Managing informal interaction: stancetaking and alignment in Dutch and Indonesian

Naerssen, M.J. van

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

People talk. A lot. The first reason springing to mind what all this talk is good for, is to share information. A message that one person has in mind is encoded in language and sent to another person to unpack and interpret.[1] That message might carry a question or an answer, an anecdote or a compliment, a "hi" or a "bye". These simple examples already show there is a wide variety of types of messages that can be sent - and hence actions that can be performed. While the sharing of information is indeed an important function of language, it is thus by no means the only one. People use language to coordinate activities (Clark, 1996) and manage their interpersonal relations (see e.g. Spencer-Oatey 2005; 2011) Some of these are more strongly involved with actual informing, in the sense that they provide knowledge that the other participant was looking for that was not previously available (e.g. in giving an answer to a question). However, some seem less concerned with providing new knowledge and more with the interpersonal relation between the participants (e.g. giving a compliment or greeting someone).

A considerable portion of talk-in-interaction does not have an immediately recognizable goal or intention related to transfer of (new) information. For example, during the openings of conversations participants routinely work

[1] This representation is reminiscent of a linear model of communication (e.g. the Shannon-Weaver model, cf. Weaver, 1949; Shannon and Weaver, 1964) and is a gross oversimplification of language processing since both the production and comprehension of communication are much more complex. For the purposes of this thesis, however, this rough sketch of communication as a pipe model suffices. This is not the place to go in to the particulars of language processing or models of communication. For an exploration of a specialized language processing model used in dialogue (as opposed to isolated text) see e.g. Garrod and Anderson (1987); Pickering and Garrod (2004); Garrod and Pickering (2004).

through a greeting sequence, which possibly has them ask about the well-being of all family members, without their health actually being the topic of talk. Or consider the obligatory small talk at the hairdresser's; or the exchange of pleasantries with friends of friends at a birthday party. This type of talk in interaction may seem insignificant (or even annoying), it plays an important role in establishing and maintaining social relations between people. Such supposedly aimless talk is in fact a core aspect of interaction. It is what is called the "phatic function" of language (Malinowski, 1923; Jakobson, 1960; Senft, 2009).

An example of talk-in-interaction that seems to be entirely concentrated on creating and/or sustaining a feeling of communion is found in example (1) below (reproduced from Jakobson, 1960:355-356). The exchange between Ella and James lasts seven turns and includes nine separated utterances. Yet, the only piece of information shared in this conversation seems to be "Here we are".

(1) *Phatic interaction*

James	Well!
Ella	Well!
James	Well, here we are
Ella	Here we are, aren't we?
James	I should say we were
	Eeyop! Here we are
Ella	Well!
James	Well!
	Well.

In this short excerpt James and Ella mention no less than four times they are at a particular location (figuratively speaking or not). The first statement of this fact by James is already a bit superfluous given both of them *know* they are there; it is the next three lines of talk that really do not fill any informational need. They simply present a repetition of what was already established. These "informationally empty" reproductions of initiating acts or statements are a surprisingly common aspect of language use (cf. section 3.3.1 and chapter 6). It is this type of interactional behavior that I am interested in: the non-conventionalized but also seemingly non-informative use of language that is regularly found in informal interaction.[2]

Such seemingly redundant contributions[3] do provide valuable insights per-

[2]Non-informative might sound a bit strong, what I mean is that most, if not all, of the information that is shared in the presented contributions (in the above example the statement "Here we are") is already known to either participant. There is no immediate need to present that information. Note that this is not to suggest they are void of meaning, these utterances are highly relevant in the negotiation of interpersonal alignment. See section 2.1 for a more elaborate discussion.

[3]Throughout this thesis, the term contribution is used as a general term taken to refer to any interactional act that presents some intentional and meaningful act in an effort to expand

taining to participants' interpersonal attitude and stance. Reproducing an earlier contribution, as in example (1), establishes a strong connection between the participants. The repetition ties the two participants to the same piece of information, marking a shared, joint, position on the matter. The both of them individually take the same stance on the topic of talk, while establishing interpersonal alignment between them. Alignment here refers to the mutual relation between stances and stancetakers (Du Bois, 2007:144; cf. chapters 3 and 6 of this thesis). Even if the actual propositional content of the repeated utterance is not very insightful, it thus presents useful and new information about the ongoing interaction and the participants' place in it.[4]

Assuming language is first and foremost a dyadic structure - a means to express and share our thoughts with *others* (Dor et al., 2014:2-3) - ensuring the social relationships are strong eases the amount of work participants need to put into coordinating their interactions. The need to establish or be updated on each other's position is thus likely a continuous priority in interaction. To what extent such efforts are encoded in expressions is presumably guided by cultural norms (cf. section 2.6). The question, then, is how speakers of different linguistic backgrounds enact this function of language in their everyday interactions. Suppose the management of interpersonal relationships is indeed the central use of language, is the way in which we establish and sustain relationships universally stable or are there culture specific patterns of use? Taking the Netherlands and Indonesia as case in point, this thesis will explore the patterns of (verbalized) interpersonal alignment as negotiated by speakers of the respective national languages.

