

Introduction

DEBORAH TANNEN

The study of cross-cultural communication is of central importance to both theory and application in discourse analysis. As a research site, communication which has broken down can be seen as analogous to the starred sentence in syntax: Analyzing why a given instance of interaction does not work sheds light on the processes of communication that go unnoticed when all goes well.

In terms of application, no issue is more crucial to both public and private human relations. At the global level, the fate of the earth depends on relations among nations, negotiated in conversations among diplomats of widely different cultural backgrounds, and daily encounters in modern societies also entail communication with many individuals of culturally different backgrounds.

When participants speak different languages and come from different countries, it is clear to everyone that communication is cross-cultural. However, as I have argued and demonstrated (Tannen, 1984, 1986), the notion 'cross-cultural' can be expanded to include situations involving people from the same country who speak the same language but who grew up in different regions, have different ethnic or class backgrounds, or are different ages or genders. All these differences result in different habits and conventions for communication, and therefore are illuminated by being seen within the framework of cross-cultural communication.

A number of researchers have given us a theoretical and methodological framework. Gumperz (1982), based on his studies of Indian and West Indian English speakers interacting with speakers of British English in London as well as interaction among Black and White Americans, has elucidated the role of paralinguistic and prosodic features, which he calls contextualization cues, in signalling the speech activity – in other words, how speakers mean what

they say. The work of Erickson on interaction among Americans of varying ethnic backgrounds in counseling interviews (Erickson and Shultz, 1982), adolescents' conversation (Erickson, 1984), job interviews (Erickson, 1986), and at home and school (Shultz, Florio, and Erickson, 1982) demonstrates the significance of rhythmic synchrony and other aspects of the inseparability of verbal and nonverbal channels, and of listening and speaking behavior. Philips (1983), in her study of Warm Springs Indian children in community and school, is also concerned with the integration of verbal and nonverbal channels, as well as the role of participant structures in enabling or disabling individual participation in group settings. (For a brief summary of the work of Gumperz, and of Lakoff, 1979; Brown and Levinson, 1978; and Goffman, 1967, on communicative style, see Tannen, 1985. For a more detailed summary of these and other sources see Tannen, 1984.)

The papers collected here are written in this research tradition. They further our understanding of cross-cultural patterns; suggest new applications; and contribute to the development of theoretical implications of studying cross-cultural communication. They deal with black/white communication in the United States (Kochman); an interview of the Ayatollah Khomeini by the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci (Johnstone); German and American interactive styles as seen through German views of American conversation, and through the experiences of American students at German universities (Byrnes); and children of multi-ethnic background in an elementary school, in terms of their expectations about the school setting (Saville-Troike and Kleifgen) and about interaction with each other (Adger).

Thus, the contexts examined in this volume range from international relations, to education, to private conversation. Most of the papers, following the tradition of research in cross-cultural communication, demonstrate that differences result in mutual misunderstanding. The final paper, however, demonstrates that differences do not always lead to breakdown: analyzing communication between two children of widely different backgrounds and communicative styles, Adger shows that their differences led not to animosity or breakdown but mutually satisfying interchanges; they became good friends. Indeed, Saville-Troike and Kleifgen found that communication among children and their teacher was often successful when they shared no language at all.

Meaning is jointly created

In the first article, 'Strategic ambiguity in Black speech genres: Cross-cultural interference in participant-observation research', Thomas Kochman raises a crucial epistemological issue and shows how it can account for interference in participant observation research. He demonstrates that a number of Black American speech genres make use of strategic, or indeterminate (as distinguished from determinate), ambiguity. For example, a ritualized verbal insult routine called *sounding*, which has been studied by Labov and others, is distinguished from argument, in that *sounding* is a form of play in which insults are not personal, whereas an argument is serious and involves personal insults. Researchers, Kochman notes, have looked to linguistic and other aspects of the verbal display to determine whether one who utters an insult intends it to be serious and personal, hence argument, or playful and ritualized, hence *sounding*. The assumption is that an utterance is one or the other, and the one who utters it knows – and determines – which it is. The hearer's (and the researcher's) task, then, is to determine how the speaker intended the utterance.

