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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9dw0m4p6>

**Journal**

Issues in Applied Linguistics, 6(1)

**ISSN**

1050-4273

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**Publication Date**

1995-06-30

**DOI**

10.5070/L461005206

Peer reviewed

# Who Has the Right Answer? Differential Cultural Emphasis in Question/Answer Structures and the Case of Hmong Students at a Northern California High School

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*Observed speech and interactive behavior of American Hmong students who were attending a northern California high school indicate that Hmong student responses to teacher generated questions were often influenced by culturally based predispositions. In answering certain types of content related questions, these students relied on underlying cultural emphases (pervasive culture specific themes) which were sometimes different from those generally held by Anglo American students and teachers at this school. Because of these differences, Hmong students often provided answers considered "wrong" in academic contexts, although they were essentially correct from a normative Hmong perspective. Moreover, Laotian Hmong students, often described as "shy" by educators, were found to be carrying out normative cultural rules for demonstrating respect and deference to authority figures through silence. This "taciturn style" was evident during numerous open ended question/answer sessions as these exchanges occurred in classroom situations. Constructing answers on the basis of Hmong cultural agendas and remaining silent in classroom situations produced impediments to communication between these students and their teachers. Moreover, many teachers often did not recognize these problems as the result of fundamental cultural differences.*

## INTRODUCTION

The arrival of Hmong students in American schools has presented a unique set of problems for educators. On the positive side, many teachers with whom I spoke described Hmong students as "highly motivated," "honest," "reliable," and "respectful." On the other hand, some teachers expressed concern over Hmong students and their apparent inability to engage teachers in open ended discourse. Many teachers attributed the general inability of Hmong students to engage others to a lack of fluency in English. Other teachers noted, however, that even students who had demonstrated a significant degree of fluency in English often attempted to

avoid "talking with teachers and other students during class time." Furthermore, some teachers noted that when working individually with Hmong students, answers provided by these students to teacher generated questions were often "dead wrong" despite the fact that in other situations these same students had demonstrated that they understood quite clearly a particular principle for solving a set of content related problems.

In assessing the speech behavior of language minority students, teachers and educational researchers often rely on traditional psychological models for guidance. In other disciplines, however, cognitive and affective dimensions of human speech behavior have been viewed as systemically linked to sociocultural factors and situational contexts (Holland & Quinn, 1989; Lave, 1988). Although anthropologists, linguists, and psychologists (especially social psychologists) are beginning to find some common ground in method and theory with regard to communicative/learning behavior, collaborative efforts are still seriously lacking. An example of this bias toward psychological explanations can be seen when, in describing the speech behavior of Hmong high school students (in a northern California high school), teachers, administrators, and school psychologists were prone to using the descriptive term "shy." Shyness, as the term is frequently used, implies the existence of a psychologically preconditioned personality structure which produces avoidance behavior in an individual. In addition, some educators characterized Hmong students, as well as other language minority students, as having learning disabilities because they often had difficulty answering what were assumed to be simple straight forward questions. In some cases learning problems were indeed psychological in nature and specific to an individual. The task for educators, therefore, becomes one of sorting out those behaviors which are psychologically based from those that are the product of shared cultural predispositioning. Some researchers have noted that some aspects of academic performance seem to differ between Anglo and Hmong as a result of differences in cultural/cognitive styles (c.f. Trueba, 1990, pp. 77-78). Ultimately, these recurring cultural patterns are expressed and perceived as overt personality traits at the psychological level. Moreover, further differences in specific communicative behavior may be complicated by shifts in social-situational contexts, making academic evaluation even more difficult.

