

**Cultural Accommodation: The Effect of Language on the  
Responses of Bilingual Hong Kong Chinese Managers**

**David A. Ralston**

University of Connecticut

**Mary K. Cunniff**

Bentley College

**David J. Gustafson**

Florida State University

**Abstract**

This research examines the influence of language on the responses of bilingual Hong Kong Chinese managers. Subjects responded to either a Chinese or an English version of the Schwartz Values Survey (SVS) instrument. The results suggest that the language in which an instrument is administered may produce "culturally accommodating" responses that can affect the results of a cross-cultural study.

When a bilingual individual responds to a survey instrument, does the language in which that instrument is taken influence the individual's responses? And, if so, is there a systematic pattern to the response bias caused by the language of the instrument?

Previous research on the effects of language typically has found that the language version of an instrument can influence individuals' responses (Bond & Yang, 1982; Schermerhorn & Bond, 1991; Yang & Bond, 1980). However, the argument for a systematic effect has received minimal theoretical or empirical attention. Therefore, to address the above questions, we shall begin by discussing the relationship that exists among culture, language, and one's thought processes (Dennett, 1991; Schermerhorn & Bond, 1991; Van den Berg, 1986). From there, using Hofstede's (1980, 1984), Schwartz and Bilsky's (1987, 1990), and Schwartz's (1992) research as our basis, we shall expand our discussion to identify the cross-cultural dimensions that are potentially relevant constructs for framing the effects of language on thought. Finally, we shall conclude our discussion of possible systematic response differences due to language by focusing upon Bond and Yang's (1982) work on cultural accommodation.

Cultural accommodation proposes that individuals will respond in a manner that favors or accommodates the culture associated with the language of presentation. Specifically, bilingual individuals, when responding in their native language, will accommodate the culture (e.g., beliefs and values systems) associated with the native language. When responding in a secondary language, these same bilingual individuals will accommodate the culture associated with the secondary language. Thus, we propose in our hypotheses that response differences exist due to the language in which a survey is administered, and that due to culturally accommodating tendencies, the responses are systematically more similar with the views of the culture associated with the language.

To investigate the possible occurrence of cultural accommodation we used a research design that compares responses of Hong Kong Chinese bilingual managers and U.S. managers using the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS). The Chinese bilingual managers responded to either an English or a Chinese language version of the SVS instrument. The U.S. managers responded to the English language instrument version only, thereby serving as a baseline of Western responses.

### **The Relationship among Culture, Language, and Thought Processes**

Culture, which has been defined by Hofstede (1980) as "the collective programming of the mind," is the mind-set or mental framework resulting from shared values, beliefs, symbols, and social ideals (Triandis, 1980). Culture independently influences thought either directly, through the socialization of the individual within a culture, or indirectly, as the individual learns the language of a culture--language being an evolved cultural pattern (Bandura, 1986).

Therefore, when learning a language, an individual's thought processes may be subconsciously influenced by the culture of that language. Consequently, when an individual responds to an instrument that assesses values, that individual's reported values may be influenced by the language--and related culture--in which the instrument was written (Bond & Yang, 1982; Schermerhorn & Bond, 1991). Thus, when bilinguals respond to comparable information presented in different languages, they may skew their responses in the direction of the culture of the language of presentation.

#### **The Hofstede Construct**

The Hofstede construct (1980) was used as a starting point in developing a framework for contrasting cultures. This construct consists of four dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and individualism. Hofstede (1984), Ronen and Shenkar (1985), and others have organized countries according to these four dimensions. One result of these efforts was the clustering of countries on dimensions that yielded general definitions of "Western" and "Eastern" cultures.

The individualism-collectivism dimension, indicating the extent to which a society focuses on self-reliance as opposed to group support, most clearly differentiates Eastern from Western cultures. Because of this relevance to East-West cross-cultural research, the individualism-collectivism contrast has received substantial attention (Triandis, 1988; Yang & Bond, 1990), and will be a focus of this study.

#### **The Schwartz Construct**

Based upon the work of Rokeach (1967, 1973) and others, Schwartz's (1992) research advanced cross-cultural values investigation by providing two important contributions to the cross-cultural assessment of values. First, the Schwartz measures move the level of analysis from the society down to the individual.

