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Communication Mix and Mixup  
or  
How Linguistics Can Ruin a Marriage  
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While staying with a Greek family on the island of Crete, I had to eat scrambled eggs (my least favorite kind) for breakfast every morning. And I had to consume bunches of huge purple grapes which were out-of-season and hence hard to come by. I had to eat them because I had carelessly remarked to my hostess that we had another way of cooking eggs in the United States, and because I had asked my host how come I hadn't seen any grapes around since I'd arrived in Greece. My hosts thought these comments indicated a preference for eggs scrambled and a desire for grapes. In fact, I had only mentioned these things to "make conversation." And then there was my British friend who I thought never had anything to say until she let me know that she had been trained to allow a certain period of silence to elapse before taking her turn to speak -- which period of silence never occurred when I was there because I perceived it as a void to be filled by another comment of mine.

We were all trying to be polite -- my Greek hosts, my British friend, and I. But clearly we were misunderstanding each other. A look at Robin Lakoff's (1973) Rules of Politeness can help explain these mixups. The Rules of Politeness are:

1. Don't impose
2. Give options
3. Be friendly (Make 'A' feel good)

Thus when I chattered about ways of preparing eggs and the scarcity of grapes, I was applying R3, trying to be friendly. I was applying the same rule when I hurried to fill the silence I perceived as awkward so my British friend wouldn't feel uncomfortable, so she would feel good as it were. My Greek family clearly understood that I was being polite, but they assumed I was applying R1 (Don't impose) and expressing my desires indirectly -- or perhaps applying the closely related R2 (Give options), so that I was giving them the option of ignoring my desires by "not taking the hint" if they chose. Similarly, waiting for a moment of silence to ensue before taking a turn to speak is a way of insuring one isn't imposing his comments before the other has entirely finished speaking. Confusions like these are in keeping with Lakoff's own observation that all cultures have the same three rules of politeness, but they may differ with respect to their order of precedence, so that middle-class Americans seem to favor R3 while other, more stratified societies might prefer R1.

We all know, though, that mixups like these aren't confined to intercultural communication. They continually occur between people who speak what ostensibly is (but often hardly seems to be) the same language. As Susan Ervin-Tripp noted (1972), "We can assume that a shared language does not necessarily mean a shared set of socio-linguistic rules." Cultural, subcultural and idiosyncratic forces all conspire to determine a person's linguistic choices, and among these choices is a position on a directness

206

spectrum ranging from application of the Rules of Politeness on one end (that is, maximally indirect communication), and use of Grice's Rules of Conversation on the other (which I associate with direct communication -- roughly, saying just what you mean, in a way that will be understood).

I'd like to demonstrate that in everyday interactions people make linguistic choices in encoding and decoding messages in accordance with systems that are internally consistent for each individual but may differ from one individual to the next -- and that these differences can explain misunderstandings that frequently occur. The strategies, or "communication mix," consist of many verbal and nonverbal cues, such as noise level, code choice, intonation, and so on. In this paper, I'll focus on the problems caused by differing strategies with regard to the politeness/directness continuum. I'll spend some time looking at examples of misunderstandings between husband and wife because, for one thing, they seem to be very widespread. Moreover, in the context of a marriage, the participants presumably enjoy the great advantage of shared values, commitments, and communicative goals, so they should understand each other, of anyone can. Furthermore, whereas countless misunderstandings -- probably most of them -- between acquaintances generally go undetected, it is highly likely that a missed communication between husband and wife will eventually surface, especially those concerning decisions which affect both partners as they organize their lives in tandem. Specifically, therefore, I chose examples of interactions with very concrete goals: decisions about activities that must be done together. The complex psychological and sociological forces operating in these interactions will be seen more clearly through the linguistic choices by which they are played out.

The following interchange is typical.

- (1) Wife: We didn't go to the party because you didn't want to.
- (2) Husb: I wanted to. You didn't want to.

Here's the conversation that led to the decision not to go.

- (3) Wife: Bob's having a party. Wanna go?
- (4) Husb: OK.
- (5) Wife (later): Are you sure you want to go?
- (6) Husb: OK. Let's not go. I'm tired anyway.

