CHAPTER **12**

Cross-Cultural Communication

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INTRODUCTION: THE IMPORTANCE OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

The study of cross-cultural communication is central to both theoretical and applied linguistics. Examining the causes of misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication sets in relief the processes that underlie all communication but often go unnoticed when it proceeds successfully. Thus discourse analysts find cross-cultural communication a useful research site, apart from any real-world interest in cross-cultural relations.

In fact, however, most discourse analysts have a genuine concern with real-world issues, and cross-cultural communication is crucial to nearly all public and private human encounters. At the most global level, the fate of all people, indeed the fate of the earth, depends upon negotiations among representatives of governments with different cultural assumptions and ways of communicating. Moreover, in order to accomplish any public or private goals, people have to talk to each other, and in more and more cases, the people communicating come from more or less different cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, as my research demonstrates and as I illustrate with brief examples from that research, the notion of "cross-cultural" encompasses more than just speakers of different languages or from different countries; it includes speakers from the same country of different class, region, age, and even gender.

PARALINGUISTIC SIGNALS IN COMMUNICATION

As the work of Gumperz (1982a) and his coworkers (Gumperz & Tannen, 1979; papers collected in Gumperz, 1982b) makes clear, speakers

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use paralinguistic and prosodic features—for example, tone of voice, pitch, loudness, pacing, pauses—to establish cohesion, that is, to show the relationship between ideas (what is foreground, what is background? What is cause, what effect? What is given, what new?) and to show their attitude toward what they say (Are they earnest, joking, or sarcastic? Being friendly or rude? Implying "come closer" or "stay back"?)

These signals about how one means what one says, which Gumperz calls "contextualization cues," are automatically processed. A speaker does not stop and think, "Now I am angry, should I raise my voice or lower it?" A listener doesn't stop and think, "Now if he is raising his voice, does that mean he is angry?" Rather, people encode and decode automatically—"I'm angry," or "He likes me"—without thinking about what tone of voice, loudness, pacing or pitch gives that impression. In the terms of Bateson (1972), these signals indicate a metamessage about how the message, or propositional content of the words spoken, is intended. In other words, how an utterance is said communicates metamessages about the relationship between interactants.

In intracultural communication, expectations about how paralinguistic features signal how an utterance is meant—that is, the interpretation of metamessages—is likely to be shared by speakers and hearers, so they are not noticed; they seem self-evident and "logical," just as the word for a chair in one's own language seems like the real word for chair, when in fact it is arbitrary and no more logical than the words *asiento, karekla,* or the word for chair in any other language.

In cross-cultural communication, however, expectations about how paralinguistic signals are used to indicate what is meant by what is said are not shared. Therefore, in asking what led to misunderstandings, one is forced to notice that a certain tone of voice or use of pitch or other paralinguistic or prosodic feature was intended to mean one thing and taken to mean another. For example, Gumperz (1982a) shows that when speakers of Indian English use increased volume to perform the conversational business-as-usual of getting the floor, it seems to speakers of British English that they are angry. A speaker of British English typically gets the floor by repeating an initial phrase until she or he has audience attention. When the speaker of British English responds in kind to what she or he has perceived as a flareup of temper on the part of the Indian, both interlocutors feel that the other unaccountably introduced the tone of anger into the interaction.

Research on communicative style (Lakoff, 1973, 1976), politeness phenomena (Brown & Levinson, 1978), what Goffman (1967) calls deference and demeanor, as well as indirect speech acts (Searle, 1975) have all

contributed to the realization that most communication is characterized by indirectness. While it may seem at first glance that people use words to say what they mean, a little thought and even less observation indicate that they usually do not come right out and say what they mean. Rather, they negotiate, hint at what they mean, try to get an idea of what the other person might think of what they might mean, and be ready to adjust or take back what they might have meant.

As the work of Lakoff demonstrates and explains, social requirements are too pressing for people to barrel ahead with their thoughts and ideas. Rather, there are two main benefits to indirectness. The first is rapport: It is better to be understood, to get what one wants, without saying what one means. Then the very fact of mutual understanding is proof of rapport, of sharing background and style. The second is defensive: In case one's intentions are not received well, one can avoid outright disagreement by not having gone "on record" (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Cultures differ with regard to whether speakers would rather risk threatening rapport, and therefore appear distant, or risk threatening independence, and therefore appear imposing.

There are cultural differences with respect to how much and what type of indirectness is expected in particular settings. For example, as my own research (Tannen, 1981a) and that of others (for example, Goody, 1978) shows, there are cultural differences with respect to how likely a person is to interpret questions as requests for information, as opposed to interpreting them as indirect ways of communicating something else. Of course all people are capable of interpreting questions both ways. They rely on information about the context, the habits of the other person, and how something is said to decide whether a question or any other utterance is meant literally or not. But the inclination to look for hidden meaning can be more or less strong depending on whether one has come to expect people in this setting to hint or not, and how. My research (Tannen, 1981a) shows that misunderstandings commonly arise when one person asks a question intended as a request for information, for example, "John's having a party. Do you want to go?" while the other interprets this as a hint, for example, "I want to go."