Through an ethnographic study conducted during the 1991-1992 school year at a California high school, I have come to the conclusion that many of these patterns of Hmong student behavior, as observed for this study, are the result of cultural specific patterns of language socialization. Based on interviews conducted with Hmong consultants, through observing Hmong students throughout the course of a school year, and through a general approach utilized by linguistic anthropologists (ethnolinguistics), I have come to rely on two concepts to assist me in understanding certain aspects of culturally based Hmong student behavior: (a) "cultural emphasis"

(Hickerson, 1980) referring to the idea that cultural traditions, through their adaptations to specific natural, social, and mental environments will, through their language, reflect biases or emphases on descriptions and classifications of things, actions, and ideas; (b) "taciturn style," as a descriptive term for these student's predisposition for quietness in classroom contexts. My central aim in this article is to describe these underlying cultural differences and suggest a broad based model for assessing question and answer protocols that require educators to work across cultural linguistic boundaries.

## **THE HMONG**

The Hmong are an Asian People. Currently there are an estimated 4 to 5 million living in China (Schein, 1986, p.73), and an additional several hundred thousand migrant Hmong who have been living in Southeast Asia (primarily Laos) since the middle of the 18th century. As a result of the Indochina/Vietnam war and its aftermath (1975 on) most Laotian Hmong, along with other Laotian minority groups (e.g. Mien, Lowland Lao and Khmu), were forced to flee to Thailand for safety; the vast majority of these resettled in refugee camps set up by the government of Thailand along the southern banks of the Mekong river. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s Hmong refugees immigrated in significant numbers to Australia, Canada, France, and the United States. According to the 1990 census there are approximately 100,000 Hmong currently living in the United States (U.S. Census, 1990); of that 100,000 more than half live in California; a trend which was established in the early 1980s (Olney, 1986, p. 182).

### **Language Socialization in Traditional Hmong Society**

Hmong parents typically do not fuss over or coddle their infants. In contrast to European and Euroamerican parents, who talk a great deal to their infants, Hmong parents avoid such talk (e.g. using baby talk or talking directly to babies). In fact, the Hmong express explicit taboos against talking too much to infants. One of my consultants put it this way: "To talk to babies is bad for them; maybe because there will be some trouble when spirits come to maybe hurt them, make them sick or something." These taboos and attitudes toward language and speech behavior in early life influence how communicative interaction is structured later in life. For example, in contrast to the way in which Anglo American parents use baby talk with their infants, Hmong infants never experience parent generated baby talk. They hear only adolescent/adult language, and most, if not all of this talk, is not directed toward infants. Thus, as Hmong infants grow,

physically and intellectually during their first five years of life, much of their energy is spent on acquiring what is essentially adult language.

Furthermore, Hmong infants are carried in cloth wraps on the backs of their mothers which allow infants to look outward over their mother's shoulders or under their arms. This provides an ongoing situation where children learn from an early age to be passive observers. Members of Hmong society from an early age participate in social gatherings, but are not initially included as direct participants. Active participation comes as a result of growing older and through acquiring status and position according to highly specific rules for integrating individuals into the whole of Hmong society. This form of socialization has the general affect of reinforcing a cultural value on observation over overt participation.

These emphases on acquisition of adult language and allowing Hmong infants to quietly observe social interaction without directly taking part are embedded in a larger underlying feature of Hmong culture: an emphasis on group identity over individual identity. Moreover, as I have said, as members of Hmong society grow older they must learn their place in Hmong society. To do this they must learn salient categories of social rank and status, how they are situated in the social system, and the sociolinguistic rules that govern how interactions are to be structured among members with differing statuses. In this sense, as Hmong children leave infancy and approach early adulthood (13 or 14 years of age), they must not only have acquired a significant degree of linguistic competence (comprehensive lexicon and syntactic structuring), but must have also acquired a complex set of social rules for regulating social communicative interaction across a number of social boundaries.

As a natural consequence of this process Hmong children learn values of cooperation, modesty, collective effort, and formal respect for those of higher social rank and status. In situations where resettlement outside of Southeast Asia has occurred, these traditional modes of behavior, at least initially, have been carried over (including school and classroom situations in North America). These recurring patterns of communicative interaction, as I have observed, are typical of Hmong students who have only recently arrived in the United States. The persistence of these patterns varies according to individual differences in language development, to the overall quality of exposure to English, and to the length of time spent in the United States. As these students adapt, emergent patterns of interaction and communication are added to these more traditional forms, and in some cases traditional modes of interaction are modified or abandoned altogether.