If we are to believe the Internet (which is a risky endeavor), speakers of Indonesian and Dutch prefer very different communication styles. Giving advice about how to conduct business in these regions, and how to adapt to the new environment as an expat, numerous websites report the Dutch to be direct, focused on clarity, and concerned with openness, whereas the Indonesian are described as indirect, concerned with face, and focused on harmony.[5] Following

---

and extend the ongoing interaction. This includes full turns or utterances, expressions that are cut short, minimal elements of feedback, etc. The terms "expression" and "utterance" are used as general descriptors to refer to "something someone said". They are not intended to carry particular theoretical connotations, but are used as stylistic variants throughout this thesis.

[4]Reproducing a prior turn is not the only means by which interpersonal alignment can be established. Part II of this thesis will explore three main ways in which participants negotiate alignment: through expressions of support (chapter 5), reproduction of meaning and form (chapter 6), and collaborative construction of meaning (chapter 7).

[5]See e.g. https://www.communicaid.com, http://www.expat.or.id, http://www.expatica.com, http://www.kwintessential.co.uk. These characterizations are of course highly simplified and they are usually not substantiated with academic research. Nevertheless, they are insightful sources of information; not because of their accurate description of Dutch or Indonesian society, but because they provide us with the dominant representation of these societies. Representations that are further shared, and thus reinforced, among people interested in interaction with people from these societies. These general perceptions and assessments thus reflect folk beliefs held about these societies.

these descriptions, the preferred Indonesian and Dutch ways of communicating are near-opposite; a familiar (maybe even expected) outcome considering the often proclaimed contrast between The East and The West. As representatives of the East and the West, respectively (cf. sections 1.4 and 2.6), these countries are excellent candidates to investigate the particularities and universalities of managing interpersonal relationships in informal interaction.

1.1 Informal interaction

Phatic communication is aimed at the establishment and maintaining of a constructive relationship between interlocutors. This is often associated with ceremonial or ritual utterances at the margins of interaction, such as greeting and leave-taking routines. However, the exchange in example (1) already proved phatic exchanges not to be limited to the margins of conversation. A further example of "uninformative" talk for the sake of talk is found in small talk:

> "[...] talk which is aimless, prefatory, obvious, uninteresting, sometimes suspect and even irrelevant, but part of the process of fulfilling our intrinsically human needs for social cohesiveness and mutual recognition". (Coupland, 2000:3)

Small talk has a clear social function. It is not necessarily concerned with transactional or instrumental goals, but does have an effect on meeting such goals. The relationship or rapport established through small talk influences further (work-related) interaction. While small talk surely occurs at the margins of conversation, for example in greeting exchanges, it is just as much found in service encounters, as part of buying or selling activities, or even as the central purpose of interaction, as a recreational activity (Coupland, 2000:10).

Still, equating phatic communication to small talk unjustly separates the phatic or social function of language from other functions of communication and from other sites of interaction. Many interactional moves can be read to do several things at once (Sidnell and Enfield, 2014), which is why labeling them as having just one function or performing one action is not representative of the dynamism of interaction. The data discussed in this thesis are thus not limited to small talk nor to the margins of conversation, but instead reflect the body of informal, spontaneous, conversation.

Taking dyadic informal talk as the central form of language in interaction (see e.g. Enfield, 2013; Goody, 1995a; Levinson, 2006b), informal conversation is considered to be the basic form of talk-in-interaction (see e.g. Heritage, 2008:304-305). The idea of "conversation" being casual, informal, or unmarked is often found in both lay and scholarly work (Gaudio, 2003:663). As noted by Cameron (2001:10) the word informal is most naturally applied to interaction as being "characterized by informality, spontaneity and egalitarian relationships between the participants". Taking everyday talk to be the basic form of interaction is further supported by the fact that analyses of institutional

talk inevitably discuss a specific institutional context and its parameters of interaction in terms of them deviating from everyday practice. The underlying everyday practice thus serves as holding the basic set of interactional possibilities, which are restricted or extended in particular institutionalized settings (Goodwin and Heritage, 1990:289; Coupland, 2000:4) . This suggests unmarked, informal, spontaneous, conversation might be an activity type in its own right.

Any event in which the primary participants share the same goal and are familiar with relevant (social) constraints could form an activity type. The most important aspect of an activity type, apart from a shared goal of interaction, is that the participants have a strong sense of what contributions are and are not allowable (Levinson, 1992:69). For some activity types, the goal and boundaries of the activity are very clear; during a job interview, for example, all participants have a clear idea of the purpose of the interaction, their respective roles, and the type of contributions that are expected (not) to be offered. In an informal conversation this might not be as clear-cut, but there are, nonetheless, particular characteristics associated with this specific type of talk-in-interaction.