In presenting a sample conversation beginning with this question, I found that Greeks in my study were more likely to interpret such a question as an indirect way of hinting one's own preference than were Americans in my study. Furthermore, for Americans but not for Greeks, women were more likely than men to interpret the question as a hint. These findings may give some indication of the sources for the stereotype of Greeks and of women as being untrustworthy (you can't believe what

they say), as well as the stereotype among Greeks of Americans as childlike (they haven't yet learned the subtle ways of hinting but, like children, blurt things out).

Indirectness (or the possibility of it) makes misunderstandings a danger in any conversation, but they are even more likely when people come from different cultural backgrounds. The automatic and seemingly self-evident elements of conversational style are arbitrarily agreed on by speakers from a given culture; speakers from different cultures have different conventions for use of these elements to accomplish conversational goals. Most speakers simply assume that their system is self-evidently appropriate. Rather than question our basic ways of doing things, most of us are ready to draw conclusions (possibly negative) about people who are different.

EXAMPLES OF CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Research in which I taped 2½ hours of Thanksgiving dinner table conversation among six friends (Tannen, 1984b) showed that although all participants spoke the same language and seemed to understand each other, nonetheless there were subcultural differences that resulted in repeated misunderstandings of each other's intentions. For example, three of the dinner conversation participants, who were from one part of the United States, New York City, seemed to dominate. However, this was the result not of their intention to dominate but of the differences in their turn-taking habits and ways of showing friendliness. When any two or more people talk, each one waits until the other has finished talking before taking a turn to talk. However, this seemingly simple criterion is really complex, because there are cultural and subcultural differences in how much pause one expects speakers to allow within turns and between turns. Whichever party expects less pause will repeatedly and predictably be the first to interpret a turn-taking pause as an uncomfortable silence, an indication that the other has nothing to say. As a result, if that person has friendly intentions and wants the interaction to go smoothly, she or he will fill the silence with talk. In other words, what is intended as a friendly act of keeping conversation going is interpreted as an unfriendly act of not giving the other person a chance to talk. This is what happened in the conversation I recorded and analyzed. Because three of the speakers expected shorter turn-taking pauses, they continually took the floor before the others felt there had been enough pause for them to start talking. The slower speakers felt the faster ones

were not giving them a chance to talk, but the faster ones thought the others had nothing to say and were not holding up their end of the conversation.

Another device used by the three faster speakers involved overlap. These speakers, like those of many other cultural groups that have been reported in the literature (for example, Erickson, 1982; Riesman, 1974), expected a lively casual conversation at dinner to include overlap. That is, they expected that more than one person would talk at a time. One function of overlap is for a listener to show understanding by talking at the same time as the speaker: by loud exclamations of understanding, by finishing sentences with or instead of the speaker to show that the listener knows where the sentence is going (hence has been a good listener), by asking questions the answers to which obviously were about to come anyway. This can be seen in the following example segment, in which the listener (B) is talking at the same time as the storyteller (A) for much of the time. (See Appendix for transcription conventions.)

(1)

A: In fact one of my students told me for the first time, I taught her for over a year. [.5] That she was adopted. And then I thought—uh—[.5] THAT explains SO many things.
B: What. [That she was →
A: [Cause she's so:: different [from her mother
B: [smarter than she should have been? Or stupider [than she should've been.
A: [It wasn't smart or stupid, actually, it was just she was so different. [2.] Just different.
B: [hm]

For much of the time that A is telling his story, B is talking, asking questions that A obviously would have answered anyway. It can be seen from the transcript that B's overlapping does not stop A from continuing his story, and during playback (a session in which the segment is played for the participants and they have a chance to comment) A stated that he did not mind B talking along with him; he took it as a sign of interest in his story. This tactic worked fine among those three speakers. Often they were all speaking at once. However, the other speakers did not expect overlap. Their idea of a conversation was that only one speaker could speak at a time. As a result, when an overlap-favoring speaker began to speak to show listenership, an overlap-avoiding speaker interpreted this as an interruption and stopped talking. The irony is that from the point of view of the culturally different speakers, each one thought the

other created the interruption: The overlap-avoiding speaker thought the overlapper intended to interrupt, but the cooperative overlapper cannot understand why the speaker interrupted himself by stopping.