Now Grice's (1967) Rules of Conversation govern a situation in which a person says exactly what he/she means. They are:

1. Say as much as necessary and no more.
2. Tell the truth.
3. Be relevant.
4. Be clear.

By these rules, the wife asks her husband if he wants to go to a party and asks again later if he's sure he wants to go, without expressing her own preference at all. The husband is the one who suggests they not go, and he gives as a reason that he is tired. This is sufficient reason (R1); it is relevant (R3); it is clear (R4); and the wife assumes that it is true (R2). She's operating on a fairly direct strategy or, looking at it another way, she's employing R3 of politeness, be friendly,

or, as Lakoff phrased it elsewhere, maintain camaraderie, which to the wife consists of being direct. Her husband, however, is applying R1 of politeness. Hence, like the Greeks in my first example, he's looking for hints as to his wife's preference. He takes her mention of the party as an indication that she wants to go to it — otherwise why would she violate R3 of Conversation by bringing it up? He takes her later question (5) as evidence that she doesn't want to go — and indeed the question "Are you sure?" often functions this way. Since he is operating on this indirect system, he doesn't say what he means, something like, "Of course I want to, but since you don't, I'll be big about it." Instead, he graciously agrees to do what he thinks she has implied she wants. Furthermore, he applies Politeness R3 and offers an excuse, "I'm tired," that will make his wife feel good about his giving in to her.

A key to understanding the husband's strategy is his use of the response "OK" which is an expression of acquiescence to another's will. "Yes," or more naturally, "yeah," would have indicated a real desire to go. This distinction might be used to discover an individual's characteristic strategy — that is, one could ask informants which they would consider a more appropriate response to a given question, "OK" or "Yeah"? If they chose "OK," we would have reason to believe they would indeed be expressing a desire indirectly by asking the question, while if they expect the answer "Yeah," they would be sincerely asking the other person's opinion. The same may be true of the husband's use of "anyway" in (6).

At any rate, in the example given, the husband's system was so natural to him that he assumed his wife understood and appreciated his sacrifice in agreeing not to go to the party for her sake, and agreeing so graciously. The wife, however, hadn't been trying to hint at anything and didn't expect her husband to hint either, so she took his statement (6) according to the rules of conversation and assumed he was saying what he meant and no more. She therefore agreed not to go for his sake. The wife apparently missed the cue which lay in his choice of the word "anyway" and his answer "OK," at least at first, even though she later admitted that she did not consider "OK" an appropriate response to her question (3). Perhaps it was, after all, a discomfort with these responses which prompted her to question him again later. In any case, her acceptance of his words in the first place is a testament (I'll refer to others later) to the fact that our expectations about the mode in which people will communicate are almost blinding. That is, we will put up with a great deal of seemingly inappropriate verbal behavior before openly questioning another person about his intentions.

Sometimes, however, the verbal behavior seems so strange to the partner that it can't be glossed over. For example:

- (7) Husb: Let's go visit my boss tonight.
- (8) Wife: Why?
- (9) Husb: All right, we don't have to go.

(7) is a clear statement of the husband's wishes, but the wife's question "Why?" could be interpreted two ways. By the rules of conversation, it is a request for information, specifically, the husband's reasons for wanting to visit his boss (information which a wife might well want to know). But it could also indicate the wife's preference not to go (also highly likely) expressed without imposing, according to Politeness R1.

The husband's retort (9) shows that this is indeed how he takes it. And by the same rule, not wanting to impose his desires on his wife, he rescinds the suggestion. The wife, however, ends up feeling confused and frustrated, wondering why she married such an erratic man. She got no answer to her question of why he wants to talk to his boss, and furthermore he suddenly changed his mind without explanation only a moment after he made the request in the first place. The husband, too, is frustrated, and resentful of his wife for her unwillingness to do this small favor.

Mixups like this can lead to direct expression of hostility.

- (10) Wife: Do you want to go to my sister's?
- (11) Husb: OK.
- (12) Wife: Do you really want to go?
- (13) Husb: You're driving me crazy. Why don't you make up your mind what you want?
- (14) Wife: MY mind? I'm willing to do whatever you want, and this is what I get?