The goal of informal conversation could be described as (i) sharing information, thoughts, and ideas and (ii) eliciting sympathy or understanding for each other's position or perspective on a certain matter. Throughout the interaction, participants aim for a pleasant, smooth interactional exchange, meaning they orient towards moving the conversation forward (Sacks, 1987; Kotthoff, 1993; Stivers and Robinson, 2006) and are oriented towards consensus. In "neutral" interaction, agreement to a prior turn is preferred (e.g. Pomerantz, 1984). While this may intuitively seem applicable to all types of interaction, what is considered a preferred response depends on the initiated action. For example, in a compliment situation it is preferred to not agree with the compliment, but instead downplay or dismiss the flattering (Pomerantz, 1978). Similarly, following accusations denials are preferred (Atkinson and Drew, 1979), and in disputes participants orient towards disagreements as preferred responsive contributions (Kotthoff, 1993).

The different patterns of preferred responsive actions further suggest that the unmarked, informal type of conversation is indeed a recognizable activity type to participants. They not only know they are engaged in informal interaction, they also know how to behave *as being engaged* in informal interaction.[6] In other words, participants have certain expectations based on the particular activity they are involved in. This includes knowledge of what is noticeably and relevantly absent from a particular interactional situation.

[6]This same line of reasoning is presented by Coupland (2000:6), arguing small talk is recognizable as an activity in itself, and in contrast with (institutionalized) work-related activities. Although small talk is a very specific form of informal interaction, people are aware of it being a separate type of interactional undertaking and can shift into and out of it. This suggests the absence of defined norms does not prevent participants from collectively knowing when they are and are not "doing small talk", i.e. when they are and are not involved in a type of informal interaction.

Furthermore, Sacks (1995:II:216-218) suggests people actively *do* being ordinary. They do things in a usual way, have usual thoughts and interests, and have a usual way of reporting about them. The way in which people do being ordinary could be the central way in which our world is organized Sacks (1995:II:221). This presupposes people have a shared sense of what ordinary or usual activity looks like, otherwise they would not be able to recognize others' behavior as ordinary nor would they be able to constitute themselves as ordinary. Similar to small talk, presenting oneself (and the interaction) as ordinary is a specific type of informal activity.

Interactants are thus able to differentiate between informal, ordinary, phatic interactions and more institutionalized forms of interactions based on recognizable patterns of behavior that are associated with one, but not the other, activity. Considering relationships are built and maintained using language, these patterned behaviors affect the mutual and ongoing relationship between the participants involved. It is through language that they show interest in each other's well-being, share insights in each other's lives, and support each other's opinions and beliefs. It is through language that they establish interpersonal alignment; that they negotiate a shared position regarding the topic of talk. Studying these relationships in interaction - as the center of social organization - will deepen our understanding of pragmatics (Enfield, 2009).

1.2 Spontaneous responsive action

As one of the core objectives of informal interaction, mutual understanding and appreciation of a particular object of talk takes an important place in this thesis. In order for *mutual* understanding or appreciation to be constructed, one of the participants first has to propose or introduce a topic of talk and present a particular position on that topic. This initiating act projects the opportunity (and responsibility) for a responsive act to be performed[7]. The ways in which participants generally react to such acts tells us something about what they feel is the appropriate next move. This is of course strongly dependent on what conversation-initiating act is presented by the first speaker.

Initiating acts can strongly demand a response, but do not always present a claim to someone else's reaction. For example, following a question, there is a strong sense of obligation to present an answer (especially if the questions was directed at a specific person), but following a general observation there is no clear obligation to react.[8] Related to phatic communication and informal interaction, the supposed norms of interest are to be found in responsive actions

[7]See Thompson et al. (2015) for an analysis of responsive actions more generally; see e.g. Schegloff (2007) on sequence organization.

[8]This relates to turn-taking and sequence organization. The basic unit of conversation is an adjacency pair: two turns that are adjacent to each other. The two turns are necessarily presented by different participants and are connected through a relation of conditional relevance. This means the first pair part limits the number of second pair parts that count as a relevant response. To each first pair part (the initiating turn), there are a number of "type-connected" second pair parts. The interlocutor that is about to perform the second

as well. Arguably, all responsive actions contribute to building and maintaining a particular social relation, however, not all responsive actions are equally suitable to study the patterns of interpersonal relationship management.

In the context of this research, the *spontaneous* display of understanding or appreciation are of particular interest, since those contributions show affiliation with both the object of talk and the interlocutor, without there being a pressing need to provide said contribution. These contributions do not generally carry new propositional content, instead they present the indexical position of the second speaker with respect to the first speaker and the topic of talk. They focus on the participants' interpersonal alignment and could indeed be described as uninformative, non-referential, or even redundant.

All interactional moves supporting that relationship can be said to have a phatic function (which is not to say it is their *only* function!). The association of informal interaction with interpersonal consensus or smooth progression of the interaction is where the phatic function of language becomes especially relevant. Through negotiation, collaboration, and ultimately mutual agreement participants attempt to reach a shared understanding and appreciation of the matter at hand. Presenting agreement or support for a particular interactional move reinforces the interpersonal bond: the two participants involved share the same perspective regarding the object of talk. In other words, they have established convergent interpersonal alignment (cf. Du Bois, 2007, 2014; Stivers, 2008; section 3.2).

