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ABSTRACT

Two distinct but related studies are reported, both investigating linguistically- and culturally-based communication problems between service providers and service seekers in Australia. The first examined language problems occurring in naturalistic situations involving a public servant and a client within three public agencies, the departments of taxation, immigration/ethnic affairs, and social security. Data were gathered ethnographically, through non-participant observation supported by note-taking and, where appropriate and permitted, by recording and interview. Analysis revealed distinct communication error patterns: sound-related linguistic lacunas; grammar-related linguistic lacunas; meaning-related linguistic lacunas; communication-related cultural lacunas; situation-related cultural lacunas; and identity-related cultural lacunas. Explanations and examples are offered for each category. A second study examined service-type interactions occurring for non-English-speaking-background (NESB) students at Edith Cowan University (Australia), reported in less detail but indicating contrasts in the two communication situations, particularly in the use of communication strategies by both NESB students and instructors. (MSE)

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# LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL FACTORS IN SERVICE INTERACTIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of access and equity in Australian society requires Australian public institutions to take action to remove barriers of language and culture (among others) which prevent clients from accessing services to which they are entitled. Research for the Commonwealth Government's Access and Equity Evaluation Report 1992 suggested that the progress that had been made in improving access and equity for non-English speaking background (henceforth, NESB) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (henceforth, Aboriginal) people had been largely limited to those barriers which were the most obvious. According to the Office of Multicultural Affairs, linguistic barriers had been more successfully addressed than culturally-based barriers and it was thought possible that at times cultural problems might have been incorrectly perceived as linguistic problems and therefore inappropriately addressed.

In response to this situation the Office of Multicultural Affairs late in 1992 proposed a research consultancy to investigate the relationship between linguistic and cultural barriers in government services and to define implications for training. A team from Edith Cowan University led by Dr Alastair McGregor and me was appointed to carry out this consultancy during 1993.

At the beginning of 1994, equity research funding was provided to enable us to carry out the same kind of investigation in our own institution. We have, therefore, applied the same model of analysis to interactions occurring in public service and in higher education settings. I would like in this paper to outline the two projects and to show the preliminary answer we are providing to the question of how linguistic and cultural factors may be distinguished in service interactions.

## **The Office of Multicultural Affairs Project**

The project we carried out for the Office of Multicultural Affairs was focused on the Commonwealth Public Service and involved the Departments of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, and Social Security and the Australian Taxation Office. It had two phases: a desk study phase, in which we reviewed the literature on the relationship between language and culture, and an empirical investigation phase in which we gathered data in the relevant Departments, analysed the data and made recommendations for training. The full project is written up in our report to the Office of Multicultural Affairs of November 1993. In this paper I shall be concentrating only on the data gathering and analysis.

The study began in Perth, where a number of Commonwealth Government departments were invited to participate. Eventually, positive responses were received from the Australian Taxation Office, the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs and the Department of Social Security.

It being the intention of this study to gain information about what goes on in naturalistic situations where clients are interacting with public service officers, the research approach adopted was inductive and ethnographic in nature. Data were sought directly, through non-participant observation, supported by note-taking and, where appropriate and permitted, recording, and indirectly by interview, both of participants in interactions and of bilingual/bicultural consultants who were invited to respond to tapes, transcripts and field notes.

After gaining permission to carry out research in the Department concerned, the research officers met with a senior departmental officer to reach agreement on the nature, time and location of the data gathering. In the case of the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, the team were able to observe and gather data from sittings of the Immigration Review Tribunal as well as from counter interactions in city

and suburban offices and information sessions and interviews at migrant reception centres and flats. In the case of the Australian Taxation Office, a member of the team was given access to the Alice Springs Regional Office so that a more concentrated study of encounters with Aboriginal people could be carried out.

An important objective of the study was to find or develop an appropriate theoretical framework within which the relatedness but distinctiveness of linguistic and cultural factors could be better understood. We found the most appropriate basis for such a framework in the concept of **lacunas**, developed first by Sorokin and Markovina (1977, 1982, 1983) and adapted by Astrid Ertelt-Vieth (1991) in her Moscow-based study of the adaptation of German scholars to life in Russia. Ertelt-Vieth collected narratives and interpretations of everyday experiences in Moscow by the German visitors and invited the Muscovites to comment on them. In many cases, there were disparities in the interpretations given by the two groups. Underlying these disparities were, she claimed, lacunas, that is, differences in symbolic meaning or in the interpretation of linguistic events. Ertelt-Vieth classifies lacunas into three groups: linguistic, textual and cultural. The textual category was concerned with written texts and was therefore not applicable to our data. We therefore took the twofold classification of linguistic and cultural lacunas and developed it as necessary to account for the data which our study revealed. The value, for our purposes, of the concept of lacunas was that it brought together language and culture as systems of symbolic meaning. The linguistic system orders the elements of language (essentially, units of sound, structure and meaning) and the cultural system orders the context within which the language is used and understood. Figure 1 shows the outline of the framework which we developed on the basis of the lacuna concept.

