the exception of a couple outliers that spoke the least. Moroccan participants had one main speaker that dominated the discussion, thus resulting in lengthy speaking turns. Lengthy speaking turns result in less and less silence pauses. Moreover, in the Moroccan group discussion, participants engaged in individual dialogues while the rest of participants ceased from being engaged in the main discussion and become attentive to the two participants, especially towards the last quarter of the discussion.

The group discussion shows that Moroccan participants were less silent when compared to the American participants. Also, the use of silence in the Moroccan group discussion is linguistic and when it is used in that sense it can become an extended pause of silence that American participants may not be comfortable experiencing. As for American participants, the use of silence is structural. It is heavily used to structure the discussion as a form of boundaries between speakers' turns. Therefore, we observe that the American group discussion has more gaps of silence and less communicative silence. However, American do still use silence for communicative purposes, and Moroccan participants do structure their discussion by means of silence. These two basic functions are universals and found in all languages. However, it is worth noting here that the extent of use differs from one culture to another, and Moroccan and American cultures might differ in this regards according to our experiment.

The difference in silence use among the two cultures can be attributed to historical factors such as the

historical perspective of oral and written cultures (Ong, 1982). Contrasting north African cultures to European and North American cultures we notice that the latter rely on documenting events and the former rely on oral accounts and collective memory. For example, the prehistoric history of North Africa is very little due to lack of documentation. The little that survived to today is mainly Roman written accounts during the period when the Romans had settlements in North Africa. This cultural difference might explain the reason why Moroccan participants use silence for communication and Americans use it for structure. Writing has visible entities we call 'space'. Space in writing has structural function of separating words and defining borders. Space is the equivalent of speech silence in writing. A written culture might actually carry that element of space over to speech and realize it in the form of silence. Thus, silence would have a structural function in speech as the main structure. That could be the reason why American participants used silence for structuring their discussion. Oral culture does not necessarily see silence as a mainly structural device. Silence for them is part of communication. For example, silence almost has no existence in the Arabic written language. Written Arabic has words meshed together erasing borders between words. That could be an influence coming from the oral language that does not necessarily see silence as borders between words, but more a linguistic device.

The struggle that arose between some Moroccan participants which resulted in an extended individual dialogue could signify the unwillingness to accept opposing views. To resolve this impasse, the participants who are engaged in individual dialogue keep trying to convert the other one into accepting their views. This is also noticed among American participants, but it was faint and indirect. This can be due to the cultural diversity existing in the United States that encourages accepting other people from other backgrounds. Morocco on the other hand seems to be a more homogeneous culture compared to the United States given the factor of a unified religion and the monarchy.

## **5. The Influence of the Researcher and the Recording Device**

One interesting observation is that one of the American participants that was silent throughout the groups discussion, he started talking more and more right after the 60 minutes discussion ended. That is to say, once the microphone was shut, he started talking casually with the other participants. This is an indication that the microphone was a clear factor that prevented him from speaking. No such thing was observed among the Moroccan participants. In addition to that, the tone of talk changed among Americans when the recorded discussion ended. It is as if the microphone was imposing a certain atmosphere in the group as a whole. This could be due to privacy factors. Moroccan participants seem to have forgot that there was a microphone recording and engaged fully into the discussion.

Privacy is an on-going publicly debated issue in the United States, especially with the growth of social network services and the ongoing data privacy regulations. This means that privacy is an important right to Americans. This might be the reason why we observed that Americans were aware of the presence of the microphone. For Moroccans, privacy is not a heated topic in the public sphere. Moroccans seem to care less about their personal information that is harvested by phone applications and other internet services such as social media and on-line retailers.

## 6. Modes of Expression

Modes of communicating ideas seems to differ from one group discussion to another. Moroccan participants for example, in expressing ideas and opinion, they tend to present them as being facts. They also seem to talk on behalf of the rest of participants without being tentative with their claims. In contrast, American participants make sure to mention that what they are stating is their own opinion and they use lot of expressions such as: “I think...”, “In my opinion...”, “To me...”. It is worth noting that Moroccan participants are not challenged by other participants as they speak as though they agree with the speaker. However, American show resistance to ideas that they may not agree and provide alternative thoughts. These differences could be due to the different natures of both cultures, especially the degree of openness towards different thoughts and the extent to which a culture is heterogeneous or homogeneous.

Moroccan participants seem to use rhetorical questions that are followed with extended silence to press an idea. American participants on the other hand ask lot of question as a way of seeking information. Moroccan participants do not seem to use question for stimulating new information. It seems that Moroccan participants have an assumption that the other person does not differ much from themselves and thus the need to ask information seeking questions is minimal. American participants question asking might be motivated by the assumption that there are differences.

In regards to paraphrasing and rephrasing the previous speaker thoughts, Moroccans seem to rely on this aspect at the initiation of a speaking turn. This process might take a couple minutes before venturing into what one thinks about the matter. It is a period or a phase in which the speaker is dancing with the previous speaker’s idea and assimilating it in order to fully process it. This characteristic was not observed among American participants.

