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Developing a Theoretical Framework to Measure Cross-Cultural Discourse and Cultural Adaptation

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**Developing a Theoretical Framework to Measure Cross-Cultural
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Abstract

This paper proposes a theoretical concept of cross cultural discursive competence (CCDC). As an initial step, it reviews and critiques a series of in the relevant areas of intercultural communication, genre analysis and contrastive rhetoric and points out that it is imperative to explore what CCDC is composed of. In addition, we also need to strengthen cross-cultural genre study in the light of the sociocognitive perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; 1995; Berkenkotter & Huckins, 1995; Paltridge, 1997; Swales, 1990). Based on the relevant theoretical dimensions reviewed, this paper develops a model to measure CCDC embracing a range of concepts including genre prototype and cultural semantics followed by specific research methodologies for the implementation of the research model.

Keywords: Cross-cultural; Managerial Communication; Socio-Cognitive

JEL Classifications: F2, C90, F14, L14, N15, O57

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Introduction

In this paper we propose a theoretical model for understanding discursive competence in spoken and written cross-cultural business communication. As this model will be the basis of an empirical research project, we want to subject it to critique to enhance the potential for construct validity in our research.

Effective cross-cultural business communication goes beyond mastery of English language. It requires a relevant ‘social stock of knowledge’ (Schutz & Luckmann, 1974) about genre use and appropriate discursive competences used in cross-cultural contexts. This paper develops a complex conceptual model to study cross-cultural discursive competence (CCDC). The model adopts a genre-based approach to analyse business communication practices and to analyse authentic English-language written and spoken texts. By authentic texts, we mean English and Chinese business letters and emails [written] and formal and informal business meetings [spoken].

Because CCDC is a relatively new concept, we briefly explain two related concepts: discursive competence, textual space, socio-cognitive space, and social space (these are developed more fully in *Key definitions* below).

Discursive competence (DC) traditionally has meant competence and performance (Chomsky, 1965) or communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) in language learning. However, being limited to textual or social competence, it does not offer a full account of discursive competence. Our fuller understanding of discursive competence derives primarily from Bhatia (2004, p. 143) who defines discursive competence as the knowledge and skills that expert professionals use in specific discourse situations of their everyday professional activities. He clearly delineates the relationship between discursive competence and *disciplinary knowledge* as an integral part of one’s professional expertise. Although his definition refers to written genres, we also apply it to spoken genres, since written and spoken texts are typical of the discourse. Thus, a text is seen as reflecting the addresser’s discursive competence (DC). DC involves textual competence, and professional and generic competencies. Drawing from Bhatia (2004, p.19), we therefore conceptualise discursive competence as comprising *textual space* (textual knowledge), *socio-cognitive space* (genre knowledge in relation to professional practice), and *social space* (social and pragmatic knowledge).

Crucial to this research is understanding *Genre Usage In Cross-Cultural Situations*. Rather than considering it as adapting one’s culture to another culture’s genre forms, we consider how both cultures adapt, using CDCC, to build intercultural collaborations. This, we argue, produces a dialectical tension between fluidity (negotiating new genre forms) and fixity (own genre conventions). Although culture plays an obvious role in this intercultural collaboration process, genre theory, so far, does not strongly focus on the role of culture in language use (exceptions include Trosborg, 2000).

In particular, very little has been done on cross-cultural text study between Australians, NZ, and Chinese cultures. Although Zhu (2000, 2005) has extensively studied these cultures, her studies focus on related areas of contrasting genres written in English and Chinese, which lays a solid foundation for this study. Such investigations help to answer questions confronted by a

manager working across cultures: e.g., what is perceived as competence by both parties in context cross-cultural business communication contexts? Whose rules are followed when English is the *lingua franca*?

Cross-cultural studies have mostly developed from earlier research in which competence is characterised mainly by knowledge and skills in identifying cultural differences in communication and language use. Often these studies are highly structural, such as comparing linear/direct and circular/indirect communication patterns and rhetorical structures in contrastive rhetoric (e.g. Kaplan, 1966, Kaplan, 1989; Young, 1994); or cross- cultural differences in beliefs, values and practices at a general level (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1991; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000).