This thesis aims to shed light on the way in which participants use spontaneous interactional contributions to establish interpersonal alignment. That is, contributions that do not present required uptake of a project, but rather demonstrate personal investment in the ongoing interaction.[9] They hence an interactional environment in which the rules pertaining to required next actions are more flexible. Still, if the management of interpersonal relationships in informal conversation is indeed normatively guided, we would assume there to be expectations and obligations in terms of spontaneous response behavior - however contradictory that may sound.

---

pair part, then, selects a second pair part that is relevant to the type that was projected in the first pair part (Sacks, 1987 [1973], 55-56). These alternatives are, however, by no means equivalent. For most types of first pair parts there are several second pair parts to choose from, one of which is the preferred one.

[9]Display of affiliation or interpersonal alignment between participants is of course not limited to spontaneous contributions. Accepting an extended invitations surely influences the interpersonal relationship in a positive manner - as do other project completions. There is, however, a strong incentive to present a response to an invitation, since not doing so would be interpreted as noticeably and relevantly absent (Schegloff, 2007:21). Following an assertion, or (the beginning of) a telling, the matching responsive action that would complete the initiated project is not as clearly defined. The *need* or obligation to present a specific type of response is less strict compared to, for example, a joint action like a question-answer pair, where two different participants have to present particular parts of the act for it to be completed. The organization of interaction based on adjacency pairs dictates that a relevant second pair part is presented (by the addressee). If the invited party does not present an answer, the absence of a response will be interpreted *as a response*.

1.3 Normal behavior - a shared concern

In order to adequately interpret and respond to a particular act, interactants have to be able to recognize what it is another person is doing. What is considered an adequate interpretation and response is - all going well - mutually understood by the parties involved. Their shared common ground (Clark, 1996) allows them to think about the other's access to information and hence expect (or even predict) certain outcomes of their communicative exchange. Goffman (1956) already explained social interaction to be normatively enforced. People follow particular "rules of conduct" that they are socialized into and that are consequently associated with a certain group of language users. These rules guide their actions, because "it is suitable or just" (Goffman, 1956:473) to behave in that specific way. Such normative patters thus create obligations and expectations on the part of all interactants involved: obligations to follow certain patterns of self-conduct, and the expectation others will behave a certain way as well. This results in an ongoing effort of coordination between interlocutors directed at their mutual understanding of their interactional moves (cf. Clark, 1996 and chapter 2).

One such expectation concerns the continuation of interaction. Once a conversation has started, the participants involved are expected to stay involved and keep the conversation going, thus properly fulfilling the role of interactant. As Goffman (1957:48) explains, "the individual must not only maintain proper involvement himself but also act so as to ensure that others will maintain theirs". This interactional order is a strong tool or system preserving both the active involvement and interpersonal and relational balance. The suggestion that continuing an ongoing interaction is the default is further supported by conversation analytic studies describing the systematic closing of both a current topic and a conversation overall (Schegloff and Sacks, 1973). The fact that interactants negotiate the closing of an activity shows that their reciprocal responsibility for their involvement in interaction is firmly entrenched in their sense of how a "normal" interaction unfolds. Instead of simply leaving the site of interaction, abruptly ending the activity, it is important to maintain their interpersonal relation across and past the current encounter.

Societal or cultural norms play a role in what counts as appropriate behavior. Much like phatic communication, normativity is often connected to politeness. The idea that politeness has to do with the observation of certain norms is prevalent in both lay and scholarly discussions of the phenomenon. The traditional social-norm view explicitly focused on norms as the source of politeness (Fraser, 1990). More recently, polite and "normal" behavior have been explicitly separated (e.g. Watts, 2003; Locher and Watts, 2005; Terkourafi, 2005; Long, 2016) because language users do not necessarily consider to act in line with what is expected a display of politeness. Politeness, then, is not equated with norms of interpersonal interaction, but is understood as existing in contrast with the general, expected, patterns of interaction. It is the deviation of those

norms that (potentially) leads to (an evaluation of) politeness.[10]

Generally, scientific theories of politeness include norms in one way or another in their conceptualization of politeness (Eelen, 2001:127). A problem with the notion of norms in politeness research is that what is meant by "norms" is not clear. The term seems to be used to cover a range of different phenomena among which appropriateness, sharedness, normality, and expectation (Eelen, 2001:128-140). Eelen (2001) warns researchers to not fall victim to the norms that are being studied: judging what is and is not polite based on norms, however they are defined, is the participants' privilege. It is the researcher's task to study the norms, not use them (Eelen, 2001:186). His conclusion is an important incentive to pursue this study:

> "The only way in which normativity can be adequately tackled without reverting to prescriptivist accounts is by making it the object of research". (Eelen, 2001:187)