## EXPANDING ASSESSMENT MODELS

For many years educational policies and assessment protocols have been dominated by models for behavior which derived from psychology (Smith, 1988). While these explanatory models have been sufficient for isolating and analyzing a significant range of student behaviors they have, in some situations, been insufficient for assessing behavior that may be culturally based. Recent studies in such disciplines as linguistic anthropology (Salzmann, 1993, for an overview), sociolinguistics (Findlay, 1992, 1994; Heath, 1988; Philips, 1993), and intercultural communication (Samovar & Porter, 1991) have suggested that clear and comprehensive analysis of recurring speech and communicative behavior in general must take into account cultural rules for regulating social interaction and the selection of appropriate responses to questioning across a range of social situations: Hymes has called the ability to call on and use these rules "communicative competence" (1964).

For example, researchers working primarily in the field of "The Ethnography of Communication" have recognized "silence" as an important feature of culturally regulated communicative structures (Saville-Troike, 1989, p. 39). Saville-Troike (1985) and Tannen (1981) have noted, through cross-cultural and cross-gender research, that silence is often employed in the language socialization process as a means of marking social boundaries. Wang (1977), whose ethnographic work was conducted in China, has pointed out that silence, or more specifically deference to authority figures expressed through silence, is an integral aspect of child rearing practices.

In contrast, psychological models tend to focus on the individual. Corsini's *Concise Encyclopedia of Psychology*, to illustrate, defines shyness as

being afraid of social interactions. Shyness is a complex condition that spans a wide continuum of behavior characteristics; it can range from occasional awkwardness in social situations to extreme neurosis and avoidance behavior that can completely disrupt an individual's life (1987, p. 1040).

Thus, describing individuals as shy places them in direct contrast to others whose behaviors might be described as unabashed. In a North American context, shy people, by virtue of their quiet behavior and their avoidance of social interaction, are seen as somewhat abnormal. Shyness in most instances is not seen by psychologists as a serious disorder, but in educational environments a shy person can experience extreme anxiety when asked to perform certain tasks (e.g. making speeches in front of classmates, answering questions in class, being called to the Principal's

office and so forth). Also, as Corsini's description indicates, in extreme cases more serious ramifications can arise. For the Hmong, however, quiet behavior is normal.

### CULTURAL EMPHASIS

Cultural emphasis is a concept which derives from linguistic anthropology as a response to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It refers to the shared "logic of culture" (Hickerson, 1980, p. 111). Cultural emphasis can be empirically studied through the linguistic manifestations of cultural predispositions. These cultural patterns can be made explicit through the construction of culture specific mental/semantic domains (ethnolinguistic expression) and through social interaction patterns and the pragmatic use of language (sociolinguistic expression). In other words, as an individual member of a society acquires a language and a set of cultural rules for the organization of a particular world view, that individual will emphasize certain values, attitudes, and perceptions shared by most other members of that society. Hence, language reflects the general orientation of a group of people to the world in which they live. As a result of differential cultural emphases, individuals from differing cultural backgrounds may arrive at conclusions to common problems that differ significantly from those of others—or those asking the questions.

Susan Philips, in what is now considered a classic study, examined speech and interactive behavior of Native American children on the Warm Springs reservation in north eastern Oregon (1983). Her study suggests that people learn how to interact with others according to cultural rules that are specific to the society in which they are socialized. Moreover, the ways in which teachers structure their interactions with students are also culturally based, and Native American teachers were generally better able to organize classroom interactions to accommodate these students. Anglo American teachers had difficulty getting and holding the attention of their students. Thus, if two differing sets of interactive protocols were operating, communication with students, expectations of the teachers, and student performance could be affected negatively. These problems were most likely the result of differences in cultural emphasis. The ways in which social and communicative interactions are actually carried out across a range of social situations are what Philips calls "participant structures." Participant structures, as I use the term, are the sociolinguistic product of a range of patterned cultural agendas that regulate all communicative interactions.