# LACUNAS

## LINGUISTIC

### SOUND-RELATED

1. Phonemic value
2. Prosodic value

### GRAMMAR-RELATED

1. Dialect
2. Inter-language
3. Style

### MEANING RELATED

1. Encoding
2. Decoding
3. Projecting

## CULTURAL

### COMMUNICATION-RELATED

#### (a) STRATEGIC

1. Reticence vs. informativeness
2. Compliance vs. assertiveness
3. Mitigation vs. baldness
4. Non-verbal co-ordination

#### (b) STRUCTURAL

1. Speech events
2. Speech acts
3. Turn-taking

### SITUATION-RELATED

#### (a) STRATEGIC

1. Orientation: (process vs. outcome)
2. Purpose

#### (b) STRUCTURAL

1. Bureaucratic
2. Legal
3. Personal

### IDENTITY-RELATED

#### (a) ROLE

1. Professional vs. personal
2. Inferior vs. superior status

#### (b) CORE VALUES

1. Family
2. Name
3. Race

### Sound-Related Linguistic Lacunas

Sound-related linguistic lacunas are differences in symbolic meaning resulting from the fact that the two speakers are operating according to different values with respect to the speech sounds they hear and produce. I am using the term speech sounds in this case in a broad sense, encompassing, on the one hand, the segmentable sounds which are commonly associated with their alphabetic representations in writing, and, on the other, the non-segmentable sound features such as intonation, rhythm, volume, stress and pace. I refer to the former as phonemic values and to the latter as prosodic values. Both kinds of lacuna were present in the data and both were associated with communication problems between clients and service providers.

In Extract 1 a member of the Immigration Review Tribunal three times seeks clarification of what an applicant has said without apparently getting the meaning. The problem is that the applicant is not giving him the cue he is looking for (that is, essentially, voicing) to identify /b/ as opposed to /p/. The phonemic value of /b/ is not common to both speakers.

#### **Extract 1:**

- IRT Member: How often did you have to travel?  
 Applicant: Had to travel, used to work two week on and one week off  
 IRT Member: Two weeks on where and one week off where?  
 Applicant: Two weeks at the plant?  
 IRT Member: It's a mobile (*pronounced* mopile) actually, we  
 Applicant: It's a what plant?  
 IRT Member: It's a mobile (*mopile*) plant  
 Applicant: Mopile?  
 IRT Member: Mobile (*mopile*)  
 Applicant: Mopile?  
 IRT Member: Yes we move around from one place to another in Canada, from Quebec to Ontario to (/) in Quebec  
 IRT Member: And you usually have to fly? Now obviously when you are...

Applicant: We have to fly, sometimes drive there, but we stay for two weeks and might come back for one week, off the job so I used to go...

The same phonemic distinction is relevant in Extract 2, but it is compounded by the fact that the NESB client is unaware that the "b" in debts is silent.

**Extract 2:**

NESB Client: I put my debts (*pronounced* depts) here  
 ATO Officer: I'm sorry  
 NESB Client: (*pointing to form*) I didn't include my debts  
 (*depts*)  
 ATO Officer: That's fine

A service provider in the Alice Springs Tax Office commented on the difficulty he had in understanding Aboriginal clients if they came into the office unaccompanied. He tended to depend on their companions or community advisers clarifying what they were saying. More than one service provider referred to problems with accent and with what they referred to as mumbling on the part of Aboriginal speakers. An important element in what is seen as accent is probably differences from non-Aboriginal speakers with respect to phonemic values, since Aboriginal English has a smaller phonemic inventory than Standard Australian English. To the hearer unfamiliar with this dialect, many sounds seem to merge into one another. This, too, perhaps helps to give the impression of mumbling.

Prosodic values are also often commented on by service providers. They are particularly important as they are often seen to relate closely to the personal identity and motives of the speaker. The work of John Gumperz has helped to show the importance of the lack of correspondence of prosodic values in accounting for negative feelings associated with NESB and ESB people in the U.K. In particular, he has noted:



An Asian [i.e., Indian or Sri Lankan] person using English makes less use of tone of voice and stress than an English person. Asian-English uses pitch level and rhythm, on the other hand, to signal emphasis in ways which are associated in English-English with expressiveness and contrastiveness. Thus the two systems of English are very different in this respect and there is consequently great scope for misinterpretation between the two systems. In fact, Asian-English sounds to an English-English speaker either unusually flat and unemotional, or overly excited as a result of these differences" (Gumperz, 1979:11).

Extract 3 is a transcript of an interaction between a public service officer of Indian origin and an English native speaking couple. The service provider uses the form of English which gives the "unusually flat and unemotional" impression Gumperz was talking about and the effect of this on the ENS speakers is shown on their faces at the end of the exchange.