Rather than *deciding* what norms are (presumably) being used in interaction, projecting an outsider understanding onto the communicative situation, we need to *discern* what normative structures are apparently observed by the participants involved in interaction. Throughout this thesis, norms are considered to be reflected in "normal" (expected, just, unmarked, appropriate) behavior. Recurring patterns of interactional and linguistic choices suggest participants orient towards a particular code of conduct or social norm. The norms that apparently guide these behaviors can be reconstructed trough the study of regularities in the negotiation of social relationships in informal interaction. The general assumption in determining such norms is that patterns that occur more frequently are unmarked and can thus be said to represent the normal use of language.[11]

[10]The main argument for defining politeness as the unmarked situation is based in the assumption that interlocutors prefer to interact under conditions that are least costly. Constantly assuming all interlocutors are hostile, have a face-threatening intention, and are not to be trusted is an extremely costly exercise in alertness and second-guessing. The frequent, unchallenged, mode of interaction is therefore constructed as the polite way of interacting (Terkourafi, 2005:248). Terkourafi thus takes a bottom-up approach to politeness, seeking empirical regularities based on qualitative and quantitative analysis. A similar approach is presented in Usami's (2006) discourse politeness, who combines qualitative and quantitative methods as well. This understanding of politeness corresponds to Watts' (2003) notion of politic behavior: appropriate behavior relative to the situation (Terkourafi, 2003:253). Following these understandings, what I have called "normal" behavior would in fact be "polite" behavior. An important difference between the frame-based approach and the perspective taken in this thesis is the centrality of social frames. While Terkourafi (2005) describes how the social aspects of a given situation, and the participants in it, inform linguistic choices, the focus in this thesis is on observable linguistic behavior in reaction to others, irrespective of their social background. In short, this research is interactional in nature, not sociolinguistic.

[11]See e.g. Terkourafi (2001, 2005) and Usami (2006) for a similar position.

1.4 Interactional universals, cultural particulars

Studies in conversation analysis have uncovered several organizational structures to guide talk-in-interaction. The basic findings are usually centered on four general concepts: the rules of turn-taking, the organization of talk in adjacency pairs, preference organization, and the organization of repair (see e.g. Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998; Liddicoat, 2007; Schegloff, 2007; Sidnell, 2010 for a general introduction). The organization of both turn-taking (Stivers et al., 2009), and repair (Dingemanse et al., 2014) have proven to show cross-linguistic similarities. That is, the general structures of organization are universally stable, but the specific way in which they are enacted and implemented in interaction are not.[12]

The universally stable organizational structures of interaction suggest there is a particularly strong norm of interaction all people orient towards, irrespective of their linguistic background. It allows people to infer meaning from interactional acts, guides interpretation and understanding, and thus facilitates successful communication. This possibly suggests humans to have a separate layer of interactional knowledge, independent from language (Levinson, 1995). A specific set of abilities designed for human interaction: a "human interaction engine" (Levinson, 2006b, cf. section 2.4).

The cultural differences found in the operationalization of these basic organizational structures emphasize the importance of shared knowledge and common ground. While all human beings evidently have general knowledge about how to take turn or signal the need for repair, it is only for a limited set of communities that they have specific knowledge about how to actually successfully and appropriately accomplish these things. These relevant rules of conduct, and the inferences associated with particular behavior, are not only influenced by the activity type, but are culturally informed as well (Levinson, 1992:97).

One of the more persistent beliefs about cultural differences (and possible difficulties) is the existence of an East-West divide (e.g. found in (work following) Hofstede, 1980; Hall, 1959, 1976).[13] The cultural differences between Eastern and Western countries are perceived to be so extensive that misunderstanding is likely to occur. This perception might, in part, be due to the problematic application of western biased theories of language and communication to languages spoken in (East) Asia.[14] When it comes to interactional

[12]There is a growing interest in universals of interaction, including efforts related to the project on a Typology of Interaction, headed by Stephen C. Levinson at the Max Planck Institute in Nijmegen, the Netherlands (see e.g. Stivers et al., 2009; Dingemanse et al., 2014), and in work on interactional linguistics (see e.g. Selting and Couper-Kuhlen, 2001; Couper-Kuhlen and Ford, 2004; Thompson et al., 2015; Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 2018).

[13]See Leech (2007) for an account of linguistic politeness explicitly negating such a divide. An explicit argument in favor of a culture-general, approach to politeness is presented by Long (2016).

[14]Most notably in research concerned with politeness and intercultural communication, the past decades have witnessed a call for alternative models and approaches rooted in Asian

behavior these regions are reported to prefer different styles of conversation. Conversational style is here used as a cover term for all patterns of language use that collectively make up the appropriate, or just, way of behaving in interaction (Tannen, 2005, cf. section 3.4). It is what "feels normal" to people.[15] These normative patterns often go by unnoticed, precisely because they are what speakers feel goes without saying; it is what they have always done and what they expect others to do as well.