For example, in one case I observed, four female Hmong students who were attending a sheltered math class were working through a set of verbal quantitative exercises. The goal of the lesson was to have students identify

quantities expressed in various ways as either "more than" or "less than" something else. At one point during the session the Hmong girls were asked the following question: "Which would you rather have? 2/3s of a dozen cookies? or 1/3 of a dozen cookies?" The Hmong girls responded consistently "1/3." The teacher repeated the question several times and with each response the girls indicated "1/3." Finally, out of desperation the teacher changed the way in which the question was framed: "Which is more?" All of the girls pointed to 2/3s of a dozen. There was an underlying traditional Hmong value at work here. The Hmong tend to emphasize cooperation in most social interactions. In fact, to the Hmong, cooperation, collective support, and mutual assistance take precedence over individuality (individuality is culturally emphasized by North Americans and Europeans). So, by selecting the smaller amount of cookies the girls were actually acting on the basis of a cultural emphasis on conservation and modesty where it is considered inappropriate or impolite to take a larger amount. When the teacher altered the question to "Which is more?" the girls recognized the question as a purely quantitative problem.

### **Taciturn Style**

As mentioned above, in Hmong society quietness and avoidance behavior among certain members with differing statuses and rank are the cultural norm. Hmong students are socialized in a way that dictates constant deference to authority; these forms of respect should be demonstrated through quiet, reserved behavior. These behavioral expressions are regulated through culturally sanctioned status differentials based on age, gender, and explicitly recognized rank (e.g., deference to village patriarchs, heads of extended households, kin groups, or clans). When Hmong children are not in the presence of authority figures, the context changes and they can, in general, be quite talkative.

In their treatment of these Hmong students teachers often used the same set of strategies employed with shy Anglo American students simply because Hmong students had been typed according to American perceptions of shyness. In the course of my research I found that Hmong students reacted privately to their treatment in ways that suggest that most are not actually shy, but are, in fact, carrying out behavior that is culturally learned. One student put it this way:

Why the teacher not talking [to] me all the time [ever]? Maybe they not knowing us [Hmong students]. I'm not knowing [I don't know]. Maybe just not making [picking] us.

Thus, what some educators are perceiving as shyness is, in reality, deference to the authority of the teacher.

## PEDAGOGICAL ISSUES

At the pedagogical level, and with regard to Hmong cultural values and taciturn style, three areas of concern emerge as relevant for teachers: (a) approaches to questioning (questioning strategies that work across cultural/linguistic boundaries), (b) performance and evaluation which are based on question/answer routines, and (c) use of Hmong cultural/linguistic brokers to mitigate problems of communication.

### Approaches to Questioning

In most teacher education programs, prospective teachers are exposed to a range of questioning strategies (Gall, 1970; Heath, 1988). These strategies usually call for questioning formats that presumably will stimulate student curiosity and motivation. For example, one of the most often used techniques involves directly asking for student volunteers instead of calling on students by name. Teachers might introduce a particular subject through a "set induction" (i.e., preconditioned context), then ask openly for volunteers to comment on the material. This approach also implies the existence of a North American cultural emphasis on competitiveness. This does not generally serve Hmong students well (or many other Southeast Asian students who share these same cultural values of collective effort). In order to elicit a response from these Hmong students teachers had to call on individuals by name. Traditionally, communicative exchanges between Hmong elders and other members of Hmong society are formal and rigid in nature. These implicit rules, which govern social interaction vertically, are carried out in order to maintain social order in prescribed cultural contexts. In Hmong households, younger members of the family can only talk to a Hmong elder (all males) if they have been specifically called on by name. For Hmong students this type of cultural rule is often transferred outside the Hmong community to school situations or any situation requiring respect for authority figures. This does not imply that teachers should give up questioning strategies that have proven useful to them, but suggests that they might include calling on students by name as an added stratagem.