These earlier approaches have been challenged recently by some cross-cultural researchers who call for more critical and synthesized approaches (Canagarajah, 2002; Shi-xu & Wilson, 2001). For instance, Canagarajah (2002) argues for the need to study how all participants in a cross-cultural context contribute equally to cross-cultural encounters. Connor (2002) points to the need to incorporate dual Eastern and Western perspectives for cross-cultural communication research. Towards this goal, Collier (2003) proposes that ‘intercultural alliances’ (intercultural collaboration and interdependence) are achieved through consensus and negotiation of values, identities and norms that incorporate perspectives from all cultures involved. In addition, Pan, et al. (2002) examined managers’ dual perspectives about what constitutes effective texts from both intra-cultural and intercultural perspectives. Soliciting views from Finnish, Chinese, and Hong Kong managers, they found that, although different cultural groups have different expectations about competence and effective communication, their viewpoints also do overlap.

In summary, we conceptualise cross-cultural discursive competence knowledge and skills around ‘intercultural alliances’, textual space, socio-cognitive space, and social space. Our empirical research will investigate the relationships among these types of knowledge to guide an analysis of texts that relate to successful and unsuccessful business communication (viewed by managers) in order to identify:

1. What kind of cultural knowledge and skills are relevant for understanding cross-cultural discursive competence?
2. In what way is cross-cultural discursive competence reflected in the written and spoken cross-cultural texts?
3. To what extent does cross-cultural discursive competence relate to effective communication by managers?
4. What links do managers perceive between effective texts, their professional practice and their business successes?

Objectives and Theoretical Underpinning of Future Empirical Research

We argue that this research is significant practically and theoretically. Effective cross-cultural business communication is essential for effective trade relations among countries. In the case of Australia, it is currently negotiating a free trade agreement with China. Although Australia has traditionally exported resources to China and imported manufactured goods, it is

likely that future trade will increasingly involve complex technical and legal issues such as intellectual property, telecommunications, mining investment and engineering, and educational services, as well as global environmental issues. In other words, the negotiations will be far more complex, requiring greater sophistication in cross-cultural communication.

Theoretically, this study develops a new framework for studying cross-cultural encounters in business communication by marrying genre-based theory (Bhatia, 2004; Swales, 1990) with cross-cultural studies using *cross-cultural discursive competence* as its crucial concept. In particular, it provides an in-depth analysis to written and spoken encounters as a process for not only achieving business goals, but also establishing cultural alliances. It develops a more sophisticated model than previously in three ways.

First, this theoretical framework extends the existing conceptualisation of discursive competence by locating this competence within a ‘cultural space’, viewing cross-cultural business communication as a constructive process of genre negotiation operating in intercultural alliances. It is a fluid space created by negotiations and informal interactions to which both parties bring not just their values and norms, but importantly an anticipation of the ‘other’ (Müller, 2004).

Second, incorporating ‘intercultural alliances’ into business and professional communication promotes our understanding of various levels of meaning in cross-cultural business communication, especially the role of relationship building, which is very important for communicating with the Chinese (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). Thirdly, this project extends genre analysis to spoken genres. Although genre theory was developed with the intention of analysing both spoken and written genres (Bakhtin, 1986), genre analysis is mainly applied to written discourse. Our research framework views both written and spoken genres as repertoires of professional practice (see also Orlikowski & Yates, 1994).

The Cross Cultural Discursive Competence (CCDC) Model

CCDC is a complex process involving socio-cognitive, professional, and cross-cultural knowledge. Cross-cultural discursive competence is the repertoire of knowledge and skills which expert professionals deploy when using various written and spoken genres in the course of cross-cultural business transactions. We propose that CCDC is determined by a person’s performance in the three spaces: professional, socio-cognitive, and cultural.

Professional Space is related to professional expertise, and comprises professional knowledge of one’s profession and knowledge of the criteria required for membership of this particular discourse community. We define this as discipline-specific knowledge (e.g., technical knowledge among engineers) and accrued experience (e.g., awareness of successful marketing tactics for salespeople).

Socio-cognitive Space is primarily concerned with genre competence. Genre is understood as “typified rhetorical actions” in response to recurring situations’ (Miller, 1984) or ‘typified symbolic actions in response to recognizable situation types’ (Artemeva, 2005, p. 392).

