# Interculturality in Interfaith Dialogue:
## Managing the Representation of Faith Until It Is Good Enough

Tuck Leong Lee, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

iD https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3566-7481

## ABSTRACT

The study of interfaith dialogues stands to gain from a discourse analysis approach towards interculturality, given how, as a concept, interculturality emphasises non-essentialist identities and cultures in deep inter-subjective engagement. Such an approach allows researchers to examine interfaith dialogues as activities where the melding and blending of identity and cultural resources are actions directed towards various accomplishments, constrained by the institutional expectations of how dialogues are done. This article proposes using an analytic tool which draws upon 'membership categorisation devices' (from ethnomethodology) as specific 'mental space' conceptual packages (from cognitive linguistics), and takes a more telescopic view of how as conceptual packages, these devices interact in 'mental space conceptual integration' or 'conceptual blends' (from cognitive linguistics). One excerpt of a short conversation between a facilitator of an interfaith seminar and a Muslim Imam (religious teacher) is analysed in-depth.

## KEYWORDS

Culture, Discourse Analysis, Identity, Interculturality, Interfaith Dialogue

## INTRODUCTION

This article presents an approach of doing Discourse Analysis in the study of interfaith dialogues, informed by the tools and theories from cognitive linguistics. The data is drawn from my larger project which compares 'secular-oriented' dialogues conducted by civic society activists with 'religious-oriented' dialogues engaged by religious representatives as key participants; and how dialogue practitioners used identity-relevant resources in the course of their conversations. In my doctoral thesis (Lee, 2017), I explained why a discourse approach to the interfaith studies would be useful for practitioners, to assist in deepening practitioners' reflection upon their practices; and for the sociologists of language and religion, further to understand how religious and non-religious manners of speaking interact. This article invites the same audience alongside new readers, to test bringing in the analytic concept of 'interculturality' into the field of interfaith dialogue studies. First, my use of the term interculturality in interfaith dialogue refers to an activity which involves what practitioners continuously accomplish with identity categories (faith-based or not), and with the topics which arise with the use of these identity categories, and with the cultural discourses which surround those topics — in interaction with other dialogue practitioners. I use the verb 'accomplish' here, and elsewhere in this article, for the same reason as a social constructionist use of the term: to signal that cultures and identities are emergent things that are constructed in talk, and recognised for what they are — rather

than intentional performance of roles (see, for example, Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Have, 2004). Why then, is there a need to bring in this concept of interculturality into this field? I draw upon Interfaith Dialogue scholar-practitioner Riffat Hassan's (2014) voice from her auto-ethnography as a preface for demonstrating its significance:

*"However, a challenge that had a much deeper impact on me personally confronted me in the Fall of 1974, when I was teaching at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, and became faculty adviser to the Muslim Students' Association (MSA) chapter at that university. This "honor" was conferred upon me solely by virtue of the fact that each student association was required to have a faculty adviser, and I happened to be the only Muslim faculty member on campus that year. The MSA had a tradition of having an annual seminar at which the faculty adviser introduced the seminar's theme. However, in my case, I was assigned a specific subject, namely, "Women in Islam," presumably because the MSA office-bearers did not think that a Muslim woman, even one who taught Islamic Studies, could have the competence to speak on any other subject…" (p. 134-135).*

Institutionalised practices of interfaith dialogue tend to select for speakers for essentialist religious identity categories, because of the politics of the gaining legitimacy from representative voices, resulting in the marginalisation of other voices. Even though, while some of these marginal voices' links to religiosity and religious institutions are only tenuous, they certainly are not unimportant because Interfaith Dialogues are also about lived experiences. Scholars of Interfaith Dialogue discourse will need to shift their focal lens from these institutionalised and essentialist categorisations, towards an expanded collection of identity labels that are used in talk, in an interculturality of encounter. They can then closely examine how interfaith dialogue participants use these identity categories and cultural repertoire, and manage the discursive powers of these resources, within the structures of institutional practices. Then, seen from this lens of interculturality, interfaith dialogues are sites where members work with unstable and fluid identity positioning, deploy a range of discursive repertoires, (and not always religious ones*)* — among voices which seek to be authoritatively representative, and those which do not.

In my doctoral study, I had taken on a more exploratory form, using a series of iterative and connected research questions, informed as it is by a constructionist theoretical framework that is characterised often by refining and developing new inquiries, as striking tentative discoveries happened. In short, that study was not driven by specific hypothesis. For the sake of this article's coherence, I will pose this research question, which guides an in-depth analysis of a short data excerpt:

## Research Question — How Do Interfaith Practitioners Manage Conceptual Constraints From Cultural Resources in Dialogue, as They Work Interculturality?

At this point, the conceptualisation of 'interculturality' needs further unpacking and situating in the larger context of communication studies. More 'traditional' approaches to interculturalism, whether in Communication Studies (see for example, Koegeler-Abdi & Parncutt, 2013) or Interfaith Dialogue Studies (see, for example, Flunger & Ziebertz, 2010) conceive of identity and culture as descriptive nomenclature for population groups, and interculturality as the participation in interactional processes between these pre-determined categorial groups, oriented towards an institutional goal of a transformative understanding, towards the dialogic 'other'. One implication — whether intended or not — is that dialogue participants are seen as 'cultural dopes', an unfortunate consequence from perspective which emphasises identity and cultural representation, while missing out on the micro-interactional management of identity and cultural resources. Applied Linguistics scholar Adrian Holliday (2012) distinguishes between two views of cultural interactions: the "dominant neo-essentialist" view which centralises identity and cultural categories, instantiated by the traditional approach; and an alternative in the "critical cosmopolitan" view, which centralises speaking-agents, who work *with* identity labels and cultural resources (p.37).

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