This is an important step forward from the Hofstede research. Hofstede himself (1980) noted that since his dimensions were relevant only at the societal level, assessment at the individual level was not appropriate, limiting the usefulness of his research.

Second, and equally important, Schwartz (1992) developed a universal values structure consisting of ten motivational dimensions of values. These ten dimensions, which are presented in Table 1, form the focus of our study. They were derived from subjects' evaluations of questions relating to three universal requirements: biological needs, social interaction needs, and survival and welfare needs (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990; Schwartz, 1992). While all ten motivational dimensions are found in every culture, the level of importance of each dimension varies from one culture to the next. Additionally, some dimensions tend to be compatible with one another while others conflict.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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As such, a typology or structure emerged, based on clustering relationships of these ten motivational dimensions. According to this typology, a dichotomy can be drawn between individualistic and collectivistic orientations. As shown in Figure 1, individualistic values include self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, and power. Collectivist values include benevolence, tradition, and conformity. Universalism and security serve as buffers or transition areas between the individualistic values of Western culture and collectivist values of Eastern culture. Thus, based on this typology, Eastern respondents are expected to score higher on the collectivistic dimensions, while Western respondents are expected to score higher on the individualistic dimensions. However, the question raised in this paper is: Are those responses influenced by the language in which the subject responds?

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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### **Cultural Accommodation**

Yang and Bond (1980) suggest that as an individual masters a second language, that individual also acquires some of the cultural attitudes and values associated with that language. Due to this "incidental acculturation," bilingual subjects, when using their second language, may develop a mind-set that is partially shaped by the values associated with that second-language culture (Yang & Bond, 1980; Bond & Yang, 1982). Therefore, when Chinese bilinguals respond to an English language instrument, their thoughts and subsequent responses to the instrument may be influenced by both the English language and the Western culture. This phenomenon—of bilingual subjects thinking and responding differently depending on whether they are using their native language or a second language--has been labeled "cultural accommodation" by Yang and Bond (1980).

### **Hypotheses**

The perspective developed in the previous section is the basis for hypothesizing that cultural accommodation effects may occur when bilingual subjects respond to the Schwartz Value Survey [SVS]. Specifically, the Chinese bilingual subjects may assign more importance to Western-based, individualistic values when responding to the English language version of the SVS, and may assign more importance to Eastern-based collectivist values when responding to the Chinese language version.

Cultural accommodation is identified in this study through a two-step process. First, we shall identify the dimensions upon which there is a significant difference between the American and Hong Kong cultures--a culture effect. If there is no culture effect, then logically there can be no cultural accommodation effect. Thus, our first hypothesis asks: Is there a difference between the U.S. managers, who responded to an English-language version of the instrument, and the Hong Kong managers, who responded to a Chinese-language version? In testing for this culture effect, we also hypothesize that good representatives of their respective cultures would emphasize values that are consistent with the individualism-collectivism differences between Eastern and Western cultures.

Second, for the dimensions upon which culture differences are found, we hypothesize a cultural accommodation effect. In this study, cultural accommodation occurs if the Hong Kong English-language

and the Hong Kong Chinese-language groups are significantly different, and if the means for the Hong Kong English-language group approach those of the U.S. group.

## **Method**

### **Subjects**

The sample consisted of 156 subjects. Of these, 104 were Hong Kong Chinese managers. The remaining 52 subjects were American managers. All Chinese subjects lived in Hong Kong and were employed in Hong Kong; all American managers lived and were employed in the U.S. There were no more than two subjects from any one organization. The demographic data on the two groups was reasonably comparable, as shown in Table 2.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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### **Procedure**

Volunteers who were full-time employees and part-time MBA students were asked to identify two managers from their companies who would be willing to participate in a values survey. Each volunteer was given two sealed envelopes. Each envelope contained an instrument with instructions for completing and returning it directly, in a postage-paid envelope, to the researchers. One of the researchers was working in Hong Kong at the time.

Of the 104 Hong Kong Chinese subjects, 52 were given the English version of the instrument, and 52 were given the Chinese version. The assignment of instruments in Hong Kong followed a randomized block design. The 52 American managers were given the English version.

Prior to the data being collected, the Hong Kong Chinese volunteers were not told that there were both English and Chinese versions of the survey. After the data was collected, the volunteers were debriefed as to the purpose of the research. Respondents also were asked if they were interested in learning about the results of the survey. Those who expressed an interest were provided with the results.