But genres are not inflexible. For example, Schryer (2000) defines genres as ‘constellations of regulated, improvisational strategies triggered by the interaction between individual socialization ... and an organization’ (quoted in Artemeva, 2005, p. 392). Professionals maintain genres to achieve professional objectives and to maintain their professional solidarity (Bhatia, 2004, p. 21; Winsor, 1996). In professional settings, genre can be seen as a type of ‘social stock of knowledge’ (Schutz & Luckmann, 1974) or ‘institutional

knowledge' (Paltridge, 1997) shared by members of the 'discourse community' (Swales, 1990) or community of social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

From a genre perspective, texts are seen as highly structured and conventionalised in terms of content and form, Genre is the primary concept of socio-cognitive space because it incorporates both social and cognitive elements. The cognitive element in genre is well established (Swales, 1990, Bhatia, 2004, Hyland, 1998 use social and cognitive perspectives). Cognitive structuring (Bhatia, 1993) and cognitive frames (Paltridge, 1997) are typical of the cognitive approach. As such, 'Cognitive' is related to the content of the text, stressing that the text reflects the writer/speaker's knowledge rather the cognition process. Zhu (2006) further identifies the importance of applying this type of genre knowledge to enhance Chinese professional's competence in writing English documents.

Cultural Space essentially refers to the people's potential to appropriately apply cross-cultural knowledge to understand other cultures and is located in 'intercultural alliances'. These alliances can be understood from two perspectives. First, it is important to understand cultures in terms of cross-cultural knowledge and culture-specific (indigenous) knowledge. Hofstede's (1991) research into the dimensions of culture, and Hall's (1976) high & low-context cultures exemplify such understanding of cultures. Culture-specific or indigenous theories that are most relevant to this project include the concepts of *guanxi* or connections (Fei, 1986), *mianzi* or face and harmony (Ge & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Second, according to Broome (quoted in Allan, et al., 2003: 307), the centrality of intercultural alliances is relational empathy, "a relational process that involves individuals and groups working together to build a collective interpretation of the situation they face and to develop a consensus for performing joined action".

The concept of cultural space thus posits cross-cultural genres as fluid and dynamic responses to the cross-cultural context and relations. For instance, in an Australian-Chinese business meeting there will be an inherent fixity and flexibility of dialectic for such encounters.

A Model for Analysing Cross-Cultural Texts

We now briefly introduce and further examine the key literatures and relevant theories that form the core theoretical principles of our framework. Our model is built upon our understanding of the nature of intercultural alliances, the roles of genre and prototypes, and the structures of rhetoric and semantic frames. Our major contribution to this model lies in the triangulation of the three spaces which underpin the model for textual analysis.

Intercultural alliances are those relationships in which parties are responsible for each other (Collier, 2003). By recognising their cultural differences and interdependence, parties seek common goals. Thus, intercultural alliances are crucial to the success of cross-cultural collaborations that are based on effective communication. The degree of fixity and fluidity in adapting genre conventions (i.e. socio-cognitive space) should be an appropriate (and measurable) indicator of CDCC. For example, a cross-cultural negotiation conducted in English between an Australian and Chinese manager can not follow exactly the conventions of an English business meetings about when to introduce the deal (Zhu et al., in press). The Chinese may need more time to know each other personally before the deal is introduced. However, this type of knowledge is still not sufficient for holding a successful meeting.

Using their cultural spaces, both parties can extend their professional and socio-cognitive spaces (e.g., by working out longer meeting sessions agreed to by both parties for building their interpersonal relationship and achieving intercultural alliances) towards enhancing the effectiveness of such cross-cultural business meetings. Clearly, cultural space plays an essential role in this triangulation process by highlighting what is important for cross-cultural genre reconstruction and what is to be negotiated. As both parties adapt genre rules, more effective negotiation and collaboration is achieved around the goal of forming effective and successful intercultural alliances. In this way, the professional and socio-cognitive spaces are underpinned by the cultural space.

