

Abdullah Hassan & Ainon Mohd. *Komunikasi Intim: Panduan Menjalin Hubungan Persahabatan, Kekeluargaan Dan Kasih Sayang Yang Memuaskan dan Berkekalan*. Bentong, Malaysia: PTS Publications, iv + 176, 2002.

Communication has been an important aspect of our lives. There is always the need to talk with others. Even when little response is expected from the hearer we still make an effort to strike a verbal exchange in our daily lives. Hence there is phatic communion. While the saying may claim silence is golden, talk is certainly an essential entity more precious than gold. Even if talk might break a relationship, it is talk and only talk can repair the break. Silence can make the verbal damage worse. When two parties sustain understanding effective communication arises from talk.

Books on communication in general and interpersonal communication in particular have been popular reading. While there are many English titles on intimate communication little has been written about this topic in Malay (excluding Indonesian). As such, this title is one of a handful in Malay. This is partly due to the subject matter, which usually would not be discussed openly. Malays see intimate communication as taboo. During my undergraduate years in the early nineties, Malay male students were not allowed to enter the female hostel blocks. There was a line drawn around the hostels of female students marking the gender boundary. Malay guys were required to request help from the hostel inhabitants to get their girl friend.

The title of the book on Malay under review translates as *Intimate communication: Reference for fostering friendship, family relations, and satisfying and lasting love*. The book contains 53 short comments that cover topics like *Men's notion of love, Men's view of love, Emotional security, Gossip as a sign of happiness, Truthful confession can kill, To satisfy your partner* among others. As not a single reference is provided for any of the commentaries in this

book the bulk of information is at best a personal account of the authors' understandings of life. As learned writers, the authors could have cited researchers like Wazir J. Karim (1990), Deborah Tannen (2001) or Robin Lakoff (1990) to be more convincing. The first author holds a Ph.D in linguistics (Malay Morphology) from Edinburgh while the second author holds a Master's degree in Translation from Leeds. She is his second wife and both are above 50 years old.

The two authors claim in the first comment that love for men is an event, an occurrence, but not an emotion (p. 1). It is dangerous for the authors to make such universal claim with little empirical support, as one man's love is another's lust or poison or something else. Although the authors do not specify the race in the book, I take it that they refer to Malay men and women. The authors speak as though the world is populated with straight men and women (cf. Sew 1997a) and even the straights do not perceive love as the way they claim. A straight Malay man whom I spoke with sees love as responsibilities that a person must have towards both the wife and children. Another claims that love is the feeling that binds two persons together.

The authors contradict themselves from the very beginning when they say (p. 1, English translation mine):

...cinta seperti juga apa-apa peristiwa lain, maka cinta juga tentulah mempunyai titik permulaannya dan mempunyai titik penghujungnya.

...love like all other occurrences, therefore love also must have a starting point and have an endpoint.

Then in the next paragraph the authors write (p. 1, English translation mine):

...maka sekali dia jatuh cinta kepada seorang perempuan, maka cintanya itu akan terus kekal kepada tempatnya, iaitu pada perempuan itu.

...therefore once he falls in love with a women, therefore his love will remain in the place, that is with the particular women.

Apart from contradicting their first point that love ends like any other occurrence, the authors forget that a man who falls in love will also fall out of love. Not a single woman nor man can claim security to love. As early as 1900s the Chinese thinker Kang Yu Wei had already noticed the frivolous nature of love and suggested for a couple to change partner every five years. Of course, this was frowned upon by the Empress Dowager Tzu si, who later sent Kang Hsi, the last real king to exile.

The authors point out that men like massage. A good way to win a husband's heart is to massage him with the fingers (p. 15). Additionally, a better way to win a man over is to massage his ego with words (p. 16). Men like women's verbal affirmation. Many Malay verbal responses of a woman affirming the husband's words are provided in the book (p. 16, English translation mine):

Betul kata abang tu
What you've said is true

Saya setuju dengan pandangan abang
I agree with your opinion

Abang betul
You're right

Kalau begitu kata abang saya terima
If that's the case I'll agree

Saya dapat rasakan apa yang abang rasakan
I can feel what you're going through

Kalau saya dalam kedudukan abang saya pun akan buat apa yang abang buat
If I were in your shoes I would do the same

Clearly the authors' advocate is male-centered. This is the fundamental Malay tenet of intimate relationship, which is based on patriarchy and polygamy. This norm is changing in Singapore, as women in general are rather independent. Some of the Malay women that I know of (who ask

their maids to serve drinks and food to their husbands) speak their minds directly to their spouses.