## **Measure**

The Schwartz Value Survey [SVS] was used as the instrument for analysis in this study (Schwartz, 1992). The SVS was selected because it was internationally developed and tested in 20 countries, and has been found to be both reliable and valid. Unlike previous values measures which were valid only at the societal level (Hofstede, 1980), the SVS is designed for use at the individual level of analysis. An additional strength of this instrument is that its dimensions are directly applicable to business situations.

The SVS consists of 56 items which form ten dimensions. Each of the 56 items is measured with a 9-point Likert scale which ranges from "opposed to my values" [-1] through "important" [3] to "of supreme importance" [7]. This instrument was developed by its author in several languages, including English and the traditional Chinese characters used in Hong Kong. After we had experts confirm these translations, we used the author's original Chinese and English versions in our study.

## **Design and Analysis**

The first step of the analysis was a one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The multivariate analysis had three levels: English language version for the U.S. managers, English language version for one group of Hong Kong Chinese managers, and Chinese language version for the other group of Hong Kong Chinese managers. The dependent variables for the analysis were the ten dimensions of the SVS. The multivariate technique was used to control experiment-wise error rate with multiple dependent measures.

If a significant effect was found in the multivariate analysis, then the second step was to calculate the univariate analyses (ANOVAs) for the ten dimensions. Finally, significant effects found in the univariate analyses were further tested for differences among the three groups of managers using Tukey multiple comparison tests (Kirk, 1982).

## **Results**

The MANOVA indicated a significant effect using Wilks' lambda ( $\lambda=.445$ ,  $df=9,2,153$   $p<.001$ ). Since this effect was significant, univariate ANOVAs were used to determine the significance for each of the ten SVS dimensions. The ANOVAs identified significant culture-effect differences for seven

dimensions: Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, Self-Direction, Tradition, Conformity, and Security.

The three dimensions for which no culture-effect was found were: Power, Universalism, and Benevolence.

Means, standard deviations, and univariate F-test results of the ten dimensions are reported in Table 3.

Figure 2 graphically presents the means of the three groups of subjects for the ten dimensions.

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Insert Table 3 and Figure 2 about here

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The Tukey multiple comparison test was used to test for cultural accommodation across the seven dimensions for which a culture-effect was found. The Tukey test identified four dimensions--Achievement, Hedonism, Tradition, and Security--that met the prescribed condition for cultural accommodation. A fifth, Conformity, approached it. Table 4 presents the multiple comparison test findings.

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Insert Table 4 about here

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## **Discussion**

### **Culture Effect**

For the seven dimensions with a significant culture effect, the direction of the means supports the individualism-collectivism typology. When we overlay our results on Schwartz's model, which is shown in Figure 1, we find a reasonable fit of our seven significant dimensions. Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, and Self-Direction had higher means scores for the U.S. group, while Tradition and Conformity had higher mean scores for the Hong Kong groups. The only deviation from their typology is that our results show a wider buffer zone, in which Benevolence clusters with Universalism and Security groups with the collectivistic dimensions. As such, our subjects appear to be reasonably good representatives of their respective cultures.

### **Cultural Accommodation Effect**

Four of these seven dimensions--Achievement, Hedonism, Tradition, and Security--met the conditions set for a cultural accommodation effect. Although the data did not demonstrate a significant cultural accommodation effect for conformity, the means showed a trend in the direction of cultural accommodation because the Hong Kong English-language group was not significantly different from either the U.S. group or the Hong Kong Chinese-language groups and was located between these two groups.

In other words, for the Achievement, Hedonism, and Conformity dimensions, significant cross-cultural differences were lost when the English-language version of the instrument was used in Hong Kong. The culture effects for Tradition and Security (dimensions that are highly valued in the Eastern culture) were so great that the apparent cultural accommodation effect merely diminished the cultural effect but did not result in the culture effect being lost to cultural accommodation. Nonetheless, it is possible that in comparisons in which the cultural differences are not as substantial as they were in this study, culturally accommodating language effects could result in lost cross-cultural effects for these dimensions.