Most work reporting an opposition between Western and Eastern ways of communicating focus on the Anglophone world and East Asia.[16] These regions are taken as strong examples of individualist and collectivist societies, respectively (e.g. Triandis, 1995; Oyserman et al., 2002). The main difference between these two characteristics is the way in which individuals see themselves, and consequently what motivates them to (not) do certain things. Individualism can be described as a social pattern in which an individual is viewed as independent from others and hence primarily motivated by his own personal wants, obligations, and goals. Collectivism, on the other hand, refers to a social pattern in which an individual is viewed as part of a collective and is primarily motivated by obligations or norms imposed by that collective (Triandis, 1995:2). This difference in self-perception and source of motivation inevitably leads to a difference in self-conduct. Especially in terms of appropriate behavior Markus and Kitayama (1991:240) note the importance of taking into account the cultural construction of the relationship between self and others.[17]

Patterns of interpersonal alignment are presumably influenced by the general idea of what constitutes a relationship and what it takes to sustain that relationship. Following the explanation above, a more individualistic perspective would assume participants to feel detached from each other, which could result in more explicit efforts of communicating closeness or similarity. In other words, it could motivate attempts to explicitly verbalize interpersonal alignment. Taking the collectivist perspective, this explicit verbalization could be deemed superfluous. Given that self and others are considered part of the same collective, it would be needless to explicitly point out the mutual relationship. This would predict the Dutch, an individual society, to make a clear effort to

conceptualization of interaction. On politeness phenomena see e.g. Matsumoto (1988), Gu (1990); on intercultural communication see Kim (2002; 2009), Miike (2007; 2015; 2014) and Wei (2016); on the conception of self, see Markus and Kitayama (1991; 2010; 2003), cf. section 2.6.

[15]It is emphatically not meant to be understood in terms of stylistics, but simply as a general understanding of "a way or mode of doing something" (Hymes, 1989:434). See e.g. Coupland (2007) and Tannen (2005) for a book-length exploration of style and variation from a more sociolinguisitc perspective.

[16]Often represented by the US and Japan, see e.g. Markus and Kitayama (1991), Kitayama et al. (1997), Kitayama et al. (2000); or even more narrowly on European Americans and Asian Americans, e.g. Markus and Kitayama (2003), Cohen and Hoshino-Browne (2005); see Triandis and Suh (2002) for an overview of cultural influences on personality construction.

[17]Markus and Kitayama (1991; 2003; 2010) do not use the term "appropriate" necessarily. They focus on independent and interdependent construction of self and the associated notions of independent and interdependent agency. These issues are further explored in section 2.6.

establish and communicate interpersonal alignment, whereas for the Indonesian speakers, as representatives of a collectivist society, the relationship is implied and not in need of explicit construction.

Indonesia and the Netherlands

Referring back to the earlier mentioned expat websites, social harmony was often suggested as being one of the central aspects of Indonesian culture. This trait is indeed reported by Geertz (1960, 1984) to be an important cultural value in Java and Bali. Note that these claims are specifically about Java and Bali. Indonesia is of course a highly diverse nation, encompassing thousands of islands, over 700 indigenous languages (Simons and Fennig, 2018) and with a population of more than 237 million in 2010.[18] The 2010 census reports roughly 198 million people to have command of Indonesian, although the level of proficiency is not specified. Most people speak other languages as well and might prefer those language for interaction with the home community (Sneddon, 2003b:6)[19] The aspects of culture mentioned here all supposedly connect with Indonesian, the national language, in general. Considering the language is spoken by the majority of the population and forms the language variety that is especially relevant in intercultural settings, the general advice found about "Indonesian culture" likely refers to the language usages norms associated with Indonesian.[20]

Contrary to the hypothesis presented above - that a collectivist outlook would not need to mark their interpersonal relationship in interaction - Wouk (2001:189-190) argues (the appearance of) solidarity to be central in Indonesian language use. This has resulted in a conversational style that overtly marks the existing solidarity between interlocutors.[21] The characterization of Indonesians as indirect communicators is confirmed by both Hassall (1999:598-599)[22] and Aziz (2003:182), the latter describing indirectness as being "part of the social norm".[23]

[18]These are the most recent census data, see http://sp2010.bps.go.id/

[19]See e.g. Sneddon (2003a); Errington (1984, 1998) on diglossia in Indonesia.

[20]It is misleading, though, to consider it a second language, as it holds an important position in society, even if it is not learned in a home or family environment (Errington, 2006:180). This leads Errington (2006:181) to refer to Indonesian as an "un-native" language, in his words, "to foreground its qualitatively different place in Indonesian political culture and as a marker of identity".

[21]Her work concentrated on the use of two specific discourse markers in Indonesian: *ya* (Wouk, 2001) and *kan* (Wouk, 1998). She concludes both of these markers are reflective of the Indonesian cultural value to emphasize solidarity between interlocutors. In her words "the important thing is not the sincerity of the claim, nor the reality of solidarity, but the successful creation of an appearance of such" (Wouk, 2001:190).

[22]Although his empirical work on request formation does not reflect this characterization. Indonesian students were in fact found to mostly use query preparatory requests, whereas a stronger preference for hints would be expected if indirectness indeed was favored (cf. Hassall, 1999, 2003).

