

# *The Pragmatics of Cross-Cultural Communication*<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The study of cross-cultural communication is a paradigm example of the inseparability of linguistic theory and application. Linguists study cross-cultural communication for its applied significance, which is enormous, given the heterogeneity of societies affected by global migrations and the increasingly cross-cultural nature of commerce, diplomacy, and personal relationships throughout the world. And we also study cross-cultural communication because it provides a discourse analog to the starred sentence in linguistic argumentation. By examining interactions in which habits and expectations about how to show what is meant by what is said are not shared, we can see semantic processes—how language means—which are harder to observe in the seamless surface of successful communication.

I will illustrate the range of aspects of communication that can vary from culture to culture by discussing and exemplifying eight levels of differences in signalling how speakers mean what they say. These aspects of ways of speaking are not extra-linguistic nor even paralinguistic but are the essence of language. Just as physicists understand the nature of physical elements by observing their behavior in various environments and in interaction with other elements, so we come to understand the nature of language by observing it in communication and in contact with other systems of communication. In analysing the pragmatics of cross-cultural communication, we are analysing language itself.

## 2. LEVELS OF COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES

What is it that can be culturally relative in communication? The answer is, just about everything—all the aspects of what to say and how to say it.

### 2.1 *When to talk*

To start on the most general level, the question of when to talk is culturally relative. I had an opportunity to see the extent to which this is true when I recently co-edited a collection of papers on the topic of silence (Tannen and Saville-Troike, in press). Moreover, cultures differ with respect to what is perceived as silence and when it is deemed appropriate.

People experience silence when they think there could or should be talk. If two people are sitting together, one may think there's a silence when the other does not. Scollon (in press) points out that Athabaskan Indians consider it inappropriate to talk to strangers, and that this has an odd effect when an Athabaskan meets a non-Athabaskan, white or black. One wants to get to know the other by talking, and the other feels it is inappropriate to talk until they know each other.

The result of this kind of difference is cross-cultural stereotyping. Non-Athabaskans conclude that Indians are sullen, uncooperative, even stupid, because they don't talk in situations where the non-Athabaskans expect them to talk

(hence they have nothing to say or refuse to say what's on their minds). And on the other side, as Basso (1979) demonstrates for the Western Apache, Athabaskan Indians have negative stereotypes of non-Athabaskans as ridiculously garrulous and also hypocritical because they act as if they're your friend when they're not.

Such mutual negative stereotypes are found in country after country. Those who expect more talk stereotype the more silent group as uncooperative and stupid. Those who use less talk think of the more talkative group as pushy, hypocritical, and untrustworthy. This was found, for example, among Finns as compared to Swedes, and even among inhabitants of different parts of Finland (Lehtonen and Sajavaara, in press). The same pattern is seen in the United States in the mutual negative stereotypes of New Yorkers and non-New Yorkers (Tannen 1981).

## 2.2 *What to say*

Once a speaker decides to talk, what is it appropriate to say? Can one ask questions, and what can one ask them about? Eades (1982) reports that Australian Aborigines never ask the question 'Why?'. Suzanne Scollon (1982) finds that Alaskan Athabaskans rarely ask questions. For these and other speakers, questions are regarded as too powerful to use, because they demand a response.

Many of us take it for granted that questions are basic to the educational setting. How would one learn anything if one didn't ask? Goody (1978) found, however, that in a learning situation in Gonja, no questions were ever asked. As she puts it, Gonjans are so aware of the indirect function of questions to imply unstated meaning that 'the pure information question hasn't got a chance'.

A universal way of communicating is telling stories. But when are they told? How many can be told? What can they be about? What can the point be, and how is the point communicated?

In my research (Tannen 1984a) I found that New Yorkers of Jewish background were more likely than their California friends to tell stories, and their stories were more likely to be about their personal experience. The non-Jewish Californians in the conversation I studied tended to talk about events that happened to them, without focusing on how they felt about those events. Members of each group often responded to the stories told by members of the other group with subtle signs of impatience or incomprehension like 'Yeah, and?' or 'What does it mean?'

Stories are just one of a range of conversational acts which seem obviously appropriate when they pop out of our mouths, but may not seem appropriate to those whose ears they pop into—especially if the speaker and hearer have different cultural backgrounds. For example, when and how and about what can jokes be told? When is it appropriate to use irony and sarcasm, and how are they signalled? When can advice or information be solicited or offered—and how? How and when are compliments given and taken?