Strategic ambiguity, Kochman explains, means that the utterance is not intended to be play or nonplay, but rather is intended to be ambiguous. In uttering an insult, then, a speaker expects the hearer to determine whether or not the insult applies personally. Implications of this view for researchers are crucial. Those who study the linguistic form of the utterance to determine its serious or playful nature are simply looking in the wrong place; the distinguishing characteristics reside not in the utterance but in the hearer's response.

This insight has repercussions for all discourse analysis. Whereas Kochman suggests that strategic ambiguity characterizes Black American rhetoric in contrast to White American rhetoric, the insight that listeners play a crucial role in creating meaning in interaction applies to all discourse and has been argued by Scollon and Scollon (1984) for Athabaskan discourse and by others (for example Erickson, 1986; McDermott and Tylbor, 1983; Schegloff, 1982), for American, or all, discourse.

In analysis, as in interaction, once a line of interpretation has been determined or observed, it assumes an air of inevitability. Researchers studying any instance of discourse are inclined to accept the response of a participant as conditioned by the intentions of the preceding speaker, thus adopting the interpretation of the participant. For example, if speaker A says, 'It's hot in

here', and speaker B rises and opens the window, in the absence of a verbalized repair ('Oh, I didn't mean that!'), a discourse analyst is likely to assume that speaker A's utterance was meant as an indirect request. In this sense, the researcher is being, in the terms of Gregory Bateson, seduced by the data (cf. M. C. Bateson, 1984). However, it is eminently possible that speaker A did not intend the utterance to be an indirect request, but allowed it to become one. Perhaps, as in Kochman's schema, speaker A was committed to neither interpretation but rather was content to leave the matter of interpretation to speaker B, and to live with the consequences – indeed, to embrace them.

Kochman's article, then, is important on a number of levels. As his title suggests, the issue of determinate vs. indeterminate ambiguity is an instance of cross-cultural interference in research. All participant observation, and I would suggest all research, is subject to the culturally conditioned epistemological system of the researcher. (See M. C. Bateson, 1984, for discussion of the impossibility of objectivity in research). Furthermore, meaning is never totally determinate but rather is, to borrow a term used by conversational analysts and ethnographers, a joint production. Finally, the paper has crucial applicability. It explicates an epistemological difference which has significant implications for black/white interaction.

Persuasive argumentation

In the next article, 'Arguments with Khomeini', Barbara Johnstone analyzes an interview that had a disastrous denouement and significant repercussions: It resulted in the Iranian head of state refusing future interviews with Western journalists. She demonstrates that Khomeini and Fallaci used different modes of argumentation. After presenting a model of Aristotelian syllogistic logic, Johnstone shows that Khomeini and Fallaci differ with respect to 'what counts as an acceptable relationship between a datum and a claim'. Furthermore, Khomeini repeatedly states the ground of his argument, something Fallaci never does; and, finally, he argues by parable and analogy, that is, abduction – meaning by association rather than the logical connections of induction and deduction.

Johnstone concludes by cautioning against a too facile or absolute identification of communication style with 'culture'. Similar to Kochman's caution about meaning, Johnstone reminds us that stylistic strategies are negotiated

among participants at the moment of communication. In other words, interaction is 'emergent'. Therefore, 'we need to look at how rhetorical choices are determined in particular situations'. Khomeini and Fallaci talked in ways that were constrained but not determined by their cultural backgrounds; as individuals, they made choices from among the range of strategies available to them, and in interaction, each not only talked in habitual ways but also reacted to the other's ways of talking.

Conversational style and politeness strategies

Following in the linguistic tradition of examining politeness strategies, Heidi Byrnes suggests in the third article that, relative to each other, German politeness is more solidarity-based and American more deference-based. The result is that Americans see Germans as impolite and aggressive, and Germans see Americans (and Britishers) as overly polite and wishy-washy. Byrnes shows that these and other mutual negative stereotypes result, at least in part, from differences among Germans and Americans in what Tannen (1984, 1986) calls conversational style.

Particularly revealing is the experience of American students at German universities. The German students are inclined to broach controversial topics early in an acquaintance and argue their view in a way that they see as committed but which Americans see as pigheaded, overly simplistic, hostile, and even humiliating. Rather than participate in such interaction, which to them would require conversational behavior they feel to be unacceptable, the Americans are inclined to withdraw, withholding their opinions and knowledge so that their German counterparts conclude either that they do not have the knowledge or that they are uncommitted.