[23]To satisfactorily analyze politeness related behavior in Indonesian Aziz (2003:182ff) proposes a Principle of Mutual Consideration (orig. *Prinsip Saling Tenggang Rasa*), which

The opposite seems to be the case for speakers of Dutch,[24] who, allegedly, prefer a direct, open, and clear way of communicating. These characterizations all fit the overall description of the Netherlands as an individualistic country.[25] Somewhat surprisingly, little work has been found to take the Dutch culture as the object of research (cf. Van Ginkel, 1990, 1991, 1992). Studies that do address cultural aspects of Dutch language use mention Hofstede's (1980) power dimension as one of the more challenging factors in intercultural communication (e.g. Gerritsen, 2001; Van der Wijst, 2000). The egalitarian approach of interaction and the ideal to have everyone heard and on board before a decision is made (reflective of Hofstede's femininity dimension) proves to be a complex combination to outsiders. In French-Dutch business negotiations, the difference in directness was reported to cause communicative friction (Ulijn and Gorter 1989 in Van der Wijst 1995, 478).[26]

Both lay and scholarly discussions of Dutch and Indonesian language use repeatedly mention concepts as harmony and (in)directness to be relevant factors in intercultural communication involving speakers of one of these languages. The (limited number of) available academic studies mostly focus on second language learners or business negotiations. This is in itself not surprising, given the immediate relevance of having knowledge about the cultural patterns of linguistic behavior in these contexts. Still, assuming informal interaction to be the default interactive situation, it is remarkable how little information is found about general patterns of interaction in informal encounters. Knowing how speakers use the language in their everyday conversations, would presumably assist in dealing with more specific contexts as well. Especially when it comes to the management of mutual understanding, both in terms of informational and relational needs, the "normal" behavior as displayed in spontaneous interaction can be a valuable source of insight.

---

explicitly includes a mutual understanding of the hearer's and speaker's face wants to ensure the preservation of social harmony.

[24]Speakers of Dutch will be understood to refer to speakers of the language variety as spoken in the Netherlands. The Dutch variety spoken in Belgium, Flemish Dutch, is not considered here.

[25]A conceptualization shown to be reflected in the way Dutch speakers talk about - and hence construct - themselves. Pouliasi and Verkuyten (2012) found Dutch speakers to primarily present information related to themselves and friends and family from their own perspective, e.g. "my son, my mother", representing the relationship between the participants talked about in terms of individual entities engaged in a dyad. They also more frequently referred to their "communal self", which is the personal involvement in particular communities, compared to Greek participants (who were shown to orient towards a more collectivist conceptualization).

[26]Van der Wijst (1995) concludes the difference in politeness or indirectness in power relations are not that great. It seems the degree of conventionality of particular request forms in French and Dutch differs, causing a divergent perception of politeness when a request is expressed using a form that is conventional (and polite) to the Dutch, but unconventional (and impolite) the French. Van der Wijst thus emphasizes the familiarity with (the use of) a language to be perhaps more important than cultural factors. See also Van der Wijst (2000). Stalpers (2005) also concentrates on French-Dutch business negotiations, but does not say anything about possible cultural influences.

1.5 This thesis

The general (folk) perception of the Dutch and Indonesian preferred conversational styles is very different: direct vs. indirect, clear vs. vague, and focused on independence vs. solidarity. A particularly important aspect of interaction that could potentially prevent misunderstandings and misinterpretations in intercultural communication is a shared understanding of the interpersonal relationship. A conversation is often full of seemingly redundant, uninformative contributions that support, repeat, paraphrase, or co-construct a particular message presented by some other participant. These contributions may not be very relevant in terms of offering new knowledge, they are crucial sources of information when it comes to the interpersonal positioning of the interlocutors. They are phatic contributions: instead of carrying a transactional or informational function, they fullfill a primarily social function.

In order to further our understanding of phatic communication in interpersonal relationship management, this thesis investigates how participants use spontaneous responsive actions (Thompson et al., 2015) to convey their personal, and as a result interpersonal, position on a certain matter. The analysis of naturally occurring interactions, will aid in uncovering patterns of language use in Dutch and Indonesian related to the management of interpersonal relationships. The guiding research question is formulated as follows:

- How do speakers of Dutch and Indonesian manage their interpersonal alignment in informal interaction?

All analyses are data-driven. That is, the empirical data - the informal interactions - are the main source of information when it comes to recognizing patterns, distinguishing categories, and contrasting results. The research is both qualitative and quantitative, in that micro-level descriptions and explanations of specific linguistic behavior related to interpersonal alignment are combined with macro-level patterns of regularity. This study is therefore an example of sensible quantification: it is not so much concerned with the (possible) occurrence of a particular form and its related normative rules, but with the relative preference to use a certain form over others. Even if a certain way of communicating is available to people, it does not mean they will use it regularly. The current research aims to find what linguistic forms *are* regularly used (and why); the specific workings of the individual forms that interactants have at their disposal is - for the purpose of this study - of secondary concern.