Also, it is interesting to note the direction of responses. On all five of the "Western" culturally important values, the Hong Kong Chinese managers using the English-language version scored higher than the Hong Kong Chinese managers using the Chinese-language version. And, on all three of the "Eastern" culturally important values, the Hong Kong Chinese managers using the English-language version scored lower than the Hong Kong Chinese managers using the Chinese-language version (see Table 3). Thus, no dimension showed a mean distribution contradicting the cultural accommodation hypothesis.

In conclusion, the findings of this study have found that individuals respond in a manner, perhaps even a mind-set, that is consistent with the culture of the language in which they are responding. While these findings support the theory presented, one study does not prove a theory. Therefore, further research to evaluate this phenomenon is needed. However, these findings strongly suggest the conclusion that researchers who do not use native language instruments may be losing valuable cross-cultural information.

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**Table 1****The Ten Schwartz Value Survey Motivational Types**


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**Power:** The motivational goal of power values is the attainment of social status and prestige, and the control or dominance over people and resources.

**Achievement:** The primary goal of this type is personal success through demonstrated competence. Competence is evaluated in terms of what is valued by the system or organization in which the individual is located.

**Hedonism:** The motivational goal of this type of value is pleasure or sensuous gratification for oneself. This value type is derived from orgasmic needs and the pleasure associated with satisfying them.

**Stimulation:** The motivational goal of stimulation values is excitement, novelty, and challenge in life. This value type is derived from the need for variety and stimulation in order to maintain an optimal level of activation. Thrill seeking can be the result of strong stimulation needs.

**Self-Direction:** The motivational goal of this value type is independent thought and action (for example, choosing, creating, exploring). Self-direction comes from the need for control and mastery along with the need for autonomy and independence.

**Universalism:** The motivational goal of universalism is the understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection of the welfare for all people and for nature.

**Benevolence:** The motivational goal of benevolent values is to preserve and enhance the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact. This is a concern for the welfare of others that is more narrowly defined than Universalism.

**Tradition:** The motivational goal of tradition values is respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that one's culture or religion imposes on the individual. A traditional mode of behavior becomes a symbol of the group's solidarity and an expression of its unique worth and, hopefully, its survival.

**Conformity:** The motivational goal of this type is restraint of action, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms. It is derived from the requirement that individuals inhibit inclinations that might be socially disruptive in order for personal interaction and group functioning to run smoothly.

**Security:** The motivational goal of this type is safety, harmony, and stability of society or relationships, and of self.

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**Table 2**

**Demographic data for the U.S. English language (n=52), Hong Kong English language (n=52) and Hong Kong Chinese language (n=52) groups**

|                  |                         | U.S.<br>English<br>language | Hong Kong<br>English<br>language | Hong Kong<br>Chinese<br>language |
|------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Age:             | Mean                    | 31.3                        | 35.3                             | 36.7                             |
|                  | SD                      | 5.1                         | 8.3                              | 8.8                              |
| Gender:          | Male                    | 28                          | 39                               | 36                               |
|                  | Female                  | 24                          | 13                               | 16                               |
| Marital Status:  | % Married               | 52%                         | 65%                              | 66%                              |
| Years Employed:  | Mean                    | 7.9                         | 13.5                             | 15.1                             |
|                  | SD                      | 4.0                         | 8.2                              | 8.7                              |
| Present Level:   | First Level Supervisor  | 57%                         | 42%                              | 35%                              |
|                  | Above Supervisory Level | 43%                         | 58%                              | 65%                              |
| Size of Company: | Under 100 employees     | 23%                         | 33%                              | 36%                              |
|                  | 100 or more employees   | 77%                         | 67%                              | 64%                              |

**Table 3**

**Means, standard deviations, and F-values of the U.S. English language, Hong Kong English language, and Hong Kong Chinese language groups for the ten dimensions of the Schwartz Value Survey**

