

'Mind Your Language': Investigating the Common Stereotypes Depicted in the Characters of an EFL Sitcom

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to examine and describe the common stereotypes portrayed by the characters in the sitcom 'Mind Your Language.' It is a British situation comedy that was aired from 1977 to 1986. The story focuses on the English as a Foreign Language class taught by Mr. Jeremy Brown, who had to deal with a diverse background of foreign students or immigrants. The type of research design is descriptive qualitative. The source of data or the subject of the study is downloaded file of the situation comedy 'Mind Your Language.' The object of the study is the common stereotypes that mark particular cultures in terms of the racial and gender profiling, cultures and groups of individuals as they are shown in the Episode 1 of Season 1 from the Series 'Mind Your Language.' The analysis applies semiotics technique by having qualitative interpretation on the scenes from that episode in terms of likeness to a particular culture's common stereotype. It was discovered that some common stereotypes are identified in terms of racial and gender profiling, cultures and groups of individuals.

Keywords: common stereotype, characters, racial, gender, culture.

Introduction

Certain individuals are recognized as part of the group that they belong based on their entity. An India lady is easily acknowledged from the *saree* that she is wearing. In other words, we stereotype a woman as an India lady because she wears India traditional costume. When we see a very tall man with blonde hair, it can be said that he must be a European. Also, when there are people with slanted eyes and fair complexion, the assumption is that they might be from a country in East Asia. As for the language used, we might easily identify that someone is from Singapore when we heard s/he talks with the 'lah' ending such as 'Don't be like that lah.'

People from a society once are assumed to be similar to one another. Inference about essential characteristics of a group or a community can be alike and different in some regards among the perceivers. In certain cultures, women are considered soft, weak and tender. At another community, women are defined as the strongest individual especially in matrilineal family where the identification of the family line is from the mother. One particular group or an individual specifically, can be perceived differently by various perspectives based on the cultures that it fits in.

Labeling or stereotyping is part of the cultures because one is tagged by considering his/her original community. It is truthfully interesting to discuss about stereotype

although the judgment is not always conclusive enough depending the perceivers' point of views. The importance of knowing stereotypes is actually for helping in cross cultural communication in order that the 'true' background information about someone/community can prevent from misunderstanding or miscommunication. That is why "stereotype" becomes one of the topics to be learned and discussed in Cross Cultural Understanding Class. This will serve as the background of this study

Enriching knowledge about stereotypes can be from various resources such as pictures, reading materials, or films. One of the movies that expose more on stereotype is 'Mind Your Language,' a British situation comedy, which was on air from 1977 to 1986. The setting is in an adult education college in London at that time. The story focuses on the English as a Foreign Language class taught by Mr. Jeremy Brown, who had to teach English to a diverse background of foreign students or immigrants. The characters portrayed in the sitcom represent certain origins; for examples, India, Pakistan, China, Japan, France, etc. and are assumed to depict certain common stereotypes.

Dobewall et al (2011, pp. 217-220) researched on stereotypes about which three groups were measured with an enlarged version of the Portrait Value Questionnaire 21. The subjects were instructed to rate the descriptions first for themselves, then for the group to which they felt they belonged to most and thereafter for the remaining two groups. The results shows even though there was no accuracy in stereotypes about value preferences of ethnic Estonians, the Russian-speaking minority, and the Russians, it was found that they were socially shared across the students who were ethnic Estonians or belonged to the Russian-speaking minority. Therefore, an investigation on and a description of the common stereotypes shown by the characters from the sitcom 'Mind Your Language.' is the aim of this paper.

Literature Review

According to Levine and Adelman (1982), stereotype is the fixed, overgeneralized preconceived beliefs we have about other people. Stereotypes originate and develop from numerous sources such as jokes, textbooks, movies, and television. Movies about cowboys and Indians portray cowboys as "civilized" and Indians as wild and "primitive." A child who knows about the American Indian only through watching these movies will have a distorted and false image of this group of people. Stereotypes perpetuate inaccuracies about religious, racial and cultural groups.

Dobewall, et al. (2011, pp. 216) state that stereotypes are exaggerated descriptions, generalized conceptions or beliefs about a cultural group, and are not necessarily accurately attributed. Moreover, according to Fiske in Keene (2011), stereotyping is the application of an individual's own thoughts, beliefs, and expectations onto other individuals without first obtaining factual knowledge about the individual(s). Many times, stereotypes are created after multiple occurrences of a similar experience. For example, an individual that knows several individuals, or families, from the south and that enjoy sweet potato pie, could lead that individual to the belief, or geographical stereotype that all families in the south enjoy sweet potato pie.