The overall goal of the research is to gain insight in how participants use phatic contributions in spontaneous informal interaction to establish interpersonal alignment. This insight will help increase our understanding of the ways in which these speakers normally (and possibly normatively) explicate their mutual relationship. Which, in turn, will contribute to a deeper understanding of intercultural communication and the connection between the organization of language, culture, and interaction.

Knowledge about patterns of alignment behavior both benefits language teachers and learners in intercultural communication. It allows participants to accurately interpret others' communicative moves and display communicative behavior in line with the relevant expectations. Being able to think like a member of the community - or at least recognize how members of a particular community think - eases communication and will likely increase mutual understanding and appreciation. The degree to which participants perceived there to be common ground, in terms of shared knowledge and expectations, affects both the successful transfer of information and the creation of a successful relationship.[27]

Ultimately, the research question presented above touches on a broader discussion of universal and culture specific patterns of language use. The contrastive nature of this study invites exploration of this overarching theme: to what extent is phatic communication a universal endeavor and how do specific languages differentiate in the decisions that are made in an effort to establish and maintain interpersonal bonds? This study concentrates on two languages only, meaning the analysis presented here can only serve as first steps towards answering the question of universality. Nonetheless, the insights gained through contrastive study of language usage provide empirical support that is indispensible in reaching final conclusions in this debate.

Structure of the thesis

As has hopefully become apparent from this introduction, I will not use a single theoretical framework to answer my research question. Inevitably, it takes some additional work on the author and reader's part to connect the relevant concepts. To that end, the thesis is divided into two parts. Part I includes the theoretical and methodological considerations guiding this research (chapters 2-4), Part II presents the discussion of the interactional data (chapters 5-8). Each of the parts will start with a brief introduction of the central themes that are discussed in the chapters. This will clarify how they are related and why they are of relevance to the research. The separate chapters will of course address these issues as well, but for a quick overview the reader is referred to the introductory text at the beginning of the relevant part. Whereas the main discussion of theory is found in Part I, the data-driven analysis in Part II includes theoretical explanations as well to allow for separate reading of Part I and Part II. The individual analyses are thus made accessible in their own right, albeit at the cost of concepts being discussed at several points in the text.

[27] The highly problematic word "successful" is here meant to reflect the favorable or desired outcome (following the Merriam Webster dictionary). Successful transfer of information thus refers to the situation in which an intended message indeed reaches the intended target. Describing the successful creation of relationships is somewhat more challenging, but would refer to all those situations in which participants were attempting to establish a particular type of relationship (be it one of like or dislike) and indeed reached the point where either party was felt to have understood and accepted the existence of that relationship.

Chapter 2 considers human interaction in general, with a focus on the social use of language; the self-less sharing of information, feelings, and knowledge believed to be unique to humans. The principles of cooperation and coordination guiding interaction are explored and the collaborative nature of human beings is discussed. These patterns might suggest the existence of interactional universals, or even a human interaction engine, warranting the question what role culture plays and how politeness might be involved.

Chapter 3 concentrates on stancetaking and alignment. This chapter moves on from a general examination of stance in interaction to the particular explanation of stance as conceptualized in a triangle, connecting the first speaker, the second speaker, and the object of talk. This will be the leading conceptualization throughout the thesis. The chapter subsequently discusses ways in which interactants establish alignment, which form the theoretical grounding of the interactional patterns studied in the data analysis. The data used for this research were taken from a reality TV show, Big Brother, to have access to both auditory and visual communication. The selection and processing of the data is described in detail in **chapter 4**, as are the connected benefits and challenges of using these data. This chapter also includes an explanation of the coding protocol that was used to analyze the transcripts.

The first chapter of part II, **chapter 5**, discusses how participants show involvement in Dutch and Indonesian through minimal and extensive expressions of support. This includes back-channeling, agreements, and the explicit marking of interpersonal alignment by means of such phrases as "I think / like X too". This is perhaps the most straightforward form of establishing (and communicating) a shared understanding and common ground. Another means of expressing similarity between two participants is presented in **chapter 6**. By reproducing (part of) a prior utterance participants are shown to establish interpersonal alignment. Considering the information of a particular message is already available (the previous person presented that piece of information after all), the main function of such reproductions is social in nature.

Chapter 7 focuses on the collaborative construction of meaning, referring to co-completions and extensions of presented thoughts. The ability to complete someone else's expression or build on an idea presented by another speaker shows the similarity between the participants involved. This does not necessarily mean they feel the same way about a particular topic, but it does demonstrate their likeness in terms of processing and coordinating their thoughts.

The results are brought together in **chapter 8** and connected to the theoretical concepts introduced in part I. It is shown that the expression and establishment of alignment differs across the two languages, both in frequency and in preferred form. This is suggested to be an effect of culture, and, more specifically, to be related to the different conceptualizations of self and other; a crucial aspect of interpersonal alignment. This final chapter will also address the challenges of the research design and the opportunities it presents for further research.