

Cross-Cultural Miscommunication in Literary Dialogue: A Sociolinguistic Analysis Gen Z in Retail Companies

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores the phenomenon of cross-cultural miscommunication experienced by Generation Z employees in retail companies, with a focus on how their linguistic styles influence workplace interaction. Using in-depth interviews with five Gen Z participants working in multicultural environments, the research identifies common communication breakdowns triggered by differences in culture, generational language use, and informal expressions. Findings show that slang, code-switching, emojis, and shortened phrases typical of Gen Z often lead to misunderstandings, especially when interacting with older colleagues or international clients. These miscommunications are not only linguistic but also rooted in differing communication norms and expectations. The study also discusses how literary dialogue can be used to reflect and analyze these sociolinguistic tensions for educational and practical insights.

Keywords: cross-cultural miscommunication, Generation Z, retail communication, sociolinguistics

INTRODUCTION

In today's increasingly globalized work environment, cross-cultural communication has become central to collaboration and operational success particularly in industries like retail that rely heavily on customer interaction and teamwork. Retail companies often employ individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, where language plays not just a transactional, but a deeply sociocultural role in building understanding and maintaining harmony in professional relationships (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020). Generation Z, who are digital natives and often fluent in informal, meme-based, or hybrid language styles, face unique challenges when working in multilingual, multicultural contexts that demand clarity, politeness, and intercultural sensitivity.

Cross-cultural miscommunication refers to misunderstanding that occurs due to differences in sociolinguistic norms, pragmatic expectations, and cultural interpretations of language (Chen, Wang, & Zhang, 2021). These misunderstandings may arise not because of poor language skills, but due to mismatches in how speech acts such as requests, refusals, or humor are interpreted across cultures. For instance, expressions of solidarity or informality common among Gen Z may be perceived as impolite or unprofessional by those from high-context or formal cultures (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018).

One participant in this study recounted using the phrase “tunggu bentar ya, sabar dulu” with a Chinese colleague, who misread the statement as impolite or impatient. In Indonesian Gen Z culture, this phrase is typically used casually, often with a friendly tone. However, the incident reveals how pragmatic expectations can vary widely between cultures, leading to unintended offense. Another participant recalled saying “I’ll try my best” to a foreign coworker, only to discover it was interpreted as a sign of uncertainty or lack of commitment. These examples reflect the need to examine miscommunication not only from a linguistic perspective but also through a cultural-pragmatic lens.

Sociolinguistics helps unpack how meanings are negotiated through language across cultural and generational boundaries. As Holmes and Marra (2021) argue, understanding intercultural workplace communication requires sensitivity to both explicit messages and underlying social expectations. Gen Z's language is often influenced by online communication, characterized by brevity, slang, and playfulness, which may conflict with the formality or hierarchy-oriented communication styles favored in older generations or certain cultural groups.

The generational divide adds another dimension to these challenges. In a typical workplace, Gen Z employees may prefer to use informal expressions, emojis, or abbreviations such as “gas,” “ygy,” or “FOMO,” which can confuse or even alienate older coworkers unfamiliar with digital-era slang. According to Prensky (2018), digital natives process and express information differently from older generations, often favoring speed and casual tone over structure and formality. This shift may create tension in workplaces where older colleagues or international clients prioritize politeness strategies grounded in tradition and cultural norms.

The idea of literary dialogue scripted or narrative-style conversations serves as an important medium to analyze these communicative tensions. Dialogue can highlight not just the surface-level language, but the social positioning and power dynamics underlying each utterance. Literary representations of Gen Z communication in cross-cultural workplaces can thus be used both as analytic tools and pedagogical models to raise awareness about miscommunication risks and strategies for clarity.

In this study, interviews with five Gen Z employees from multicultural retail environments were analyzed using a sociolinguistic lens. Their experiences shed light on how miscommunication occurs at the intersection of culture, language, and generational identity. Through this analysis, the study contributes both to academic discourse and to practical recommendations for improving communication across cultural and generational divides.

As supported by Sharma and Verma (2021), understanding youth communication in global workspaces demands an appreciation of how culture, media, and generation intersect. By analyzing these patterns through literary and linguistic discourse, we can develop better frameworks for intercultural competence in the modern retail landscape.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative methodology within a sociolinguistic framework to explore how Generation Z employees in retail companies experience and respond to cross-cultural miscommunication. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives through their lived communication experiences, particularly those involving generational and cultural diversity.

Participants

The participants of this study consist of five individuals from Generation Z (born between 1999 and 2004), each of whom currently or previously worked in multicultural retail environments. These participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on their direct experiences of interacting with colleagues or customers from different cultural or linguistic backgrounds. All five participants were interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview format. This format was chosen to provide flexibility in exploring their stories while ensuring that all key research themes were addressed. The interviews provided rich, contextualized narratives that reflect the realities of communication across cultural and generational lines in retail workspaces.

Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered through semi-structured interviews with five participants from Generation Z who are currently or previously employed in multicultural retail environments. The interviews were designed to elicit detailed narratives about the participants' experiences with cross-cultural communication in the workplace. Each session was conducted either face-to-face or via online platforms such as Zoom or WhatsApp Call, depending on the availability and location of the participants. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, with natural instances of code-switching into English, reflecting the participants' authentic speech practices in professional settings.

The interview guide consisted of five open-ended questions aimed at exploring real-life incidents of miscommunication with culturally or linguistically different colleagues or customers, the participants' strategies for managing such situations, their reflections on the influence of generational differences in communication, and the role of informal or Gen Z-specific language in shaping interactional outcomes. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes with the participant's consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve the original tone, expressions, and nuances, then translated into English for analysis where necessary. This method allowed for the capture of rich, context-sensitive data aligned with the study's sociolinguistic focus.