**Extract 3:**

DIEA Officer: Who is this child?  
ENS Client: That's my son  
DIEA Officer: Is this child included on your passport?  
ENS Client: Yes, over the page  
DIEA Officer: What about the other child?  
ENS Client: He has his own passport now  
DIEA Officer: Were they born here?  
ENS Client: The younger one was  
DIEA Officer: \$50 please  
ENS Client: *(Looks sideways to partner and raises eyebrows)*

The lacunas with respect to prosodic values between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal English speakers are particularly marked. Aboriginal English has a stress pattern which gives prominence to the first syllable of words. Sometimes the public service officers could only catch the beginning of a word and unsuccessfully guess at the rest. This especially applied to names, where there are usually no content cues to help in making an accurate guess. I saw tax officers looking up files unsuccessfully for "Clems" when the name was "Clements" and "George" when the names was "Joseph."

Extract 4 shows how the prosodic features of pausing and low volume combine with a lack of eye contact and a dependence on non-verbal rather than verbal cues to make the communication between the tax officer and the Aboriginal client distinctly uncomfortable. The tax officer is able to conclude the interaction successfully largely because of the heavily predictable nature of the exchange - that is, the handing in and checking of a tax return.

**Extract 4:**

ATSI Client: (enters, walks past the table where the ATO officer is sitting, and hands over the form without looking at him)

ATO Officer: Is this the only one?

ATSI Client: (looks at ATO Officer, pauses, then speaks very softly) Yeah

ATO Officer: Are you married?

ATSI Client: (very softly) Uh?

ATO Officer: Are you married?

ATSI Client: Yeah

ATO Officer: What's your wife's name?

ATSI Client: Dora

ATO Officer: Dora Martin?

ATSI Client: Martin

ATO Officer: (handing over papers) That's your copy (indicating place on form) Can I just get you to sign just there

ATSI Client: (signs and withdraws, as wife comes forward to hand over her Group Certificate)

**Grammar-Related Linguistic Lacunas**

Grammar-related linguistic lacunas occur because there are differences in symbolic meaning at the grammatical level between the varieties of English used by the persons interacting. The differences may relate to dialect, interlanguage or style.

In many parts of the world which are not populated by people of Anglo background stabilized dialects of English have emerged which are spoken by NESB people from childhood upwards. These dialects differ from those spoken by speakers

of Australian English in grammatical and other ways. Lacunas may arise in communication with Australian English speakers because of the grammatical incompatibilities between the two dialects or because of the assumption by Australian English speakers that such speakers are lacking in English competence. Extract 5 is part of an interaction in which the service provider wrote down a statement after interviewing a migrant client of Indian origin, then asked him "Would you like me to read it or are you okay to read the statement?", not realizing that the migrant was sophisticated in his knowledge of Indian Englishes, had a passion for English literature and a PhD in Chemistry and had been a university teacher in Illinois and New York.

**Extract 5:**

- DSS Officer: *(Prepares statement then shows it to the client)*  
Would you like me to read it or are you okay to read the statement?
- NESB Client: If you like, er, I can read it
- DSS Officer: *(Hesitates)* Is that okay?
- NESB Client: *(Addressing Research Assistant)* Actually, what university are you from?
- RES.Assist: Edith Cowan University
- NESB Client: Actually I was teaching at university in USA< in Indiana and New York. I'm very interested in literature
- DSS Officer: I didn't mean to imply....
- NESB Client: No, no I understand
- DSS Officer: *(Turns embarrassed, blushing and photocopies documents)*
- NESB Client: *(Reads statement and requires correction to be made)*
- DSS Officer: Is there anything you would like to add?
- NESB Client: Yes, here *(points to form)*, can it be that my son sponsored us
- DSS Officer: Of course do you want to add that?
- NESB Client: No you write it *(Officer adds information)*
- DSS Officer: *(Leaves to telephone re residence status)*

During this time the client spoke at length with the Research Assistant about his PhD in Chemistry, about the linguist he roomed with as a student, about Indian Englishes, and about his early instruction using *The King's Primer* and his passion for English literature.

Aboriginal clients may well express themselves in English which is different at the grammatical level from Standard Australian English. I recorded, for example, such utterances as:

*What time the taxation is arriving?* (When will my tax refund cheque be coming?)

*Somebody done one for him before.* (His return has already been submitted)

*Where the one with glasses on? Short one?* (Where is the short lady with glasses who attended to me last time?)

Such lacunas as these did not, however, of themselves, occasion communication breakdown.

Grammar-related linguistic lacunas resulting from interlanguage speech may make somewhat greater demands on the interlocutor. Clients for services may in some cases speak an interlanguage which enables them to communicate meanings in only a very generalised way if at all in English. In Extract 6 the speaker wants to know if a fee is payable for the consultation he is having with the tax officer, but he doesn't know the word fee and he can't use other than the basic syntactic frame "How much [something] for...". His question "How much money for this?" is interpreted by the tax officer as an inquiry as to the size of his tax refund. It is notable, however, that the NESB speaker, although his interlanguage is so limited, is able to achieve a repair of the miscommunication with one more ungrammatical question: "No, how much for you make my paper?" The fact that communicative purposes can still be achieved despite grammar-related linguistic lacunas is noteworthy. Clearly, some grammatically deviant utterances can be decoded by the Standard English speaker. This can be related to the observation of Kaldor et al (1993) that, in the writing of non-native English speakers, some errors are *reader adjustable* and some *reader non-adjustable*.