This time the wife apparently picks up the implication that the husband is not expressing a real desire to go, when he says "OK." So she asks (12). Applying the Rules of Politeness, the husband interprets this, like the question "Are you sure?" in the earlier example, as an indication that she doesn't want to go, whereas her raising the question in the first place meant to him that she wanted to. Thus he sees her changing her mind on the spot, which may just fit in with his expectation about women anyway — a further incentive for him not to question her more closely. The wife can see no reason for his sudden outburst and refusal to express what he wants.

So that's one kind of communication mixup that can happen, and from what I am told by numerous informants, happens all the time. Here's another that actually plagued one couple, but apparently is similar to the experiences of many others. In fact, it may be a routine that is regularly played out in different forms which can be called The Birthday Present Routine.

- (15) Wife: How could you not get me a birthday present?
- (16) Husb: I did. I gave you the radio.
- (17) Wife: That's not a birthday present. You must've just seen it on sale or something.
- (18) Husb: You wanted a radio. I busted my ass to find you one.
- (19) Wife: How could you think I wanted a radio for my birthday?

It turns out that the wife was washing the dishes one day and remarked that she wished she could listen to an FM station. Her husband took this as an indirect expression of her desire for an FM radio. Further questioning of the wife revealed that she had meant no such thing; she had an FM radio that she could have had fixed if she'd wanted, and furthermore, there was one in the other room which she had just been too lazy to turn on. But the husband, applying the Rules of Politeness, took the hint and acted on it.

The birthday present is a prime candidate for this sort of communication mixup because one of the requirements of a birthday present, for

many people at least, is that it NOT be directly requested. The partner MUST divine the other's wishes from indirect communication. It might be interesting to "define" Birthday Present in other ways too. For example, in the case cited, the wife didn't interpret the radio as such because, among other things, it was given to her before her birthday and it wasn't wrapped in colored paper. These elements were not necessary for the husband's definition of birthday present -- at least not for a present he gives to someone else. But this is another issue.

One more example of a marital situation: The couple had recently completed graduate studies and were both working for the first time. After a few months of their new economic solvency, this interchange took place:

- (20) Husb: I can't stand it. You want to live like a hippie.  
I can't live like that.
- (21) Wife: Whaddya mean? What's wrong with the way we live?
- (22) Husb: You know what I mean.
- (23) Wife: (Protestations of ignorance)
- (24) Husb: (Finally) You refuse to buy decent furniture. You want to live with this crap forever.
- (25) Wife: Since when do you want to buy furniture? You never said anything about buying furniture.
- (26) Husb: You *knew* I wanted to buy furniture.
- (27) Wife: How could I know?
- (28) Husb: You knew.

It finally became clear that the husband had been suggesting they go to a department store every time they had a free evening, and, particularly, he had been directing their path to the furniture department, where he had elicited his wife's opinion about various couches and chairs. Although she didn't know why she was spending so much time in Macy's, she was operating on a fairly direct strategy, assuming her husband would adhere to the rules of conversation in communication with her and say what he wanted clearly and directly. She didn't look for hidden meanings. It never occurred to the husband, however, that his wife sincerely missed his point. He was sure she understood but was perversely refusing to act on his wishes, which he was politely not imposing on her (R1). By the way, if you find this example implausible, just imagine that it was the wife who was leading her husband through department stores and the husband who never thought of furnishing their apartment.

This example shows, too, that the systems of communication varying from politeness to directness apply to nonverbal as well as verbal cues, as both Lakoff and Grice note. Each partner is operating on what he/she takes to be a self-evident system of encoding and decoding strategies.

Conflicting stances with respect to the politeness/directness continuum seem to be at the core of many mixups. A woman was complaining about a male friend who begrudged walking her to the subway. He'd asked, "Do you want me to walk you to the subway?" She took this as an indication that he didn't really want to, expressed in a way that appeared to give her the option (R2). When I later questioned the man, he was confused. Of course he had been willing to walk her, but he hadn't wanted to offend her by assuming she needed help in case she didn't (R1, Don't impose). Why did she think he didn't really want to? As we discussed other examples, it became clear that this woman sees any yes/no question

that involves someone doing something for her (and especially coming from a man) as fishing for a no reply. If the man had really been willing to walk her to the subway, he wouldn't have asked; he'd have said, "I'll walk you." She would then have felt comfortable saying, "That's not necessary," if she wanted. There are others, however, myself included, who would not find it so easy to deflect so assertive an offer.