Figure 1 provides a model for combining our theorisation and methodology. Crucial to the model is the assumption that each interactant brings to the intercultural alliance a level of cross-cultural discursive competence that they access when using various written and spoken genres in the course of cross-cultural business transactions. Consequently, CCDC can be measured by the degree of participant flexibility exhibited in the socio-cognitive, professional and cultural spaces. This flexibility is manifested particularly in genre manipulation (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993, 2004; Pan, et al., 2002 inform this). Genre comprises the communicative purposes and textual conventions shared by professional members of a discourse community. We analyse the variation in genre construction and use to achieve non-linguistic ends in professional contexts (i.e., an intercultural alliance). Pan et al's (2002) intercultural reflective model will clearly be useful in this integrated theorisation.

Figure 1. Model for Analysing Cross Cultural Texts

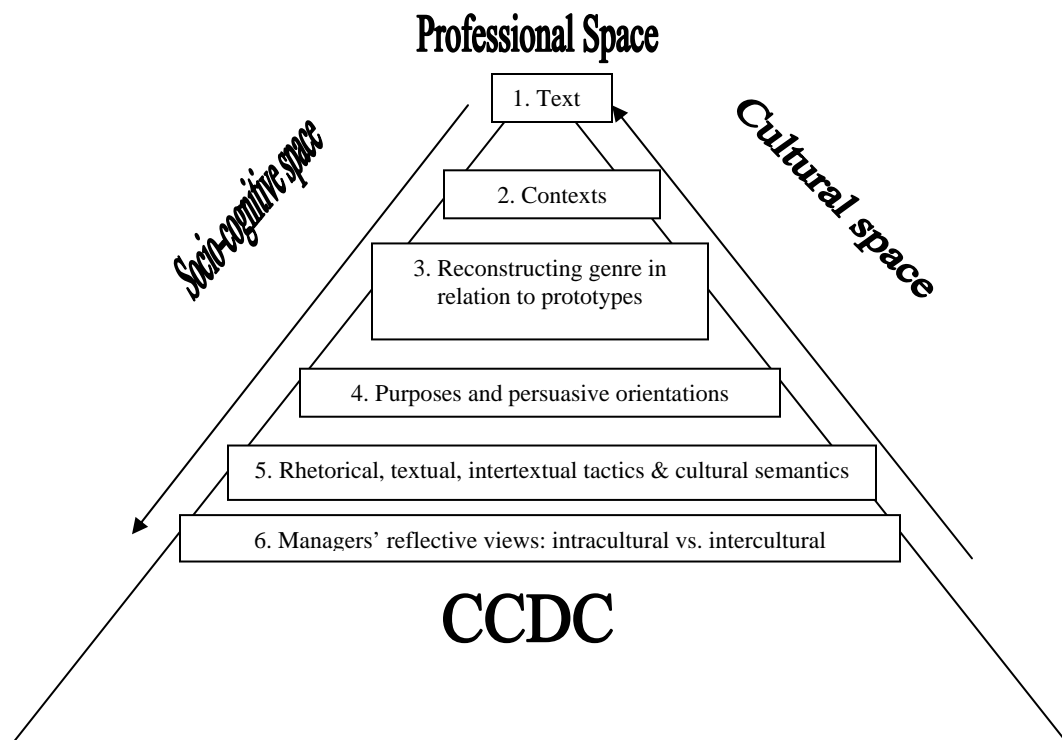


Figure 1 comprises six stages of genre analysis. The top-down sequence from text to purpose and rhetorical structure is based on Swales' (1990) genre analysis. However, our theory of genre construction in a cross-cultural context is more dynamic and fluid.

1. Text in the sociocognitive space, is not simply a linguistic construct; rather it is seen as linguistic and rhetorical means of achieving communicative purposes. Text has both internal (contextual, textual and intertextual indicators) and external structures (disciplinary culture and discursive procedures and practices) (Bhatia, 2004, p.125). That the internal structures are interrelated with external structures is essential for the following stages of analysis.

2. Contexts, also within the sociocognitive space, refer to the location of genre in the social environment (e.g., a sales brochure written by a computer software company). Genres are "historically and culturally specific, pre-patterned and complex solutions to recurrent communicative problems" (Gunthner and Knoblauch, 1995, p 8). Context is thus related to Berkenkotter and Huckin's (1995) 'situatedness' principle, where genre knowledge derives from our participation in the communicative activities of daily and professional life. We see contexts as closely related to cultural space in our study for the obvious reason of cross-cultural interactions. Clearly, genre adaptation is predicated on a person's knowledge and skills based on the contexts including professional, interpersonal and cultural.