### Performance and Evaluation

Evaluating the academic performance of these Hmong students with forms of evaluation that are culturally "loaded" resulted in inaccurate outcomes. Test results often did not reflect an accurate measure of competency and skill levels in that various forms of evaluation did not take

into account differing cultural emphases. To illustrate, in one particular instance several Hmong students who had been mainstreamed because of their fluency in English were asked to answer the following objective question (selected from a junior level history class):

Andrew Jackson made extensive use of his position as President. One of the most important sources of power for him was the use of:

- a) veto power
- b) foreign investors
- c) his fatherly image
- d) the Navy

The correct answer is A (veto power). All of the Hmong students, with the exception of one student (who selected D), chose C as their answer. The teacher, after correcting the tests, noticed this pattern and wondered if culture was influencing the selection of their answer. Several days later I interviewed three of the Hmong students who had taken the test. I simply asked them why they had selected C ("his fatherly image") as their choice. One of the students responded:

I think he [is the] President. He [is] a leader right? the American people? I think it [is] important he be like [a] father to he [his] people. If too many people thinking he [is] not father, maybe they [will] not follow him.

My follow up question addressed the issue of veto power. Most of the students involved in the interview knew what veto power was and most knew that Jackson had used it to his advantage. However, the issue of "importance" belies a difference of cultural emphasis. To the Hmong students, Jackson's role as father to the nation superceded any other aspect of his Presidency. Thus, although these students were well aware of his use of veto power they selected answer C (his fatherly image) because it most closely represents their view of political authority.

The degree to which cultural emphasis is statistically significant on tests of this kind is difficult to ascertain. However, a general awareness of the existence of such problems can go a long way in providing culturally sensitive forms of evaluation. One suggestion would be to design questions that are as free of indirect or connotative language as possible. Avoid questions which require implicit understanding until students acquire a richer understanding of English idioms and implicature. In the cookies question, for example, "Which would you rather have?" only conveys "Which is more?" when the interlocutors share a particular cultural background (see Table 1).

Evaluating extended responses to more open ended questions also presented problems. In another instance the profound influence of normative

culture on the construction of responses to questions originating in a different cultural milieu was apparent. Hmong students, who were attending a regular English literature class, were shown a video of a recent production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The students, along with non-Hmong students were given a set of questions to take home. The questions or items requiring response had been designed to allow students a significant degree of latitude in their responses. The first item read: "Hamlet, throughout much of this story, appears to be upset or distressed. List some of the events in the story which might have caused Hamlet to be so disillusioned." In surveying the responses the next day the teacher and I found that all students who had turned in papers found that the murder of Hamlet's father had been the primary cause of his distress. On this point the Hmong students were in agreement with their peers. Anglo students also found that much of Hamlet's problem may have resulted from his mother marrying his uncle (who was probably the murderer). To the teacher's surprise, the Hmong students did not identify Hamlet's mother marrying his uncle (Hamlet's uncle) as a problem. In fact, in discussion with me, the teacher hypothesized, "They probably didn't quite understand the question or they just didn't know what was going on in that part of the story." This particular teacher attributed their not identifying this as a problem to a lack of comprehension of the question itself.

In a subsequent interview with several of these students (all of whom were partially fluent in English) I discovered why they did not see a problem with Hamlet's mother marrying his uncle. In Hmong society they practice the "levirate" rule for remarriage. The rule states that the brother of a deceased brother is obligated to marry the widow of the dead brother. Stated another way, a widow, if it is possible, is obligated to marry the brother of her deceased husband. Most likely this is done to keep that patrilineage segment and the extended household together. In Hmong terms, therefore, Hamlet's mother was acting in a manner consistent with Hmong rules for remarriage. One Hmong student put it this way:

If a woman[']s husband die. Then she marry the younger brother [of] her dead husband. It surprise me that Americans don't do this.

Moreover, in subsequent discussion in class several Anglo students expressed dismay at how quickly Hamlet's mother remarried. Although the Hmong students did not discuss this in class, in my interview with them, they, again, did not perceive a problem. In fact they all agreed that it is expected that upon the death of a husband that the wife is obligated to remarry as quickly as possible in order to maintain the integrity of the extended family. As the same student stated:

In class they say it weird that she [Hamlet's mother] get married. I guess that [is] the way they do it here. But, for the Hmong [the] woman—the wife—get married soon. Even if the brother already have wife, she [the widow] get married to him.