The use of paraphrasing among Moroccan participants seems to be a process by which participants get acquainted with other people’s contribution to the discussion. It is a way for Moroccan participants to agree with what had previously been stated and then integrating that idea or set of ideas into one’s own thought scheme. In addition to that, Moroccan participants use very little expression of agreement. Therefore, we conclude that paraphrasing is a way for Moroccan participants to validate the other speaker stand. As for American participants, we notice the use of ample expressions of agreeing such as:

- I so agree
- That’s so right...
- Yeah...
- I know!!
- Right?!
- That’s true
- Exactly!

In our observation we noticed that Moroccan participants have the tendency of finishing another speaker’s phrase. In addition to that, they tend to make use of incomplete phrases that may not stand alone in normal speech and which is placed at the end of a speaker’s turn. This phenomenon seems to be highly motivated by in-turn pauses. Especially the kind that is used to earn more cognitive processing time in order to come up with the appropriate lexical word. An exception that we noticed during the group discussion is that one

Moroccan participant contribution to the group discussion consisted entirely of sentence or phrase completion for other participants. This phenomenon was not observed during the American group discussion. They seem to allow time for the speaker to finish their phrase.

This observed phenomenon seems to contribute to the silence volume imbalance between participants. The amount of potential silence pauses that were filled with phrase-completion utterances among Moroccan participants is abundant throughout the group discussion. As for American participants, phrase completion was not observed which resulted in more silence occurrences. Therefore, recorded silence pauses among Moroccan participants had less volume and frequency than American participants and this could be partially due to the phrase-completion phenomenon. This phenomenon might be due to the culture. Maybe shared cultural background might align people to think alike and finish each other's sentences without feeling bothered. It is a way of anticipating an idea that the speaker is formulating and making their task easier. For American participants, this phenomenon might be perceived as being disrespectful and impatient, especially that American participants seem to respect each speaker's turn territory. So, any attempt to complete a speaker turn may be appreciated.

## **7. Derogatory Language**

In this experiment, the use of derogatory words is unobserved among Moroccan participants. Moroccan group discussion seems to be reserved and that could be due to cross-gender communication context. On the other hand, the American group discussion is plain-spoken. American participants had no problem using swear words every now and then. In addition to that, derogatory language was not heavily used amongst American participants, but it was permitted.

The cultural reason why derogatory language was not used in the Moroccan group discussion is that the boundaries between the two genders in the Moroccan culture are defined and stressed. This cultural aspect is beginning to fade away in urban and dense areas but still observed in the rural areas and amongst old generations. These results might be due to two differing modes of communication between the two opposing sexes since cross-gender communication mainly takes place with members of the immediate family such as husband and wife, sister and brother, father and daughter, and uncle and niece. However, the circle of cross-gender communication is beginning to expand in Morocco, especially among the youth. In dens cities like Casablanca, the use of derogatory language in cross-gender communication can be observed. All in all, the remains of the Moroccan conservative cultural legacy could explain the absence of derogatory language that was respected in this experiment.

## **8. Ways of Handling the Topic of Discussion**

The topic of discussion is tackled in different ways by each group discussion. For example, the Moroccan group discussion mainly explored the social medial misuse and disadvantages whereas the American participants explored the impact of social media on society as well as exploring the function of different types of social network platforms. Moroccan participants also compared the use of social media in Morocco with other cultures, especially western cultures. This comparison consisted of frequent use of *us* versus *them*. In this regard, Moroccan participants showed an awareness of being guests to social media

technology whereas the western culture is native to the technology since this tool was invented by the west. During the group discussions, we also observed that Moroccan participants talked about social media in a philosophical manner. They questioned social media *raison d'être* and if we need it at all. They seem critical in discussing topics and they try to get to the fundamentals of things and paint a larger picture in order to make sense of the idea at hand. This was not observed among American participants. For example, Moroccan participants, in discussing social media, they talk about it as a global phenomenon and that Morocco is only a small part in a larger context. American participants on the other hand talk about it only within the context of U.S. politics or in relation to celebrities.

## 9. Conclusion

In general, the two group discussions did not only exhibit differing aspect between the two groups but also some similarities. For example, both groups recounted personal experiences in order to elaborate on an idea or a thought. Conflict was less frequent in both discussions. The presence of a recording device might have played a role in that. In addition to that, both group discussions had one participant that spoke the most, and one participant that spoke the least. There are other similarities that are universal, such as repairing a sentence or an utterance, hesitation, and general patterns of turn taking. There are definitely more differences in communication patterns between the two groups than what we stated in this article. The patterns we managed to capture in this article consist only a small portion. The discussions have a wealth of data and pattern that could be extracted. The audio recordings attached in the appendix are presented as a modest contribution to the field of research and curious mind in order to be investigate further.

## Reference:

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## Appendix

Recorded audio files of the two experiments

Private Link:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1da-T0YMVYmpL6Hq7wO8MKrMF13cjVx6Q?usp=sharing>