3. Reconstructing genre in relation to prototypes reflects the relationship between genre and its prototypes. Prototype theory (e.g., Rosch, 1973) derives from semantic research. It asserts that people categorise objects based on prototypical images they build in their minds about the objects. This can also apply to categorising a genre which should not be seen as rigid with clear boundaries and borderlines. Rather, genres are dynamic and evolving as they respond to social change (Bazerman, 1988), and this is especially the case with cross-cultural genres. Prototype theory presents a way to understand how genres are categorised in one's own culture: 'prototype theory claims that concepts cannot be reduced to the sum of simple components: they depend, rather, on a prototype that is conditioned by socio-cultural factors' (Paltridge, 1997, p. 53).

The concept of prototype is useful for reconstructing genre use in cross-cultural contexts. In the cultural space, the manner in which cultural differences such as different values and ways of thinking are handled by 'intercultural alliances' can be explained by prototypical images of exemplar texts in two ways. Interactants in these alliances can understand their own genre conventions using prototypical images that allow fuzziness of borderline texts (Paltridge, 1997). The other is to extend this framework to interpret texts produced by people (with no language difficulty involved) from other cultures who may apply their own culture-specific prototypical system: e.g., a personal greeting may not be prototypical in an English sales letter, although it usually is in Chinese business sales letters (Zhu, 2005).

4. Purposes and persuasive orientations are necessary because genres are characterised by their communicative purpose (Swales, 1990), and are relatively stable in cross-cultural contexts (e.g. an English business genre generally has clear purposes such as promoting sales). However, additional purposes such as building intercultural alliances (Zhu, 2000) can also be embedded in a business text. Persuasive orientations must, then, be considered. Different cultures resort to different types of persuasion (Lü, 1998; Zhu, 2005). In Western culture, Aristotle's (1991) *Rhetoric*, based on his three proofs of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* has been a significant influence. The Chinese persuasive orientations, *qing* (emotion) and *li* (reason) exercise a profound influence on modern Chinese writing. The preferences of *qing* (emotion) and *li* (reason) may indicate a

different stress from the concept of *logos* in English writing (Zhu, 2005), and may influence Chinese managers' discursive styles.

5. Rhetorical, textual, intertextual tactics and cultural semantic combine rhetorical purpose, semantic-based prototype theory, and text. Rhetorical structure and their associated textual tactics are important components of 'content' and 'form' of genre, which are part of the genre convention and regularities (Bhatia, 1993). The concept of moves (Swales, 1990) to indicate the units of rhetorical structure, will be applied in our analysis. However, to give in-depth analysis of cross-cultural texts, two further linguistic concepts are used explain the fluidity and dynamics of genre: intertextuality and frame semantics. Intertextuality originates from Bakhtin's (1986) where an utterance is linked to utterances in a complex organising system (Hu, 2001; McKenna, 2004). Intertextual study is already an important method of genre analysis: we will extend it to cross-cultural genre use. For example, Zhu's (2005) research on Chinese knowledge of their own culture exhibited when advertising a sales exhibition in English letters indicates contextual behaviour can also be related to prototypical images.

Cultural semantics are related to semantic frames, which are the conceptual structures that underlie language usage (Fillmore, 1976). However, they are cultural defined and shared by members of a certain culture. Semantic frames in our framework serve as a type of cognitive structuring device that provides the background knowledge about how words in a certain language are used in discourse (Fillmore, 1982): e.g., using verbs of *buy*, *sell*, *spend* or *charge* or using adjectives of *cheap* or *expensive* for a commercial transaction. These lexical choices reveal a particular perspective from which the transaction is viewed. Semantic frames can be used to analyse cross-cultural texts to indicate how writers of different cultures may indicate different perspectives. More importantly, both parties writing/speaking and receiving the text can then interpret genre forms as meaningful semantic frames in relation to building intercultural alliances. For example, specific forms stressing collaborations in initial Chinese sales letters (Zhu, 2000) may resurface in the English letter written by a Chinese manager and can be interpreted as such using appropriate cultural space.