A special instance of this phenomenon occurred when a fast, overlapping speaker uttered a particularly loud or paralinguistically exaggerated show of appreciation of the talk of a slow, overlap-avoiding speaker. This expressive use of paralinguistic features often had the effect of stopping the speaker in his or her linguistic tracks, wondering what caused the outburst. This can be seen in the following example, in which the main speaker (C) is telling about a meeting at which a speech pathologist suggested that "gay" (homosexual) speakers' identifiable voice quality might be the result of hormonal differences. This is an idea that all those present found preposterous. However, the way that two listeners, (A) and (B), (the same speakers quoted in the earlier segment) show their agreement with the speaker (C) is so unexpected to him that rather than being encouraged to continue, he is thrown off balance:

(2)

C: Yeah. Whether the gay voice was hormonal.
B: [YOU'RE KIDDING!]
[2 sec.]
B: Wo::w.
[1.5 sec.]
A: Oh God! [softly]
[1 sec.]
C: Or whether it was learned behavior, or w whether it was [.5] uh learned behavior, o:r genetic, or hormonal or what. / ? as they were gonna /

The paralinguistically gross reactions of A and B, who are fast, overlapping, expressive speakers, were meant to encourage the main speaker (C), but because he is a slower, overlap-avoiding speaker, he was shocked by the first overlapping and extreme reaction, *YOU'RE KIDDING!* and stopped talking. This led both A and B to remedy the situation by giving more expressive encouragement, but these only exacerbated C's confusion. Therefore when he resumed his story, it was with much hesitation, repetition, and vagueness.

A similar phenomenon occurred with a way of asking questions that I have dubbed "machine-gun questions" (Tannen, 1981b, 1984b). The fast, overlapping, expressive speakers often showed interest by asking a series of questions that, typically, were personal in focus and were characterized by reduced syntactic form, high or low pitch, and an appearance of abruptness. An extreme but not atypical example of the

negative effect of such questions with others who do not expect them can be seen below. Again, the speakers are the same as the ones seen in the previous examples:

(3)

[4 sec. pause]
B: You live in LA?
C: Yeah.
B: Y'visiting here?
C: Yeah.
B: What do you do there?
C: [1.5] uh: I work at General Stu— [.5] General Studios [1.]
B: [a:nd
[You an artist?
C: No: no.
B: Writer?
C: Yeah:. I write [.5] advertising copy.

B's questions were intended to draw C out, to show interest in him, to encourage him to talk. However, they had the opposite effect. Because they seemed so unexpectedly pointed, personal, and abrupt, they caught C off guard. B tried to remedy the situation by showing more interest, asking more such questions. This, of course, because of their style differences, only made things worse.

When such questions were asked of others who used this style, however, a variety of possibilities existed. They were answered sometimes immediately, sometimes very quickly, and sometimes at length. Sometimes they were suspended and answered later; and sometimes they were not answered at all. In any case, the quick questions had the effect of keeping conversation snappy and smooth. Machine-gun questioners knew that such questions were intended as a show of friendliness and did not have to be answered. Non–machine gunners, however, felt that questions have to be answered, so they felt compelled to stop whatever they were saying and answer the question, though often minimally, as a way of passive resistance, and because they resented the imposition. The machine gunner could not understand why the other was so resistant to making conversation, and the machine gunned could not understand why the asker was so pushy.

EFFECTS OF CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

In all these examples, no participant realized that the other's way of talking was a reaction to his or her own, but simply attributed it to the

unaccountable and possibly negative personality or intentions of the other. In all these examples, too, it is clear that the devices that make up conversation—the way people use pacing, tone of voice, pitch, loudness, and so on to show how they mean what they say and to show how ideas are related to each other (what's important and what's by the way)—are conventional. When conversationalists share expectations about how these conventions are used, then communication is smooth. One can pretty much assume that what the other means is what one would have meant if one had said the same thing in the same way. But if conversationalists have different habits about use of these conventions, then interpretation becomes very tricky. Others may not mean what their utterances seem to mean. When the conversational habits of the person from the other culture have no meaning in one's own repertoire, then the utterance is likely to be dismissed as unprocessable. But, as is more often the case, since the basic features of tone, pitch, pausing, and loudness are the universal ways of showing how one means what one says, and in fact are the substance of which talk is made, when the utterance of a person from another background has meaning in one's own repertoire, a listener simply assumes that he or she intended the perceived effect. If he seems angry, one assumes he intended to show anger. If he seems pushy, or resistant, one assumes that he is a pushy or unfriendly person. This is the tragedy of cross-cultural communication.

It should be noted, however, that cross-cultural differences do not always have negative effects. The possibility of misinterpretation can lead to positive as well as negative misattributions. As a simple example, the turns of phrase and common expressions of another language, when translated into one's own, can seem especially charming, novel, or creative, and one can therefore attribute special creative verbal ability to speakers of other languages who are simply translating common expressions from their native language.