Many of the grammatical deviations in NESB speech are *listener adjustable* and need not interfere with communication. However, the level of tolerance of error or deviation will, I would expect, vary among listeners according to social and personal factors.

**Extract 6:**

NESB Client: How much money for this?  
 ATO Officer: I can work out how much you pay or get back  
 NESB Client: No, how much for you make my paper?  
 ATO Officer: Oh, there is no fee for this

The client in Extract 7 has a less advanced interlanguage and cannot even handle the simplification of "fee" to "money" which is offered by the officer.

**Extract 7:**

DIEA Officer: There isn't any fee  
 NESB Client: Fee?  
 DIEA Officer: Any money  
 NESB Client: Money?

Similarly, the client in Extract 8 seems unable, without his wife's intervention, to make any meaningful response to the service provider. In this case, the service provider resorts to *foreigner talk* in an effort to get through to the client.

**Extract 8:**

ATO Officer: Did you ring this morning?  
 NESB Client: *(no response)*  
 ATO Officer: *(loudly)* TEL-E-PHONE?  
 Client's wife: Yes, yes

Grammar-related linguistic lacunas may also occur because of style shifts made by native English speakers. The shift of style may sometimes catch the NESB listener unawares and result in bewilderment. In Extract 9 the NESB couple are baffled when, as soon as they mention "translate", the receptionist apparently shifts into

bureaucratise, calling out "Translation", giving them a ticket and treating the interaction as at an end.

**Extract 9:**

NESB Client: I would like to translate  
 DIEA Reception: Translation, (*hands client a ticket*) take a seat (*looks to next client*)  
 NESB Client: (*looks bewildered, looks around to see what to do next, find their way to waiting area*)

Style shifts are often, however, made for the presumed benefit of the NESB listener. One of the commonest we have found in our data is a tendency towards thematization, that is, to put first in the utterance something which the service provider wishes to foreground. Despite the good intention underlying this, it often is associated with miscommunication, since it complicates the syntax. Some examples are:

*The asthma, you have suffered for some years?*

*With the \$5000 bond, if Mr and Mrs A claim government support, whatever is claimed, we will claim from the \$5000*

*Your sister and her husband would be staying with you?*

**Meaning-Related Linguistic Lacunas**

Meaning-related linguistic lacunas result from the fact that there are differences in symbolic meaning associated by different speakers with the same linguistic or paralinguistic forms. Interactants are engaged continuously in encoding their own meanings, decoding the meanings of what they hear and projecting the meanings or meaning gaps which may lie ahead.

The most obvious sort of meaning-related linguistic lacuna which arises occurs when the same word or phrase is used with a different meaning in two varieties of English. This is notably present in encounters involving Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal speakers, since Aboriginal English is deceptively similar to Standard Australian English

and draws largely on the same vocabulary, but it does not have the same underlying semantics. Examples of such semantic differences which affected communication between Aboriginal clients and non-Aboriginal tax officers in Alice Springs were:

*the taxation* (the tax refund cheque)

*long time* (a long time ago)

*stopping* (dwelling)

Another source of confusion may be in the use of routinised phrases of an idiomatic nature which may be opaque to NESB listeners. For example, rather than expressing the literal meaning of "We will send you a letter," an officer may say to clients: *You'll hear from us*, or *We'll get in touch*.

Sometimes, a meaning which would be expressed verbally in ESB interaction is encoded non-verbally by a non-native speaker. This commonly occurs in Aboriginal contexts, where a gesture, a nod, or a glance will often be used in place of verbalization. It also occurs among other cultural groups. In Extract 10 a NESB speaker uses a smile where a native English speaker would expect a verbal acknowledging act, and the service provider needs to confirm his understanding.

**Extract 10:**

DSS Officer:	You will get a bit more money
NESB Client:	<i>(smiles)</i>
DSS Officer:	Do you understand?
NESB Client:	Yes, we thank you for your kindness

Just as there are problems associated with the encoding of one's own meanings, there are problems associated with the decoding of the other person's meanings. Public service counter staff will often operate by rule of thumb, since there is a high level of predictability in the interactions which take place over the counter. For instance, people coming into the tax office may be assumed (even before they speak) to be concerned with lodging a tax return or getting a tax file number. In

Extract 11 the receptionist in the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs seems similarly to be operating according to rule of thumb when a client raises the question of visa. She assumes it's a request for a visa extension. However, in this case, the assumption needs to be corrected by the accompanying client.

**Extract 11:**

NESB Client: We wanted to ask about the visa  
 DIEA Reception: *Takes passport and checks expiring date of visa*) This doesn't expire till...  
 NESB Client: But she doesn't want an extension, she just wants to know about the money  
 DIEA Reception: Well you can have this back then  
 NESB Client: We only wanted to know....  
 DIEA Reception: *(Interrupts)* Do you want to see an officer, I'm only the receptionist

Often, anticipating that they may get meanings wrong, ESB service providers may feed back to clients by way of a recast what they think has been said to them, as does the officer in Extract 12 - a practice which I would think is worth encouraging.