Byrnes' analysis is significant in a number of ways. It adds to the growing and much-needed canon of cross-cultural style differences, and it also integrates the work of such linguistic theorists as Gumperz, Lakoff, and Brown and Levinson with those of applied linguists such as House and Kaspar. It dramatizes the specific working out of style differences in interaction, the way that one speaker's talk provides an environment for the other's, such that the American students were unable to say what they knew when interacting with the differing German style — an inability that was opaque to the Germans and painfully frustrating to the Americans.

Scripts

Muriel Saville-Troike and Jo Anne Kleifgen, in the fourth article, 'Scripts for school: Cross-cultural communication in elementary classrooms', draw on findings which are part of an ongoing study of communication in a public elementary school that serves children from a variety of language backgrounds, many of whom know little or no English on arrival. The authors organized their findings into three levels of interaction – scripts, structures, and codes. They found that errors or differences on the levels of codes (grammar, vocabulary, and phonology) and structures (expectations about sequences of utterance types in interaction) caused little or no significant trouble in communication. Their article focuses on the level of interaction that did cause problems, the third and highest level: scripts, or structures of expectation (Tannen, 1979), associated with school.

Scripts for school include such elements as the physical setting (the school building lacked a protective external wall, children sat at scattered desks and tables rather than in orderly rows of chairs, walls were brightly decorated); roles and responsibilities (type and extent of parent and peer involvement, presumed privileges and limitations associated with gender and age); organization of activities (individualized and peer instruction, consistency of structure of curriculum and student participation); and curriculum sequence and content (subject matter of lessons and of reading materials).

The final category of scripts which Saville-Troike and Kleifgen discuss are rules and expectations for behavior (the level of excitement and participation expected or allowed in class). They found that 'the most serious miscommunication between teachers and students occurred where their scripts included conflicting rules and expectations for classroom behavior'. In a finding echoing that of Philips (1983), they observe that encountering different conceptions of discipline resulted in the erroneous perception of lack of discipline. In other words, observing that the American teachers tolerate behavior that would be deemed undisciplined at home, non-American children and their parents conclude that in an American classroom, anything goes.

This phenomenon highlights a crucial aspect of cross-cultural communication. In the context of cross-cultural interaction, participants assume that others are behaving characteristically, whereas they are aware that they themselves are behaving uncharacteristically, in reaction to the other's behavior. (If you are rude to me, you are a rude person, but if I am rude to you, it is

because you offended me.) This insight, too, constitutes a caution for researchers not to conclude that the behavior observed in interaction is necessarily characteristic of that cultural group. Philips, for example, found Warm Springs Indian children exhibiting physical behavior deemed disruptive in classes taught by Anglo teachers. A researcher might be tempted to conclude that by Indian norms, children are expected to display less physical self-control. Quite the contrary, Philips explains, Warm Springs children in Indian contexts exhibit far greater control than Anglo children ever do. The explanation she advances is that Indian children in Indian contexts are expected to observe two types of control: calm control — i.e. sitting still — or active control — i.e. sports, games, and dance. In all Indian contexts, 'both verbal and physical excitation suggesting a lack of control are discouraged' (p. 105). The Anglo-run classroom, with its encouragement of levels of verbal excitation that would be considered out-of-control by community standards, is misunderstood to be a situation in which no control is expected. In their findings of a similar pattern, Saville-Troike and Kleifgen present evidence supporting Johnstone's contention that behavior as it emerges in interaction is not necessarily behavior prescribed by participants' culture. People in cross-cultural communication often behave in ways they would never behave in their own cultural context.

Finally, this paper suggests a framework for analyzing discourse in any context, and suggests that the most important level may be the one that is hardest to observe and is usually unrecognized by participants — that of scripts, or underlying expectations.

Successful cross-cultural communication

Lest the accumulation of findings of cross-cultural misunderstandings lead to disillusionment or despair, this issue ends with an article that demonstrates an instance of cross-cultural difference that has a happy ending: In 'When difference does not conflict: Successful arguments between Black and Vietnamese classmates', Carolyn Temple Adger finds that two first-grade boys' respective interactional styles lead them to seek differing goals when they engage in protest sequences. James, a Black American, seeks to get the last word. Hai, who is Vietnamese, seeks to diffuse the conflict. Since these differing goals are not mutually exclusive, it is possible for both to feel that

they achieved what they sought. Happily, it is the cross-cultural difference itself that makes it possible for both to win.