Upon reflection, though, it seems that many people are suspicious of yes/no questions. For example, when you ask someone who has invited you to dinner, "What shall I bring?" you are making the assumption that you will bring something, and your host can comfortably suggest what is most needed. But if you ask, "Should I bring something?" you are in fact forcing your host to ask you to bring something, which he or she might be reluctant to do, saying instead, "Nothing -- just bring yourself." There is an example of this in the movie, "A Woman Under the Influence." When Nick, a construction worker whose wife has had a nervous breakdown, decides to take his kids out of school one afternoon and take them to the beach, his friend realizes that Nick is tottering pretty close to the brink himself and asks, "You want me to go with you, Nick?" But then he realizes that Nick can't possibly say, "Yes, I need you to come with me," so the friend immediately restates his offer: "I'll go with you." This is the kind of directness which the woman in the subway example expects.

However, the same movie contains an eloquent testament to the failure of directness with those who don't expect it. When the wife returns from the mental hospital to find her house filled with well-wishing (?) relatives, she finally musters the courage to tell them, "I wish you'd all go home." But the use of rules of conversation in this context is so unexpected that the guests cannot act on it at all. They treat her utterance as simply aberrant and ignore it.

Each person's communication mix -- his encoding strategies and expectation that others will operate on the same strategies -- is so internalized that he has a very clear idea of what constitutes an appropriate response at any time -- in effect, he has a grammar for interaction. John Gumperz gives the following example:

- (29) Mother: Where are your galoshes?
- (30) Son: In the closet.
- (31) Mother: Don't give me any backtalk. Get them on.

The mother is annoyed because her son is pretending to interpret (29) by the rules of conversation rather than as the indirect command it clearly is ("I'm telling you to put your galoshes on"). However, Gumperz points out, the direct statement "Oh, I forgot to put them on," would be a starred response in this mother's grammar, for she expects her son to answer in the same indirect mode, e.g., "Is it really raining?" As mentioned earlier, a person's interactional grammar can be tapped by tests of appropriateness such as we use in judging the grammaticality of sentences, as when the wife in the earlier example did not hesitate to report, when asked, that she considered "OK" an inappropriate response.

But if it happens so often that husbands and wives, friends and lovers, have such a hard time figuring out what the other means, why do they keep resorting to politeness or indirectness at all? There are times, certainly, when it is more efficient to be indirect, taking advan-

tage of shared knowledge. But in many cases, most perhaps, getting mixed up with the rules of politeness is clearly less efficient than following the rules of conversation would be. For one thing, as Gumperz has pointed out, we want to control without appearing to. But this doesn't seem sufficient to explain the stubbornness with which we cling to our strategies after they have tripped us up and left us sprawled on our faces again and again. A key to understanding why we continue to opt for politeness may lie in an observation made by Gumperz (1974) about an interaction in which a black student approached a professor surrounded by a group of black and white students and asked the professor if he would write him a recommendation for a fellowship. Then he turned slightly toward the other black students and said, "I'ma git me a gig." Gumperz comments that the student seems to be

taking that part of the audience familiar with black rhetoric into his confidence; appealing to them as if to say, "If you can decode what I mean you must share my tradition and if you do you can understand why I act the way I do." To resort to such indirectness is also to risk misunderstanding.

And so we are all willing to risk misunderstanding in order to achieve the sense of camaraderie which is the goal of R3 of politeness -- the feeling that we are speaking the same language in the deepest sense. This is going on, I am sure, in the birthday present routine, where the gift becomes a test of the partner's ability to discern our wishes without being told. And it must be this desire to be understood WITHOUT explaining oneself which leads husbands and wives in so many of the examples I've gathered to assert, "You KNOW what I mean." I think husbands and wives must be saying this to each other all the time all over the world, when in fact it couldn't be farther from the truth -- they hardly know what the other "means" at all. Perhaps we can take comfort, though, in the realization that the mixups are the result of differing strategies which can be subjected to systematic study and eventually understood. So maybe the title of this paper should really be, "How linguistics can SAVE a marriage."

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