**Extract 12:**

NESB Client: This is Certificate..uh.. not guilty  
 DIEA Officer: Yes, Police Certificate  
 NESB Client: This is Certificate...Christian  
 DIEA Officer: Yes, Baptism Certificate

A part of interaction is the projection of possible misunderstandings by the interactants so that they can be forestalled if possible, and we found that this is often going on in service interactions with NESB clients. Many potential meaning-related linguistic lacunas do not in fact arise because the interactants have co-ordinated spoken language with written text, or used gesture or foreigner talk or deliberately simplified their language. One of the important features of public service counter settings (by contrast, as we were later to find, with educational settings) is that they are driven by the need to satisfy the communicative imperative.



### Communication-Related Cultural Lacunas

We now come to consider cultural lacunas, that is, differences in symbolic meaning which attach to the non-linguistic aspects of communicative events. First among these we shall look at communication-related cultural lacunas, that is, differences in how appropriate communicative behaviours and events are perceived. We found it necessary to consider separately strategic and structural elements.

With respect to strategies, different cultures have quite contrasting evaluation of behaviour which may lie between the poles of reticence and informativeness, compliance and assertiveness, and mitigation and baldness.

With respect to the reticence/informativeness axis, it was found that clients of Vietnamese origin were particularly reticent and clients of British and Australian origin were particularly forthcoming in giving information. Clients from Malaysia and the People's Republic of China came somewhere in between. Public service officers seeking information saw it necessary with the more reticent groups to "know just the right question to get the right answer", since, unless the information they wanted was specifically sought it might not be volunteered.

In this regard, Aboriginal speakers come closer to the reticent than to the informative end of the continuum. It has been suggested that the length and recency of an orate rather than a literate tradition in Aboriginal society is associated with a strong sense of the need for control in what is said with regard to matters over which the group, or particular members of the group may have some sense of ownership or guardianship. Aboriginal speakers, then, think twice before they give information, and may often refer inquiries to another person. I observed in interactions with public service officers in the Northern Territory that even a man and his wife might not

answer for one another if both were present. (Further evidence of this kind of behaviour is illuminatingly discussed by Sansom, 1980). In the case illustrated in Extract 13, an Aboriginal woman who has come to see the tax officer with the intention of putting in a tax claim including deductions for her children does not offer this fact, but waits to be asked, and even then does not answer immediately.

**Extract 13:**

ATSI Client: (enters, accompanied by four children, and hands over Group Certificate)  
 ATO Officer: Hi  
 ATSI Client: Hello  
 (she talks in Aboriginal language with the children while the ATO prepares a tax return form)  
 ATO Officer: Er, you married?  
 ATSI Client: Yeah  
 ATO Officer: (continues to fill in form)  
 What's you husband's name?  
 ATSI Client: Mark  
 ATO Officer: Mark...Jefferies?  
 ATSI Client: Fox  
 ATO Officer: Fox  
 (continues to fill in forms) Who earns more? Do you get more money or does Mark?  
 ATSI Client: I don't know  
 ATO Officer: Only one of you can claim for the children. It doesn't matter who. You can claim or he can claim.  
 ATSI Client: I got three. This one five years old, this six and other eleven (pause)  
 I wanna claim for my children. I asked him yesterday or Monday and he said he's not claiming for the children (referring to papers) They're your ones. I'll put them back (putting them in envelope)  
 ATO Officer: I'll just get you to sign the front of the return (takes the pen, signs very slowly and returns the pen).  
 ATSI Client: Thank you  
 ATO Officer: Thank you  
 ATSI Client: (leaves without looking back at the ATO officer)

The second axis we have observed is between compliance and assertiveness. A tax officer working in Alice Springs commented that "Aborigines are among the easiest to deal with. They are patient. They are not as arrogant as white people." He

observed that when Aboriginal clients came into the tax office and did not get what they wanted, they would not usually question the judgment or the authority of the tax officer. Typically they would nod and walk out.

A quite different pattern is shown by some migrant clients. Extract 14 shows a client who persists in interrupting the tax officer to contest what he is telling her. The tax officer shows his irritation at this in his comment "I'll explain why if you give me a chance."

**Extract 14:**

NESB Client:            (*Queries Assessment notices*) These are different, but our returns were exactly and same

ATO Officer:            There must be a mistake on the return...

NESB Client:            (*Interrupts*) But I don't understand, I filled them out exactly the same

ATO Officer:            (*Recalls returns*) It's your husband's which is wrong....

NESB Client:            (*Interrupts*) But I don't understand that, they are the same.