Furthermore, features that have one meaning to one person and another meaning to the other may nonetheless have a positive meaning to the listener and a positive effect on the interaction. For example, Suprapto (1983) shows that in interaction between an Indonesian gynecologist and American patients, the doctor uses laughter in a conventional Indonesian way, for example when potentially embarrassing subjects are broached. The patients are not familiar with this conventional use of laughter, but they interpret it as a sign that this doctor has an easy-going, informal, and good-humored personality, and they therefore like to deal with him.

Another example of positive effects of style differences is demonstrated by Adger (1984) based on analysis of children's interactions in a multicultural classroom. One child comes from a cultural background in which

the style of argumentation requires the winner to get the last word. Another child comes from a cultural background in which value is placed on avoiding confrontation and winning over the long haul. Thus, in arguments between these two children, it is possible for the first child to get the last word and the second child to back down to achieve harmony, with the result that both feel they have won what they set out to achieve.

It might seem, logically, that increased exposure should lead to increased understanding. When people of different groups communicate with each other frequently, they should come to understand each other better. Sometimes this is the case, or, if the differences have positive rather than negative effects, the mutual misinterpretation does not lead to friction. But just as often, and tragically, increased exposure and contact can lead to increased mutual negative stereotyping, as Vassiliou, Triandis, Vassiliou, and McGuire (1972) have found. When people have not had much contact with others from a certain other group, they have no reason to develop negative stereotypes. But when they have had dealings with people of the other group, have tried sincerely to be fair and have ended up frustrated, each blames the other. People are not likely to assume that both are genuinely trying but are misunderstanding each other.

Stereotypes of ethnic groups develop partly, at least, from impressions made on people from one culture by habits that have a different meaning for people in the other. For example, the stereotype of the pushy New Yorker is the non–New York view of such Mediterranean habits as standing close, talking loud, and talking at the same time. In contrast, New Yorkers expecting these expressions of rapport find many non–New Yorkers cold and dull.

There are many such pairs of mutual stereotypes. The image of the American Indian as silent and stony probably grows out of the cultural convention of many American Indians to remain silent in situations in which non-Indian Americans engage in chitchat, for example, when meeting new acquaintances. The corresponding stereotype among Indians is that white people are ridiculously talkative, insincere, and superficial, trying to act like your friend when they are not. (Basso, 1979; Scollon & Scollon, 1981).

The inscrutable Chinese is a speaker merely fulfilling the Chinese expectation that one start somewhere off the point and work in to the point by indirection. Getting right to the point seems hopelessly rude or foolishly childlike, or is taken to be an indirect way of implying something else (Young, 1982).

Cross-cultural communication is like trying to follow a route on which someone has turned the signposts around. The familiar signposts are

there, but when you follow them, they take you in the wrong direction. As Becker (1982) eloquently demonstrates, interpreting discourse across cultures exaggerates the dilemma that is inherent in all communication: One's interpretation is "deficient" because it misses intended subtlety and is also "exuberant" because it reads in unintended meaning. When one is unfamiliar with the constraints of another's system, one cannot distinguish business-as-usual cohesion from individual variation by deviation from convention.

Similarly, cross-cultural communication exaggerates the paradox, inherent in all communication, that grows out of the fact that humans are simultaneously individuals and yet need others for survival. As Scollon (1982) points out, all communication is a double bind, simultaneously showing interpersonal involvement and respect for individuality. Thus, in cross-cultural communication, showing respect for cultural differences is a violation of rapport, denying ways that all people are alike. (That is why some people object to any research documenting cross-cultural differences, which they see as buttressing stereotypes and hence exacerbating discrimination). At the same time, ignoring cultural differences leads to misinterpretation and hence discrimination of another sort.

When the setting of cross-cultural communication is a Thanksgiving dinner, and the participants are friends or friends of friends, people are disposed to ignore or pass over negative impressions. If they do not succeed, the repercussions are not serious; perhaps they will invite different friends to dinner next time. But when the setting is crucial to one's personal life (e.g., a job interview), or when the misunderstandings are repeated (e.g., if one has moved to a new country or region, or married someone of different cultural background), the misunderstandings can mount to cumulative and serious frustration. When the arena is international affairs, the results of cross-cultural misinterpretation can be tragic indeed.

APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

Length of pause is indicated in brackets.
Brackets across lines indicate overlap: both lines spoken simultaneously.
— indicates glottal stop: sudden cutting off of voicing
: indicates lengthening of vowel sound.
/?/ indicates words not transcribed because incomprehensible.
/words/ in slashes indicate uncertain transcription.
CAPS indicate stress through pitch and loudness.
? indicates rising intonation, not syntactic question.
. indicates falling intonation, not syntactic sentence.
→ indicates that utterance continues without pause.

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