The authors make a valid point in this book by saying many wives are reluctant to praise their husbands' good looks as it might encourage them to seek extramarital affairs (p. 19). I have heard the same response from my female Malay boss when her male colleague praised her husband's good built. Her response was, "Please don't tell my husband that for he might lose sight of his family." I have never heard any praise of my father from my mother. The authors point out that women like praise on themselves whereas men like praise on their performance (p. 20). They go on to suggest that wives should keep telling their husband how fortunate they are to be married to them respectively.

The wives are reminded to respect their husbands. The authors reiterate the fact that a husband has a hierarchical relationship with his wife, and a wife should not use any addressing term that dilutes the order. This claim is supported by the informal interview with young urban Malay males who said they do not like their wives to use *you* in the communication. The authors reinstate the traditional addressing term *abang* 'elder brother' in their discussion as the choice address (p. 25).

The authors include Malay phrases frequently used by Malay wives to control their husbands. The wives usually gain the upper hand by using such utterances (p. 96-97, English translation mine):

Saya tak peduli. Saya kata jangan pergi, jangan pergi!
I don't care. I say don't go and don't you dare to go!

Saya isteri abang. Saya ada hak tahu ke mana pergi duit gaji abang!
I am your wife. I have the right to know where your salary went!

Takkan Tanya sedikit pun tak boleh? Saya ni kan isteri awak.
Can't I even ask? I am your wife, right?

Awak tu suami. Awak tak boleh lari daripada tanggungjawab awak kepada saya.

You are the husband. You cannot run away from you responsibilities for me.

Apart from empowering the wives, these phrases affirm the hierarchical relationship between husband and wife. While the wife might seem subjugated in the marriage institution the husband is expected to cooperate in a certain behavior to his wife. It is expected of the husband to provide his wife the access to his life completely. The husband seems to have little privacy from his wife in a marriage. Like a double-edged sword, the Malay wife owns the husband as much as the husband owns his wife.

In fact, there are many occasions when a Malay woman may obtain a better deal than a man. When it comes to infidelity, the wife can be more subtle and secretive than her husband. The Malay saying *musuh dalam selimut* (literally, ‘an enemy in the blanket’) translates as ‘a traitor in the household’. This saying is depicted by the image of a smiling wife, sleeping next to her husband, having something on top of her covered by the blanket. The saying is annotated as a typical usage against unfaithful wives (Lee 2001, 35).

Some creativity in comprehending Malay sayings *bulan jatuh ke riba* ‘the moon falls into one’s lap’ will shed more light on the hidden power of Malay woman. Lee (2001, 85) includes a suggestive idea to this saying, which denotes ‘unexpected good fortune’ and ‘being in luck’s way’. Lee’s illustration depicts a seated Muslim woman totally covered in black, including a black veil across her face, holding a crescent moon with smacking lips on her lap.

The authors discuss the basic problem in Malay arguments, namely the confusion between opinion and argument (p. 116). Relationships break when opinion is taken as argument. However it is difficult to sustain the opinion-argument boundary as utterance carries metamessage (Tannen 2001). Similarly, it is difficult to tease out the difference between

customary and linguistic competence in verbal communication (Sew forthcoming). Not knowing the right thing to say is mainly due to a lack of cultural competence on the part of the foreign speaker who is not familiar with the languaculture of his host (cf. Sew 1997b). The common Malay phrases that sparkle arguments are provided in the book as follow (p. 117, English translation mine):

Awak da lupakah?
Have you forgotten?

Awak tak belikah?
You did not buy?

Awak ni kenapa malas?
Why are you so lazy?

Kenapa dengan awak ni?
What's wrong with you?

Ini kesilapan awak
This is your fault.

Awak tak tahukah?
Don't you know?

Itulah, degil lagi.
That's why, stubborn again.

Ini salah siapa?
Whose fault is this?

Obviously, all this questions are not questions when it comes to interpersonal communication, especially within the context of familylect (cf. Tannen 2001, Sew forthcoming). In fact, at the metamessage level (Malay) questions are used as a form of disagreement. All the questions listed above are either accusations or reprimands.

An important point mentioned by the authors about the Malay phrases in argument is the use of *awak* 'you', which make the phrases sound vindictive. The impact of *you* in Malay is further

fleshed out in the following phrases, which according to the authors are very dangerous in intimate communication (p. 117, English translation mine):

Awak ni kenapa?
What's wrong with you

Abang selalu balik lambat
Brother (you) always come back late

Itulah, awak tak minta izin saya terlebih dulu.
That's why, you did not seek my permission first

Abang ni macam orang tak ada iman.
Brother (you) is like a man without faith.

You suka sakitkan hati saya
You like to hurt my heart

The use of *awak* is always rude in Malay communication, especially when talking to a person who is hierarchically related to the speaker either in terms of age or rank or social status; instead the Indonesian second person pronoun *anda* is employed as substitute (cf. Sew 1996c). The same communicative rule applies to Japanese although the second person pronoun *anata* can be used as term of endearment in Japanese intimate communication (Sew 1997b).