ATO Officer:            I'll explain why if you give me a chance. There is a mistake on it

An interesting and consistent finding was that the most acrimonious exchanges did not occur when the clients were NESB but when they were ESB. Native English speaking Australians confronted by bureaucratic requirements sometimes reacted with hostility or contempt, to a greater extent than we found with any NESB clients observed. Extracts 15, 16 and 17 are examples of this.

**Extract 15:**

ENS Client:            All I want is me number

ATO Officer:            (*Pointing to form*) Well you have to bring in these documents.

ENS Client:            What a lot of crap

ATO Officer:            We cannot give a tax file number over the counter without the proof of identity on the application form

ENS Client:            I shouldn't have to make an application, I'm me, I'm here now and you have my number and I want it

ATO Officer:            All I can do is post it. Is this your current address?

ENS Client:            No I've changed it. It's there (*points to form*)

ATO Officer: Well we'll have to note the change and send it to the new address  
 ENS Client: But how do you know it's me?  
 ATO Officer: Because we do a signature check  
 ENS Client: How long will that take?  
 ATO Officer: I'll post it this afternoon

**Extract 16:**

ENS Client: I have an STP of \$5, where do I put that in?  
 ATO Officer: You'll have to fill out a Schedule L  
 ENS Client: Where's that?  
 ATO Officer: It's at the back of Taxpac  
 ENS Client: *(Finds appropriate form)* What a load of rubbish for \$5

**Extract 17:**

DSS Officer: You can only get Sickness Benefit if you can't work  
 ENS Client: *(Loudly)* What am I meant to do? Prostitution?  
 DSS Officer: *(Quietly)* It's for if you can only do eight hours of light work per week.  
 ENS Client: *(Loudly)* They took my pension off me...because my son wasn't living with me. My son was living with me. I want my pension NOW  
 DSS Officer: *(Quietly)* Hang on a minute....

A third dimension along which we found differences between cultural groups was that of mitigation versus baldness of face threatening acts (to use the terminology made famous by Brown and Levinson, 1978). Here we found that the ESB service providers tended to go to considerable lengths to soften the demands or requests they had to make. For example, a request for a signature might be expressed:

*Whack a signature on that for us, or  
 I'll just get you to sign the form, or  
 If I can get you to sign that just there*

There was a vast range of mitigations of requests for money, such as:

*Now for the hard part, parting with the money.  
 That will set you back \$50, sir.  
 It's \$180. I'll just grab that off you now.*

The tendency to mitigate requests and demands was not as strong with some other cultural groups. In particular, we observed that Aboriginal Community Assistants did not use mitigation at all when performing face threatening acts with Aboriginal clients. A request for a signature would be encoded: "Sign down there."

The tendency to mitigate face threatening acts meant that the service providers' language was often quite complex and possibly less easy to follow by NESB clients than it might have been. The complexity was further increased by the frequent use of hedges, or strategies to lessen their own responsibility for what they were saying, is in, for example:

*The only way we can help you is...*  
*My understanding is...*  
*On our machine we've got..*

It is interesting that the mythology about Australians is that they are straight talkers. The evidence, at least from certain workplace contexts seems to be otherwise. Lorrita Lee (1993) in a recent PhD study compared the discourse of participative decision making in banks in Australia and Hong Kong and found that Australians by comparison with the Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong bank officers used far more hedges and mitigating devices in putting forward their opinions.

Another strategic aspect of interaction is the co-ordination of non-verbal with verbal behaviour. We observed NESB and ESB speakers employing non-verbal strategies for both supportive and non-supportive effect in interactions. The service providers typically accompanied their initial greeting or offer of service with a smile and eye contact. Head movement, especially nodding, was used to indicate understanding or agreement and laughter was used to alleviate the demands of the system. As we have seen, not all clients, particularly in Aboriginal contexts, returned

eye contact and some showed in their demeanour that they were not as relaxed about the service encounters as the service providers were. Non-supportive non-verbal behaviours observed included frowning, head-shaking, raising of eyebrows and, in the case of one NESB client who had been told that under his class of visa he could not sponsor relatives, fist slamming on the counter.

Structural lacunas occur where the members of different cultural groups operate according to different systems for the social organization of speech. In particular, we found structural lacunas with respect to the speech events, speech acts and turn-taking procedures which the communication we observed entailed.

I have only time to illustrate selectively, so I shall take as an example of a structural lacuna with respect to a speech event the visit of the tax officer to a remote Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory. The visit of the tax officer had been announced some weeks ahead, and the members of this community were looking forward to "doing their tax." However, when the tax officer arrived and set himself up (with me) in a room in the community's administration block, for a while nobody appeared. After a long delay, a couple of people apparently casually came into the room. We wondered if they really wanted to see us because they didn't look at us and didn't approach us directly. Then one wandered past the table and, turning back, looked at it. Without a word, he dropped a group certificate on the table. The tax officer went through his routine, seeking further information as required and receiving sometimes a word, a gesture or a silence, and occasionally a sentence or two, in response. The interaction concluded as it began, with no eye contact and no parting greeting. And, in like manner, some twenty more clients drifted in in twos and threes, hovered uncomfortably around until their business was done, then disappeared again.