Nittle (2017) defines that stereotypes are characteristics imposed upon groups of people because of their race, nationality and sexual orientation, among others. However, according to Brannon (2004), results from studies show despite similarities in many aspects of gender stereotypes, not all cultures hold the same views of what traits, characteristics, and patterns of behavior men and women should exhibit.

From Stereotype Examples (n.d.), stereotype is also defined as any commonly known public belief and is often created about people of specific cultures or races based on a prior assumption. On that website, some common stereotypes are categorized. Racial Profiling is stereotypes surrounding race. For example, saying that all Blacks are good at sports is a stereotype, because it's grouping the race together to indicate that everyone of that race is a good athlete. Some Gender Profiling are like stereotyping men and women such as men are strong and do all the work, Girls are not good at sports, guys are messy and unclean, men who spend too much time on the computer or read are geeks. Cultures Stereotypes are about cultures of countries as a whole; the examples include the premises that all white Americans are obese, lazy, and dim-witted, Mexican stereotypes suggest that all Mexicans are lazy and came into America illegally, all Asians like to eat rice and drive slow, all Americans are generally considered to be friendly, generous, and tolerant, but also arrogant, impatient, and domineering. Groups of Individuals are stereotypes that involve grouping of individuals; for examples: Punks wear Mohawks, spikes, chains, are a menace to society and are always getting in trouble; Goths wear black clothes, black makeup, are depressed and hated by society; All librarians are women who are old, wear glasses, tie a high bun, and have a perpetual frown on their face; All teenagers are rebels, all children don't enjoy healthy food; The elderly have health issues and behave like children and so forth

In addition, Brannon (2004) categorizes that Gender Stereotypes have four different aspects—physical characteristics, traits, behaviors, and occupations. Each aspect may vary independently, but people make judgments about one based on information about another, to form an interdependent network of associations. Cuddy, et al. (2010, p. 13) define that gender stereotypes are the traits that are perceived as uniquely characteristic of women versus men. Their finding (2010, p. 13) suggests that gender stereotypes are actually flexible, dynamic, and cross-culturally varied – deviating from the widely-held belief that they are rigid, static, and universal.

Research Method

The type of research design is descriptive qualitative. The source of data or the subject of the study is downloaded file of the situation comedy 'Mind Your Language. The object of the study is the common stereotypes that mark particular cultures in terms of the racial and gender profiling, cultures and groups of individuals as they are shown in the Episode 1 of Season 1 from the Series 'Mind Your Language.' The analysis applies semiotics technique by having qualitative interpretation on the scenes showing the characters from that episode in terms of likeness to a particular culture's common stereotype. There are 12 characters altogether.

Results and Discussion

The characters are outlined based on their origins. First are the characters from East Asia. They are Tarō Nagazumi from Japan and Chung Su-Lee from China. Tarō Nagazumi is an executive who works as a representative for the London branch of the fictional Japan-based electronic company, Bushedo electronics. He bows whenever he wants to speak up or is called upon. He speaks English always by adding "-o" to every word he says (as in "thank-o," "English-o," and so on). The exclamation "Ah So!" is also his habit. In the beginning, he has arguments with Su-Lee due to Japan and China's political differences in the 1970s. Most of the time, he brings his camera. Chung Su-Lee is a Chinese woman who works as a secretary at the Chinese Embassy. She is a woman with ideology and always has her Little Red Book of Mao, from which she often quotes. She continuously replaces "R"s into "L"s. At first in the series, she had an ideological conflict with Taro, her Japanese classmate. Those characters are pictured in screenshots below from the episode:



Figure 1. Taro Nagazumi and Chung Su Lee.

Second are the characters from South Asia. They are Jamila Ranjha from India, Ali Nadim from Pakistan and Ranjeet Singh from Punjab, Pakistan. Jamila Ranjha is an Indian housewife. When she first joins the class she barely speaks any English - she talks in Hindi. She needs Ali to translate for her. The first phrase that she can say in English is "gud hefening" (which is how she pronounces "good evening"). She brings her knitting tools and knits during the class. Ali Nadim is Pakistani and unemployed. He is originally from Lahore, Pakistan. He is a talkative and straightforward student. He has a verbal and sometimes physical rivalry with Ranjeet, who is a Sikh. He has a fair command of English although he often misapprehends. Ali's typical expressions are "yes please" (means "yes, thank you"), and "Squeeze me please" (means "Excuse me please"). He also exclaims "oh blimey!" and "jolly good". Ranjeet Singh is an Indian Sikh from Punjab. He has arguments with Ali, who is a Pakistani Muslim. He is quite fluent and has a sufficient vocabulary. His usual expression is "a thousand apologies". These three people dress in the way that can show who they are from. Jamila is wearing her saree. Ali is always seen with his Jinnah cap. Ranjeet always wears a Punjab headgear so called turban or *dastaar*.