The papers collected here thus present analysis of cross-cultural communication in a range of situations from international, to institutional, to personal, and focus on speakers of widely varying ages, cultural backgrounds, and roles. They examine differences at a wide range of levels: epistemological assumptions about who controls meaning; rhetorical conventions for persuasive argumentation; conversational style; scripts; and interactive style with respect to disputes. Taken as a group, the papers demonstrate the importance of analyzing cross-cultural communication for theoretical and methodological issues in discourse analysis – indeed for all disciplines concerned with understanding human behavior – as well as the applicability of discourse analysis to understanding cross-cultural communication.

References

- Bateson, Mary Catherine (1984). *With a Daughter's Eye: A Memoir of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson*. New York: William Morrow.
- Brown, Penelope, and Levinson, Stephen (1978). Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. In *Questions and Politeness*, Esther Goody (ed.), 56–289. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Erickson, Frederick (1984). Rhetoric, anecdote, and rhapsody: Coherence strategies in a conversation among Black American adolescents. In *Coherence in Spoken and Written Discourse*, Deborah Tannen (ed.), 81–154. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- (1986). Listening and speaking. In *Languages and Linguistics: The Interdependence of Theory, Data, and Application*, Deborah Tannen and James E. Alatis (eds.). Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1985. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- and Shultz, Jeffrey (1982). *The Counselor as Gatekeeper: Social Interaction in Interviews*. New York: Academic Press.
- Goffman, Erving (1967). The nature of deference and demeanor. In *Interaction Ritual*, 47–95. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Gumperz, John J. (1982). *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lakoff, Robin Tolmach (1979). Stylistic strategies within a grammar of style. In *Language, Sex, and Gender*, (*Annals of the New York Academy of Science* 327), Judith Orasanu, Mariam Slater, and Leonore Loeb Adler (eds.), 53–78.
- McDermott, R.P. and Tylbor, Henry (1983). On the necessity of collusion in conversation. *Text* 3(3): 277–297.
- Philips, Susan Urmston (1983). *The Invisible Culture: Communication in Classroom and Community on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation*. New York and London: Longman.
- Schegloff, Emanuel (1982). Discourse as an interactional achievement: Some uses of 'uhuh' and other things that come between sentences. In *Analyzing Discourse: Text*

- and Talk*, D. Tannen (ed.), 71-93. (Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1981). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Scollon, Ron, and Scollon, Suzanne B.K. (1984). Cooking it up and boiling it down: Abstracts in Athabaskan childrens' story retellings. In *Coherence in Spoken and Written Discourse*, Deborah Tannen (ed.), 173-197. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Shultz, Jeffrey, Florio, Susan and Erickson, Frederick (1982). Where's the floor? Aspects of the cultural organization of social relationships in communication at home and at school. In *Ethnography and Education: Children In and Out of School*. Perry Gilmore and Alan Glatthorn (eds.) 88-123. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Tannen, Deborah (1979). What's in a frame? Surface evidence for underlying expectations. In *New Directions in Discourse Processing*, Roy O. Freedle (ed.), 137-181. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- (1984). *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk among Friends*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- (1985). Cross-cultural communication. In *Handbook of Discourse Analysis 4. Discourse Analysis in Society*, Teun van Dijk (ed.), 203-215. London: Academic Press.
- (1986). *That's not What I Meant!: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks your Relations with Others*. New York: William Morrow.

Deborah Tannen is Associate Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University. She received her Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley in 1979. She is the author of numerous articles as well as the books *Conversational Style: Analyzing Talk Among Friends* and *That's Not What I Meant!: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Your Relations with Others* and the editor of *Analyzing Discourse: Text and Talk* (Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1981); *Spoken and Written Language: Exploring Orality and Literacy*; *Coherence in Spoken and Written Discourse*; and, with Muriel Saville-Troike, *Perspectives on Silence*. She is an Associate Editor of *TEXT* and was the director of the 1985 LSA/TESOL Institute. Her most recent research compares ordinary conversation and literary discourse, for which she has received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