It seemed obvious to me as I watched this going on that at the tax consultation was a speech event which did not exist in the communicative repertoire of these Aboriginal people. They didn't know how it operated, so they hung back for as long as they could, then came in and waited for it to happen. And it was the tax officer's job to make it happen.

Cultural lacunas exist with respect to structures at lower levels too. Speech acts, for example, may not correspond. We noted earlier the commonness of hedges in ESB communication and their uncommonness in Chinese and in Aboriginal communication. Similarly, expressions of greeting and of thanks, which may carry a good deal of symbolic significance, may be absent from the communication of Aboriginal clients. Also, turn taking conventions may differ. The assumption of a regular exchange of turns does not hold for many Aboriginal interactants. The service provider expecting to hear a responding or an acknowledging act in response to his or her initiations with Aboriginal clients may often be greeted with silence.

**Situation-Related Cultural Lacunas**

Situation-related cultural lacunas occur where members of different cultural groups interpret a situation differently. What does it mean, for example, to "do one's tax"? To the tax officer, as an executive of the dominant culture in Australia, it may be seen as making a full declaration of all income so that the just income requirements of government will be met. To the unemployed Aboriginal person it may be seen as a rather complicated way of getting an additional cheque to help his day-to-day survival. Lacunas may occur where two interactants are participating in what each perceives to be a different event. Problems have been seen to arise when a client's ambiguous

remark like "I've come to see you about my tax" is interpreted as a request for help in making out a return when it is in fact a request for a refund cheque.

Another kind of lacuna may occur where a service provider gives what are seen by the client as ambiguous signals with respect to the purpose of the encounter. We found that counter staff sometimes attempt to informalise interactions by making remarks of a social nature, for example about football or what might be going on in the weekend. Some NESB clients, especially from cultures where there is a strong differentiation between social and transactional roles (for example in many parts of Asia) may find this behaviour confusing and off-putting.

There are also situation-related cultural lacunas of a structural kind. The service providers are working within a bureaucratic structure which will be largely unknown to many of their clients. We found that some clients, in particular Aboriginal clients, cannot comprehend why they should be redirected from one government department to another for services that all come from the same government. They also may be frustrated when records from one government department cannot be accessed by officers from another.

The activities and decisions of public servants are not only constrained by bureaucratic procedures but also by the laws under which they are serving government. Clients, especially those newly arrived in Australia are often ignorant of the details of the laws relevant to the services they require and may be assuming that the legal requirements are the same as in the countries they have come from. It was not uncommon for us to find service providers defending the demands they were making on clients by saying such things as

*I must see the documents. It's the law, I'm sorry, or  
Before 1983 the law was different for these.*



**Identity-Related Cultural Lacunas**

The third kind of cultural lacuna is that which we have called identity-related. These are differences of interpretation of events which relate to matters of identity, such as a person's perceived role and core values.

In work situations in Australia most employees behave and expect to be responded to in accordance with the roles they fill in the organization. To culturally different groups, especially Aboriginal groups to which this kind of work culture is foreign, this may raise problems. The client may not be satisfied to carry on an exchange with a person in the same role as the person with whom he or she dealt last time. They may require continuity of personal contact with the person they see as understanding their case.

Another aspect of this matter is the fact that many of the NESB clients of service providers in Australia find themselves disempowered when they have to come before public service gatekeepers. Their client status may contrast markedly with the status they enjoy in other places, and which, perhaps, they feel they have left behind in their country of origin.

Identity-related cultural lacunas may be particularly likely to occur where the public service officer encroaches on the domains of person, family and race. Just the use of a person's name - or the failure to use it - has the potential to cause offence. Aboriginal clients may have many names and may not apparently respond to the same name on different occasions. They may also regard certain of their names as restricted, either temporarily because of their association with a deceased person, or permanently because of their ritual significance. Some members of NESB groups have names which service providers find difficult to pronounce. We observed that some counter

staff may use tickets or gestures to summon them, to avoid having to speak their names.

Attitudes to the family are closely related to personal identity. We observed one service provider who, perhaps insensitively, remarked "Well done" when the person he was interviewing gave the number of his children as seven. We also found identity related cultural lacunas in the ways in which some officers made comments betraying stereotypes about certain cultural groups. In Extract 18 we have a case where an ENS client had the stereotypic view of Australians as all being ENS.

**Extract 18:** (Telephone enquiry related to Research Assistant)

ENS Client:	Can I speak to an Australian?
DIEA Officer:	I am Australian
ENS Client:	No, I want to speak to someone <u>born</u> in Australia

### The Edith Cowan University Project

As mentioned earlier, the approach taken in this study of language and culture in the public service was adopted again by the same investigators in investigating interactions involving NESB students at Edith Cowan University. This project cannot be discussed in detail here but it revealed some interesting contrasts which can be made between the interactions which occur in a service encounter in the wider community and those which occur in a university.

Universities, of course, dispense services of an educational as well as of an administrative nature, and the study at Edith Cowan University looked at both. Observations were made of counter inquiries, service interviews, tutorials and lectures. Some material was also obtained by questionnaire and by interview.