6. Managers' reflective views will be vital for validating our interpretive analysis in the empirical study. Managers' intra-cultural and cross-cultural reflective views (Pan, et al., 2002) will be used in at least two ways. One is to consider their overall reflections on effective cross-cultural English genres (letters, emails or meetings). The other is to solicit their views about the cross-cultural texts relating to successful and unsuccessful deals (more details in research method section) and to interpret them from both their own cultural views as well as their counterparts' views. Particular attention will be given to how they adapt their prototypical images of genre, such as how to take turns in a business meeting, for genre reconstruction in order to achieve intercultural alliances. Their views are crucial for illustrating CCDC involving specific types of knowledge for business genre use the managers have been equipped with.

Research Method

Study 1. To indicate how these concepts might be operationalized, we briefly outline how we intend to conduct our research, which involves three studies. **First, we establish** a corpus of English letters/emails and recorded business meetings collected from companies in each country (Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong and China). Data for each country (letters, emails, meetings) will be sorted according to whether the outcome was successful or unsuccessful in completing a business deal, allowing a comparative analysis. Then the data will be analysed and compared within each country. Initial inductive analysis will be derived from

Leximancer (www.leximancer.com) analysis. A second level of (deductive) analysis, using our conceptual framework will occur. The three objectives for this analysis are:

- a: Are there unexpected lexical occurrences that will force re-evaluation of a priori concepts in (b) and (c)?
- b: Are different communication tactics used in these two sets of data (successful and unsuccessful)? This will be determined by lexical and genre analysis.
- c: Do the characteristics of successful cases indicate appropriate incorporation of CCDC and, conversely, do unsuccessful cases lack CCDC?

Each cross-cultural text will be classified and analysed based on our proposed model in the six stages of analysis, according to its rhetorical purpose (using a system devised using both western rhetorical and Chinese persuasive orientation). It will then be analysed using two analytical tools: genre analysis and semantic frames. The study of semantic frames complements genre analysis, offering clues about possible genre prototypes for understanding the reconstruction of genre. It is anticipated that these data can be quantitatively recorded at least in part using categories provided by genre and semantic frame theory, as well as the lexical data. Genre characteristics can be identified according to the rhetorical and linguistic structure of the document (Bhatia, 2004; Cheng, 2003; Zhu, 2005), intertextual features (Bakhtin, 1986) and its linguistic features using systemic functional linguistic categories (McKenna & Waddell, 2006). Zhu (2000) has successfully applied some of these tools (e.g., persuasive orientations, rhetorical structure (moves), intertextual features in her studies of Chinese-English business communication genres).

Study 2 involves focus groups that will gather managers' reflective views, providing insights into the managers' shared understandings of genre. The focus group interviews will solicit managers' views about cross-cultural discursive competence to further substantiate our proposed model of the three spaces. How managers of each culture frame the relationships between these spaces may help explain their preferences for using genre and genre prototypes.

Finally, **Study 3** would use managers in each country in small groups in a study of texts of successful and unsuccessful business interactions such as negotiations derived from Study 1 and 2. Using a questionnaire related to the text provided, each manager structurally rate the quality of each interaction, the text, evidence of cultural values and ways of thinking along a number of Likert and semantic type differential scales (e.g. effective-not effective, friendly-not friendly, likely to seek consensus or bring people closer together), and other ratings that reflect the key concepts in the guiding model. Each questionnaire will be structured around the key concepts described in our model, but using everyday terms and concepts. In addition, open-ended questions will ask them to report their perceptions about the criteria they think are appropriate for writing an effective business letter to a potential customer from another culture (Australian/NZ or Chinese).

Conclusion

Clearly, this model offers a more sophisticated framework for understanding the mutual adaptations that business people engage in as they conduct their business in cross-cultural situations. By understanding genres as stable, but adaptable, textual products in given situations, and by understanding the reflexivity of participants in their encounters, the model more

accurately reflects actual behaviours. Thus, this more complex model of cross-cultural discursive competence (CCDC) will determine effectiveness in terms of the tension between fluidity and fixity in such exchanges. We have also shown that it is possible to develop an effective methodology for this theoretical framework.

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