| Dimension      | Location  | Language | Mean | SD  | F       |
|----------------|-----------|----------|------|-----|---------|
| Power          | U.S.      | English  | 3.27 | 1.2 | 2.20    |
|                | Hong Kong | English  | 3.58 | 1.3 |         |
|                | Hong Kong | Chinese  | 3.48 | 1.6 |         |
| Achievement    | U.S.      | English  | 4.85 | 0.9 | 4.32*   |
|                | Hong Kong | English  | 4.76 | 1.0 |         |
|                | Hong Kong | Chinese  | 4.34 | 1.0 |         |
| Hedonism       | U.S.      | English  | 4.49 | 1.4 | 4.36*   |
|                | Hong Kong | English  | 4.10 | 1.2 |         |
|                | Hong Kong | Chinese  | 3.51 | 1.1 |         |
| Stimulation    | U.S.      | English  | 3.66 | 1.2 | 10.68** |
|                | Hong Kong | English  | 2.70 | 1.4 |         |
|                | Hong Kong | Chinese  | 2.54 | 1.5 |         |
| Self-Direction | U.S.      | English  | 4.92 | 0.8 | 5.38**  |
|                | Hong Kong | English  | 4.46 | 0.8 |         |
|                | Hong Kong | Chinese  | 4.49 | 0.9 |         |
| Universalism   | U.S.      | English  | 4.06 | 0.8 | 0.49    |
|                | Hong Kong | English  | 4.01 | 0.8 |         |
|                | Hong Kong | Chinese  | 3.90 | 0.9 |         |
| Benevolence    | U.S.      | English  | 4.58 | 0.7 | 1.99    |
|                | Hong Kong | English  | 4.29 | 0.9 |         |
|                | Hong Kong | Chinese  | 4.31 | 0.8 |         |

**Table 3** (continued)

|            |           |         |      |     |          |
|------------|-----------|---------|------|-----|----------|
| Tradition  | U.S.      | English | 1.99 | 0.9 | 16.56*** |
|            | Hong Kong | English | 2.68 | 1.0 |          |
|            | Hong Kong | Chinese | 3.07 | 1.1 |          |
| Conformity | U.S.      | English | 3.77 | 1.0 | 4.31*    |
|            | Hong Kong | English | 4.11 | 1.0 |          |
|            | Hong Kong | Chinese | 4.34 | 1.0 |          |
| Security   | U.S.      | English | 3.95 | 0.9 | 11.42*** |
|            | Hong Kong | English | 4.30 | 0.8 |          |
|            | Hong Kong | Chinese | 4.74 | 0.9 |          |

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\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 4**

**Tukey Multiple Comparison Tests of the U.S. English language, Hong Kong English language, and Hong Kong Chinese language groups for the seven dimensions with a significant Culture Effect**

|                |       | Groups |       |       | Effect                 |
|----------------|-------|--------|-------|-------|------------------------|
|                |       | Grp 1  | Grp 2 | Grp 3 |                        |
| Achievement    | Grp 1 |        |       | *     | Cultural Accommodation |
|                | Grp 2 |        |       | *     |                        |
|                | Grp 3 |        |       |       |                        |
| Hedonism       | Grp 1 | Grp 1  | Grp 2 | Grp 3 | Cultural Accommodation |
|                | Grp 2 |        |       | *     |                        |
|                | Grp 3 |        |       | *     |                        |
| Stimulation    | Grp 1 | Grp 1  | Grp 2 | Grp 3 |                        |
|                | Grp 2 |        | *     | *     |                        |
|                | Grp 3 |        |       |       |                        |
| Self-Direction | Grp 1 | Grp 1  | Grp 2 | Grp 3 |                        |
|                | Grp 2 |        | *     | *     |                        |
|                | Grp 3 |        |       |       |                        |
| Tradition      | Grp 1 | Grp 1  | Grp 2 | Grp 3 | Cultural Accommodation |
|                | Grp 2 |        | *     | *     |                        |
|                | Grp 3 |        |       | *     |                        |

Table 4 (continued)

|            |       |       |       |       |                        |
|------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------------------------|
|            |       | Grp 1 | Grp 2 | Grp 3 |                        |
| Conformity | Grp 1 |       |       | *     |                        |
|            | Grp 2 |       |       |       |                        |
|            | Grp 3 |       |       |       |                        |
|            |       | Grp 1 | Grp 2 | Grp 3 |                        |
| Security   | Grp 1 |       | *     | *     |                        |
|            | Grp 2 |       |       | *     | Cultural Accommodation |
|            | Grp 3 |       |       |       |                        |

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where, Grp 1 = U.S. managers/English language  
 Grp 2 = Hong Kong managers/English language  
 Grp 3 = Hong Kong managers/Chinese language

where, \* indicates that the comparisons are significant at the  $p < .05$  level,  
 controlling for experiment-wise error rate.