Data Analysis

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, which allows the researcher to identify, interpret, and report recurring patterns and meanings within qualitative data. All interview transcripts were read repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the content and to gain a holistic understanding of each participant's communication experience. The analysis focused on identifying sociolinguistic themes relevant to cross-cultural miscommunication, particularly in the context of Generation Z's language use in multicultural retail settings.

Codes were developed inductively from the data, paying close attention to linguistic features such as informal expressions, tone, code-switching, and generational slang that had the potential to cause misunderstandings across cultural or age boundaries. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflect key communication challenges, including pragmatic failures, the clash between informal Gen Z speech and formal workplace expectations, and the impact of differing cultural interpretations of politeness and professionalism. The analysis was interpretive in nature, aligning participants' narratives with relevant sociolinguistic theories, especially in the areas of intercultural pragmatics and generational discourse styles. Through this process, the study uncovers not only the surface-level communication issues but also the deeper cultural and generational dynamics that shape how miscommunication is experienced and managed by Gen Z employees in retail environments.

Procedure

Each interview was conducted either face-to-face or virtually (depending on availability), lasting approximately 20–30 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, with natural instances of code-switching into English, mirroring authentic workplace communication patterns. With participant consent, all interviews were audio-recorded, then transcribed and translated into English as needed for thematic analysis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study revealed several recurring patterns of cross-cultural miscommunication experienced by Gen Z employees working in multicultural retail settings. Based on interviews with five participants, four major themes were identified as contributing factors: (1) pragmatic

misunderstandings, (2) the use of Gen Z-specific expressions, (3) hybrid language and code-switching, and (4) generational differences in communication styles.

Table 1. Themantic Findings From Interview Data

Main Theme	Example Expressions/Incidents	Communication Implications
Pragmatic Misunderstandings	“Tunggu bentar ya, sabar dulu” perceived as rude by Chinese coworker	Differences in interpreting speech acts across cultures
Gen Z Expressions	“Gas,” “mutualan,” “It’s kinda messy tho” seen as unprofessional	Misinterpretation due to unfamiliarity with Gen Z’s informal and digital-native style
Code-Switching and Hybrid Language	“Udah di-void,” “slow respon,” “gue follow up nanti”	Confusing to non-native speakers unfamiliar with localized borrowing or mixed codes
Generational Communication Styles	Gen Z prefers short chats without greetings, seen as impolite	Differences in expectations for formality and etiquette across generations

Explanation Based on the Table

1. Pragmatic Misunderstandings:

An expression like “tunggu bentar ya, sabar dulu,” intended casually by the speaker, was interpreted as rude by a coworker from a different cultural background. This highlights the importance of pragmatic awareness, as the same utterance can carry different meanings depending on the listener’s cultural frame. Such cases reflect a mismatch in speech act interpretation—central to intercultural pragmatics (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2018).

2. Gen Z Expressions:

Words such as “gas,” “mutualan,” or phrases like “It’s kinda messy tho” often create confusion, especially when used in formal settings like emails. These expressions, while common among Gen Z, may be perceived as inappropriate or unprofessional by older colleagues or international clients. This echoes Holmes and Marra’s (2021) discussion of discourse norm clashes in the workplace.

3. Code-Switching and Hybrid Language Use:

Participants frequently blended Indonesian with English and localized jargon e.g., “udah di-void,” “gue follow up.” While this mix enhances peer communication, it can create misunderstandings for those unfamiliar with such hybrid forms, especially foreign or older coworkers.

4. Generational Communication Styles:

Gen Z tends to favor quick, informal communication (e.g., short messages without greetings), which older colleagues may perceive as abrupt or disrespectful. This reflects deeper generational differences not only in word choice but also in expectations for politeness and message structure.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the experiences of Generation Z employees working in multicultural retail environments, focusing on how cross-cultural miscommunication emerges in everyday workplace dialogue. Through a qualitative, interview-based approach, the research has highlighted that miscommunication is not merely a result of language proficiency, but is deeply rooted in sociolinguistic differences including pragmatic expectations, generational communication styles, and cultural norms.

Findings revealed that Gen Z's tendency to use informal expressions, internet slang, abbreviations, and code-switching while effective for building in-group solidarity can easily be misunderstood by older coworkers or individuals from different cultural backgrounds. These misunderstandings often arise when intentions are not matched with the hearer's expectations for tone, politeness, or clarity. Phrases intended to be casual or friendly may be perceived as rude, unprofessional, or ambiguous in cross-cultural settings.

The study also found that generational differences significantly influence communication preferences. While Gen Z participants often favor speed, informality, and directness, many of their older colleagues or foreign clients expect more formal, structured interactions. This misalignment underscores the importance of intercultural pragmatic awareness, especially in customer-facing industries like retail where clarity and sensitivity are essential.

Importantly, the research demonstrated that participants were not passive victims of miscommunication, but active agents who adopted strategies such as clarification, repetition, simplification, and code adjustment to resolve misunderstandings. This adaptability shows potential for training and development programs aimed at enhancing intercultural communication skills in the workplace.

Finally, the study affirms the value of literary dialogue as a reflective medium through which these sociolinguistic tensions can be explored and illustrated. By analyzing real-life speech patterns and representing them in fictional or scripted dialogue, educators and trainers can raise awareness about cultural and generational miscommunication in a practical, relatable way.

In conclusion, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how Gen Z communicates in multicultural professional settings, and how their communication style may clash or converge with those from different cultural or generational groups. As the global workforce continues to evolve, such insights are increasingly crucial for fostering inclusive, respectful, and effective workplace communication.

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