Figure 2: Photos of Jamila Ranjha, Ali Nadim, and Ranjeet Singh. Taken from Moses and Allen (1977). *Mind Your Language* (Motion Picture).

Third are the Englishman and woman, Mr. Brown and Mrs. Courtney. Jeremy Brown is the English teacher. He is employed after the previous teacher quits and was driven crazy by the students. Mr. Brown takes the challenge and lasts longer. He often has to accept the students' often literal interpretations of the English language. Dolores Courtney is the Headmistress of the school. She, at first, hesitates to hire Mr. Jeremy Brown because she has a very clear dislike for the male sex and she thinks of women as being superior to men. In other words, she prefers having female teachers instead of male. She often takes time to drop by the classroom to check up on the progress of Mr. Brown's class and she often gets disappointed.



Figure 3: Photos of Miss Courtney and Mr. Brown. Taken from Moses & Allen (1977), *Mind Your Language* (Motion Picture).

Fourth is Giovanni Cupello from Italy. He is a chef and the loudest student in the classroom. Giovanni's problem with English is understanding words. He refers Mr.

Brown as "Professori". When he is shocked or surprised, he often says the phrases like "Santa Maria", "Holy Ravioli," etc. When he doesn't understand something he would say "scusi".



Figure 4: A Photo of Giovanni Cupello. Taken from Moses and Allen (1977), *Mind Your Language* (Motion Picture).

Fifth, it's Maximillian Andrea Archimedes Papandrious. He is a Greek shipping agency worker from Athens. Max also tends to misunderstand words. He also speaks with an accent, which makes him adding "H" to almost the word he says as in "Hokay" for "Okay."



Figure 5: A Photo of Maximillian Andrea Archimedes Papandrious. Taken from Moses and Allen (1977), *Mind Your Language* (Motion Picture).

Next is Anna Schmidt from German. She works as an au pair. Anna is a hard-working student. Her problem when speaking English is mixing "V"s and "W"s.



Figure 6: A Photo of Anna Schmidt. Taken from Moses and Allen (1977), *Mind Your Language* (Motion Picture).

Then, it is a beauty from French, Danielle Favre. She is a loving French au pair. Her good looks suddenly grab the attention of all the men, including Mr. Brown.



Figure 7: A Photo of Danielle Favre. Taken from Moses and Allen (1977), *Mind Your Language* (Motion Picture).

Last is a Hispanics man, Juan Cervantes from Spanish. He is a bartender. Juan is a confident person. In the first episode, Juan does not speak English at all. He answers and responds everything with "por favor". It makes Giovanni translate some key terms for him.



Figure 8: A Photo of Juan Cervantes. Taken from Moses and Allen (1977), *Mind Your Language* (Motion Picture)

These characters then led the discussions into the common stereotypes shown in the sitcom of Episode 1.

Racial Profiling

Anna calls herself as an efficient German although Taro is against the idea. The teacher, Mr. Brown seems also to stereotype German people as effective and well-organized.

Asians can extremely be intelligent, but when they don't meet a person standard, they can easily feel inferior. From the sitcom, we can conclude that Su Lee is so gifted, but Jamila really need to struggle with her English. In the beginning, Jamila shows a little inferiority. However, in the next stage, she is excited enough to practice.

Hispanic people are assumed to be illegal immigrant. Nonetheless, they are hardworking and confident. This can be seen from Juan's character. Although he doesn't have sufficient English, he doesn't mind that.

Gender Profiling

Common stereotype of physical characteristics between male and female is that both are strong and weak consecutively. Yet, according to Miss Courtney, male is typically no stamina when she examples the previous teacher, Mr. Warburton. She stereotypes based on sex or gender. In addition, she also believes that a female fatale might cause chaos in the classroom among the male students as she is referring to Danielle.

In term of behavior, Miss Courtney doesn't like to be addressed by 'Mrs.' When everyone calls her, she always corrects the 'Mrs. into 'Miss.' Then, we can say that a middle aged woman like her is stereotyped to be a married woman. In fact, she is proudly not. It is very common for someone to be unmarried in England.

As for occupations, the characters originated from South Asia –Ali, Ranjeet, and Jamila– aren't very successful with their job. On the contrary, their counterparts from East Asia are defined prosperous in occupation; they are Su Lee and Taro. Max, Giovanni, and Anna are typically Europeans whose jobs are common for their nations.