It might be thought that, since a minimum level of English proficiency is required for students to enter University, there might be less evidence of lacunas there

than in the interactions in public service contexts. To a certain extent we found this to be true. However, when we looked closely at what was happening, we found that the lack of evidence of lacunas was not because of the students' competency in English but because of certain situational factors.

The great imperative in service encounters is to communicate. Usually something significant is at stake - perhaps fulfilling a legal requirement or making sure that one gets the money one is entitled to, or maybe getting a visa or a passport. People, however poor their English, enter these situations determined to communicate.

The University is different. Students entering that context are not, for a lot of the time, under the same communicative imperative. They can get the regulations from handbooks and notice boards; they can read up in the library if they have difficulty in understanding lectures; they can check up with their fellow students if they are not sure about procedures. They can keep their mouths shut in tutorials if they don't know how to express themselves. If communication in certain situations is threatening, they can escape from it.

We found, then, that in the university context there were far greater opportunities for NESB students to employ avoidance strategies than there are in public service contexts. Therefore the lacunas may be less apparent in the university setting.

There is, however, another element in the situation: the university lecturer. We sat in on a number of classes where there was a high proportion of NESB students and we found that in some the lecturers exercised what I shall call counter-avoidance strategies, calling on students to respond, and, if they didn't, repeating the question or coaxing.

Extract 19 is a sample of this kind of behaviour.

**Extract 19:**

T:	What sort of wealth is it? n/a	<i>general unsuccessful</i>
T:	Charles, what sort of wealth is it? n/a	<i>individual unsuccessful</i>
T:	Total wealth? n/a	<i>rephrased unsuccessful</i>
T:	What's the total wealth, somebody can answer this, what's the total wealth?	<i>coaxing success</i>
S1:	22,000	
T:	22,000	
--		NESB

Another way in which the discourse in the university context contrasted with that outside was in the concern not only with what was said but with how it was said. Extract 20 illustrates this. "Maximise income" was not acceptable as an answer because although the meaning was right the appropriate terminology was missing.

**Extract 20:**

S3:	Investment?	<i>success</i>
T:	You invested already, you've already invested, so what is your objective?	<i>coaxing</i>
S3:	To maximise wealth...	<i>success</i>
T:	To maximise your what, your wealth, not the right word you're using, maximise your...? n/a	<i>coaxing unsuccessful</i>
T:	No, you've already invested, so what are you going to maximise now?	<i>rephrase</i>
S4:	Income?	<i>success</i>
T:	What are you looking for:	<i>rephrase</i>
S4:	Income:	<i>success</i>
T:	Not the right word, I think you've got the answer but...maximise your...?	<i>coaxing</i>
S4:	Consumption?	<i>success</i>
T:	No ok, maximise your consumption (laughs) maximise what? Your satisfaction, right, utility, right. Shareholder, er, shareholder's er objective - maximise satisfaction. You've got to get it right. Maximise income, maximise er, i...i...it's right, it's not wrong but you've really got	

to get the exact terminology

A third contrast we observed when we studied language and culture in the university setting was that another culture had emerged into view. The students in the university context were all learning to interact in a new culture, in that, at least if they were undergraduates, ESB and NESB students alike were learning to be members of the university community. Diana Crane (1972) has spoken of academic communities as particular kinds of social circles with their own unique communication structures. These structures are not entered all at once, and students spend their undergraduate years making progress towards belonging, though acceptance into membership will ultimately depend upon appropriate publication. There is, then, a strange ambivalence in the university context. It is the third culture into which ESB and NESB participants alike need to be initiated.

**Conclusion**

Ethnographic research often has the capacity to raise questions rather than to supply answers. The projects I have been reporting on here are no exception. We can, however, conclude with several reasonably confident observations about workplace communication before going on to look at the remaining questions.

Theoretically, I think we can say that Ertelt Vieth's concept of the lacuna provides a useful perspective from which linguistic and cultural factors in interactions can be recognized and distinguished.

With respect to the data we have observed, it is, I think, fair to say that

1. workplace communication, especially that involving service encounters of ESB speakers with NESB speakers, is fraught with potentially disruptive communicative gaps;
2. speakers have a remarkable capacity to bridge the gaps when there is a strong imperative to communicate, though sometimes that capacity fails;

3. speakers have an equally remarkable capacity to make it seem that the gaps are not there, when there is no strong imperative to communicate;
4. Australian service providers use many devices to informatise communication and mitigate conflict but these may often confuse NESB clients because they complicate the verbalization.
5. there is as much potential for culture conflict between institutional and occupational groups as there is between linguistically different groups.

The questions remaining for further research are many, but perhaps two could be suggested as priorities:

1. Can Ertelt-Vieth's concept of textual lacunas be effectively applied to the study of written texts in English by NESB writers?
2. What factors underlie differences in the tolerance of NESB speakers' deviations in English use on the part of ESB speakers?

#### NOTES

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