Evaluating performance on the basis of class participation could also be problematic. In classes where a significant portion of a grade is determined by class participation it might be useful to evaluate the various ways in which students are incorporated into classroom discussions. For Anglo students open and free discussion in classrooms was as much a part of their cultural experience as quietness and deference to authority was for these Hmong students. If grades are, to some extent, determined by class discussion, Hmong students might be explicitly invited to join in as discussion sessions unfold. Many of the teachers I observed used grouping strategies for purposes of facilitating cooperative learning and for generating student discussions. Hmong students observed for this study generally reacted positively to these grouping strategies. When students were not grouped and an open forum approach was employed, Hmong students tended to remain quiet and seemingly uninvolved or detached. This, in effect, amounted to a subtle form of exclusion.

### **Use of Cultural/Linguistic Brokers**

As previously mentioned, Hmong students who had only been in the United States for a short period of time were usually quiet in classroom situations. In addition, only a small number of these students spoke English (although the number of English fluent Hmong is ever growing). The coupling of these two factors, at times, made teacher-student communication extremely difficult. To compensate for these formidable barriers many of the monolingual teachers observed made extensive use of cultural/linguistic brokers. These brokers were bilingual Hmong students or aides who could not only interpret linguistic utterances, but could also identify possible problems stemming from differential cultural emphases. In transcending differences in cultural emphasis and the taciturn style of these Hmong students, brokers could speak effectively on behalf of Hmong students with limited proficiency in English. For example, in one particular ESL class students had been given the assignment of doing a public speech (in class). They were required to provide a five minute autobiographical description; a difficult task for these Hmong students because of a general lack of confidence in English and a shared deemphasis on individual achievement. The teacher called for volunteers. None of the Hmong students volunteered until a Hmong student aide raised her hand and said, "Vang is ready. He'll do it." At that point the teacher called on Vang and he gave his speech (with some difficulty in English).

Cultural/Linguistic brokers acted as communication experts who regulated messages being sent back and forth between teachers and Hmong students (Findlay, 1994). Most importantly, they were often able to break down barriers created by teachers misreading Hmong student behavior. Thus, for teachers to simply identify and use key brokers in their classrooms to facilitate communication with Hmong students, represented a significant step toward reducing numerous cultural/communicative barriers; barriers which, in many instances, were hindering the academic progress of these students.

## THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

To develop a workable understanding of how culture influences the situational construction of question/response exchanges, it is in my view useful to employ theoretical models that facilitate the analytical integration of specific speech acts with sociocultural predispositions toward social interaction. To do this I have conjoined two theoretical models that merge concerns over the linguistic construction and use of highly specific linguistic utterances ("speech acts") with underlying sociolinguistic and interactional dimensions of communicative transactions ("equivalence structures").

### Speech Act Theory and Equivalence Structures

To understand how differential cultural emphasis might have been influencing response outcomes in this situation, as mentioned above, I have relied on two theoretical frameworks: "Speech Act Theory" (Levinson, 1983; and Searle, 1969) and "equivalence structures" (Gearing, 1984; and Wallace, 1970). First, I have used Speech Act Theory to provide a conceptual framework for describing, in pragmatic terms, the structure of question/response utterances and to provide a means of identifying gaps in comprehension (of either spoken or written texts). Levinson and Searle have developed a set of concepts which allow for analysis of individual speech acts by drawing distinctions among the explicit meaning of an utterance (a "locutionary" act), the intent of a speaker (an "illocutionary" act), and the impact or reaction achieved by the utterance (a "perlocutionary" act). Any given utterance made by an individual carries these three dimensions and thus forms a complete speech act.