Cultures (Language, Symbol and Belief)

A language stereotype in term of phonological features is shown by Taro, Su Lee, Anna, Danielle, and Max. Su Lee and Taro replaces the sound /r/ into /l/ or vice versa. This is the conversation between Su Lee, Taro, and Mr. Brown:

- Su Lee: Mr. Blown, Prease folgive my rateness! I apologize but I rost my way.
 Mr. Brown: Not to worry. What is your name?
 Su Lee: Chung Su Lee.
 Mr. Brown: Where are you from?
 Su Lee: Democlastic Lepublic of China.

Mr. Brown: What is your job?
Su Lee: Secletaly. Chinese Dipromat.
Mr. Brown: Very nice! Where shall we put you" Taro! How are relations between Japan and China?
Taro: Depends on political viewpoint. Japan, light wingo! China refto wingo.
Mr. Brown: I see! Are you light wingo or reft wingo? Right or left?
Su Lee: I forrow teaching of Chairman Mao.

Other findings are also said by Su Lee in this sentence:

Su Lee: It is duty of evely citizen to overthlow impelial warmongers.

Taro also does the same thing as he says 'camelas' instead of 'cameras' and 'representative' for 'representative' as in these sentences:

Taro: Japanese make much more better terevision and camelas
Taro: Representative of Bushedo Electlonics.

Anna and Danielle cannot say 'the' in English. Anna says "Jairmans are zer best" and Danielle says 'the' with 'ze' as in her sentence "I come to learn English" as 'Ave I come to ze right place?"

Taro adds /o/ to every word he says as in his sentence "I am o very happy o to be learning o English o." Even when he exclaim 'Ah!' he adds /o/ that makes "Ah so!" which sounds like 'asshole' which is culturally taboo word in English. Likewise, Max tends to add /h/ to the word starting with vowel as in "Hokay" for "Okay in the sentence "My eyes are hokay! It's my hears."

Giovanni from Italy tends to give affixes in the words that he says. As a Spanish speaking person, Giovanni adds '-da' ending for some words like 'cookada' instead of 'cook' and 'da-' prefix in words like daspaggetti and dalasagne. More, He isada fool.

From these characters' pronunciation, it can be directly identified or stereotyped that one is from Japan, China, German, French, Italy and Greek.

As for symbol, bowing is very common culture in China, Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and Vietnam. Other cultures that also have bowing with different ways are India, Thailand, and Laos. As for Taro, he can be directly stereotyped as Japanese from the way he greets or starts as conversation that includes bowing. Other symbols that stereotype cultures are the green blouse and skirt of cheongsam worn by Su Lee, the saree by Jamila, the Jinnah cap and the dastaar.

Another culture thing is the gesture. In India, nodding the head forward and backward doesn't mean 'yes.' That is why when Miss Courtney asks whether Ali understands the direction she gave, he nods his head that way but says 'No.' As for Indian culture, he is supposed to move his head right to left or vice versa when he means 'Yes.'

The very precise beliefs shown in the sitcom is the religions of the characters by judging the way they dress; for example, Ali is a Moslem because he is wearing a Jinnah cap or fur hat that shows his Moslem identity; Ranjeet is a Sikh from his turban or dastaar.

Groups of Individuals

Being a part of Moslem group, Ali might be stereotyped as an individual who is not easily in contact with other people from different religions. In the beginning of the

class, sits alone in the front row. He didn't sit with Max or Giovanni who are typically non Moslem. Even when Ranjeet comes, Ali is not okay with the idea of being a seatmate with a Sikh. Only after the last student comes, Danielle, the seat next to Ali is taken by her. This might be because it's the last seat available. In addition, since some students share similar background language –Spanish–, they coincidentally take care of each other. For examples, Giovanni and Juan, Giovanni helps Juan because they can speak Spanish. Or, Ali helps Jamilla when she has problem expressing herself because they share similar Hindi language.

Conclusions

A generalization of stereotypes must also consider the individual because someone may meet a person from a particular country and finds him/her to be talkative and outspoken. It doesn't mean that whole people from that country are like him/her. Generalizing can be dangerous especially when a country is very much diverse in groups such as Pakistan which represented by Ali and Renjeet in this study analysis. Most importantly, the stereotypes that we have toward other people from different background must not bring us to negative perception since both positive and negative stereotypes are risky.

The study only deals with the analysis of stereotypes portrayed in the Mind Your Language Series of Episode 1 Season 1. However, there must be a lot of features that can be discussed from the sitcom such as error analysis because most of the students made mistakes either in pronunciation, words and phrases used, or the sentence pattern. Moreover, if more episodes are analyzed, there might also be interesting discussion; for example the techniques of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching applied in that particular era. Last, how the sources of material from this sitcom can contribute to the teaching and learning process especially in Cross Cultural Understanding (CCU) Class.

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