Another word that is not well received in Malay intimate communication is *kenapa* 'why'. The word *kenapa* is considered rude by Malay superiors (p. 118). This affirms the fact that indirectness is the way to go in Malay pragmatics in particular and Asian pragmatics in general (Sew 1997b). In fact, many Malay genres display indirect stylistics through rhyme, metaphorical pretext and/or synecdoche (Sew 1996a). The authors provide these phrases that are identified as ill-mannered utterances in Malay intimate communication (p. 118, English translation mine):

Kenapa awak tak fikir dulu? (x)
Why did you not think first?

Kenapa awak tak mahu cakap? (x)
Why didn't you say so?

Kenapa awak beli minyak cap ini? (x)
Why did you buy this brand of oil?

Kenapa tak balik cepat sikit? (x)
Why did you not come back earlier?

Kenapa tak minum kopi tu?
Why did you not drink the coffee?

As I translate the phrases above I notice that it is impossible to avoid using *you* in English; there is no way I can translate the last two Malay phrases without using *you*. As such the authors' suggestion of not using the second person pronoun in Malay intimate communication is a language specific communicative rule that applies to Chinese too. The second person pronoun in Chinese is optional in utterances and the inclusion of this pronoun puts the hearer in focus.

Sarcasm is detrimental to intimate communication. The authors point out that unhappy couples usually perform sarcasm up to ten times before letting a quarrel die (p. 146). Here are some samples of Malay sarcasm (p. 146, English translation mine):

Ada orang tu, nama saja suami.
Some people are only husband in name.

Setengah [sic] orang tu, makin tua makin tak sedar diri.
Some people are more mindless as they get older.

Suami zaman sekarang tak boleh diharap.
Husbands of present time cannot be dependable.

The authors remind us that criticism entails argument and conflict. This is because we fail to distinguish the issue from the person when we criticize (p. 152). When hearing the second person pronoun, for instance, the hearer sees himself rather than his action as the target of the

criticism. We are asked to use more positive language in the criticism. Instead saying A, readers are advised to say B (p. 153, English translation mine):

A: Bad Malay utterances in intimate communication	B: Good Malay utterances in intimate communication
<i>Abang suka datang lambat.</i> Brother (you) likes to come late.	<i>“Abang lain kali datang cepat.</i> Brother (you), come early next time.
<i>Awak silap.</i> You are wrong	<i>Saya tak setuju dengan pandangan abang.</i> I disagree with brother (you).
<i>Abang ni pemalas.</i> Brother (you) is lazy	<i>Abang tolong saya gosok baju-baju ini.</i> Brother (you), help me to iron this shirts.

During my analysis of Malay talk, female informants were talking about the incapability of their respective husband in cooking. The working Malay informant claimed that her husband did not cook, and if she does not cook for him he will not eat at all (Sew 1996b). There is not a single negative reference on the personalities or attributes of their husbands. Malay dyads basically observe the politeness maxims, which avoid imposing on the hearer to commit any action. By not singling out the negative attribute of one’s husband (or somebody else) the hearer is omitted from making any value judgment in the conversation.

Howard Gardner (1983) has identified interpersonal intelligence as one of the eight or more human intelligences. We need to enhance our interpersonal intelligence, as ultimately we are gregarious creatures. This book reminds me that being humble and less critical about our parents/family members/friends/spouse/partner is intelligent living. There is more than one way to say things and choosing the preferred communicating strategy is definitely a win-win communicative move.

After reading this book I am more appreciative of my mother’s speech styles in our familylect. I am beginning to realize why my first brother-in-law remains aloof at times. While

it is easy to demand the right to say things as they are, especially on the women's part, it is an art to attain cooperation in verbal and intimate communication. What is the point of being able to say what we want but end up chasing the hearers, who matter most to us, out of the room? To talk effectively is to win the other person over and over again without making the person felt obligated, stressed or fearful. The Malay way of communicating intimately should not be limited to the Malay speakers as certain soft pragmatics can be applied to intimacies all over the world, irrespective of one's orientation.

The content is a personal account of the two authors who had been through real world Malay customary interpersonal relationships. As this is one of the few Malay books dealing with intimate communication, it can be taken as a personal account of a Malay couple concerning man-to-woman relationship cum husband-wife communication. The book offers a Malay worldview of mainstream relationship that might be of interest to lay persons who need a quick guide to interpersonal communication. If nothing else, this is interesting reading material for Malay readers, married or otherwise, as it forms the conventional basis of a heterosexual relationship.

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Jyh Wee Sew
CHIJ ST Theresa's Convent, Singapore