As I have used these concepts here, anyone attempting to decode a teacher's question is going to have to engage all aspects of the question as a speech act. For example, in the question "Which would you rather have, 2/3s of a dozen cookies? or 1/3 of a dozen?" the explicit utterance itself represents a locutionary act. Not hearing what is said or not knowing what

has been said (no lexical comprehension) would mean that communication has been impeded at this initial step in the overall process. When a hearer does hear what has been said and does know, at a literal level what has been said, but is not able to read the intent of the speaker, communication has broken down at the level of the illocutionary act (See Table 1). If this is the case, the perlocutionary act generated by the hearer(s) will not correspond to the locutionary and illocutionary acts that were produced by the initial speaker. When this occurs "equivalence" has *not* been achieved.

The basic idea of equivalence was first brought to light by Wallace (1970, pp. 27-36), and elaborated on by Gearing (1984) as a design to more effectively describe culture transmission process. Both Gearing and Wallace suggest that communication and learning occur not through direct reciprocal exchanges (the "conduit" model), but that meaning in communicative events always involves negotiated transactions. Meaning, therefore, is never discrete, uniform or entirely agreed upon. An agreement or "fit," of sorts, would be according to Wallace, a "partial equivalence." When Hmong students answer a question incorrectly or respond in a way that is not consistent with the intentions of the teacher (or whoever is asking a question), equivalence, as mentioned above, has not occurred. Table 1 demonstrates the systematics of this process.

When the teacher altered the math question, as indicated in Table 1, to "which is more" several equivalences resulted. First, the real intent (the illocutionary act) was made clear to the students. Second, the Hmong students, recognizing the question as a quantitative problem, did not opt for the Hmong value of taking less when offered two differing quantities of something (in this case cookies). With regard to the utterance "Who would like to give their speech" the intended meaning or illocutionary act can be found at the implicit level as "I want volunteers to give their speeches." The prevailing Hmong cultural predisposition toward not drawing attention to one's self through overt speech—what I have termed taciturn style—resulted in a nonequivalence response in the form of silence. For equivalence to emerge in any given communicative exchange, the parties involved must comprehend the intent behind the utterance of the person who is initiating an utterance that requires a response. At the level of the perlocutionary act, if equivalence is to be achieved, the hearer must not be impeded by normative cultural rules that are inconsistent with those of the person initiating an exchange.

**Table 1: The Impact of Differential Cultural Emphasis on Equivalence**

Speech Acts		Equivalence (fit?)
locution	illocution	perlocution
"Which would you rather have, 2/3s of a dozen or 1/3?"	Which is more?	'We want 1/3' NO
"Which is more?"	Identify quantity.	'2/3 is more' YES
"What is bothering Hamlet?"	His mother marrying his uncle is a universal cultural taboo.	Hamlet's mother is obligated to marry his uncle. NO
"Who would like to give their speech?"	I want volunteers to give their speeches.	Silence NO

### CONCLUSION

When assessing recurring student behaviors in various educational contexts, a range of explanatory models based on sociocultural factors should be included as an essential part of the process. To rely solely on psychological models forces educators into the difficult position of assessing student behavior without the benefit of data from cultural and linguistic sources. In this case a particular population of Hmong students utilized a different set of cultural values from their Anglo American counterparts in order to regulate communicative exchanges and to solve academic problems. Hmong students were also described as "shy" because their quiet behavior in classroom situations, at least superficially, resembled shyness. In order for educator's responses to the presence of these students in their schools to be more effective, a wider range of explanatory models are necessary for understanding the behavior of Hmong students. For this study I have relied on Speech Act Theory and equivalence structures to articulate how differences in cultural emphasis influence question-response outcomes. To assess academic performance and to understand more fully the classroom behavior of Hmong students—especially as these behaviors relate to verbal and written questioning—educators must be willing to acquire a full range of

relevant data and conceptual models (e.g., from psychology, ethnography [cultural anthropology], and sociolinguistics) to assist them. In this particular case detailed observation has suggested that cultural predispositions may be responsible for certain behavioral and informational outcomes. In any given situation educators must decide whether or not to include cultural criteria as part of their attempt to understand student behavior.

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