A personal experience in Greece made me aware of the cultural convention involved in exchanging compliments, which I, in my naive pre-linguist state, had assumed to be evidence of personality. I was invited to join a dinner party at the home of a man who was an excellent cook. He had prepared an elaborate dinner, including many small individually-prepared delicacies. During dinner, I complimented the food: 'These are delicious'. My host agreed: 'Yes they are delicious'. I praised: 'It must have taken hours to prepare'. 'Oh, yes,' he agreed. 'These take many hours to prepare.' Taking for granted that a host should not compliment

his or her own cooking and should minimize his or her effort, I decided that this host was egotistical.

When leaving the dinner party, I said, 'Thank you for the wonderful meal'. And the host retorted, 'What, those little nothings?' with a dismissing wave of his hand in the direction of the table and a self-deprecating grimace on his face. I was surprised again, and even felt hurt, as if he were implying I had been making too big a deal about the effort involved in preparing the meal. I expected him to accept the compliment this time, saying something like, 'The pleasure was mine; come again'.

So I saw that we differed not about whether compliments should be accepted or deflected, but rather which compliments should be accepted and which deflected—and how. What I had interpreted as a personality characteristic was a cultural convention. This interpretation was repeatedly confirmed when I heard other Greek speakers accepting and turning aside compliments in similar ways.

In cross-cultural communication it is difficult to assess personality characteristics, because such judgements are always measured against cultural standards. If we don't know the standard, we can't gauge the divergence from it, as Sapir (1958) observed in discussing the intriguing question of the relationship between culture and personality.

## 2.3 *Pacing and pausing*

The next level of cross-cultural difference is that of the conversational control mechanisms of pacing and pausing. How fast does one speak, and how long does one wait following another speaker's utterance, before concluding the other has no more to say? Differences in expectations about these matters can bring a conversation to an end.

If two people who are talking have even slightly different expectations about how long to wait between turns, then the person who expects a slightly shorter pause will take a turn first—filling and thus curtailing the pause that the other is waiting for. I had a British friend who I thought never had anything to say (which was becoming rather annoying) until I learned that she was waiting for a pause to take her turn—a pause of a length that never occurred around me, because before it did, I perceived an uncomfortable silence which I kindly headed off by talking.

Even being married is no proof against mutual misinterpretation. I am frequently thanked by readers and audience members who tell me that these kinds of slightly different habits explain misunderstandings that have plagued them their entire married lives. Slightly slower partners accuse faster ones of not giving them a chance to talk and not being interested in what they have to say. Slightly faster partners accuse slower ones of not talking to them and not saying what's on their minds.

One might think that knowing each other a long time would lead to mutual understanding of style. But reactions to and interpretations of subtle signals like pacing and pausing are automatic and seemingly self-evident. Rather than affecting interpretations of style, they affect interpretations of personality and intentions. Furthermore, negative conclusions, such as the impression that the other has nothing to say, are continually reinforced by observation and experience. One has no reason to revise such evaluations.

This level of processing is automatic. One doesn't stop and ask oneself, 'Now how many milliseconds shall I wait?' One simply perceives whether or not someone wants to talk and acts accordingly.

## 2.4 *Listenership*

Another level of processing in conversation that is automatic and taken for granted is showing listenership. One way is through gaze. Erickson and Shultz (1982) found that white participants in counseling interviews maintained eye gaze when listening and frequently broke their gaze when speaking. Blacks in the study did the opposite. They maintained steady eye contact when speaking and frequently broke their gaze when listening.

This meant that when a white speaker talked to a black listener, s/he got the feeling that the listener wasn't paying attention because the expected sign of attention—steady gaze—wasn't there. And when the white speaker sent a small signal asking for confirmation of comprehension, the black listener often missed it because s/he was looking away. So the speaker said the same thing again, in simpler terms—talking down. When the white was the listener, the black speaker's steady gaze seemed overbearing.

I found that New Yorkers in my study had an enthusiastic way of showing listenership—for example, shouting 'Wow!' or 'No kidding!' This was understood as a sign of attention and encouragement by speakers who shared that style. But such loud responses frightened and confused the Californians—sometimes to the point of stopping them dead in their vocal tracks.

If one's speaking habits create a strange reaction in a listener, one rarely realizes that the strange behavior is a reaction to one's own way of talking. One thinks, instead, that the other has strange speaking habits—or is a strange person. The New Yorkers never suspected why the Californians stopped. All they could see was that they kept hesitating and not getting on with their talk. And the Californians never suspected that the New Yorkers were simply being appreciative listeners.

## 2.5 *Intonation*

Another level of difference is intonation. Here I will borrow an example from the work of Gumperz (1982). In London's Heathrow Airport, airport staff who ate in the employees' cafeteria complained about rudeness by cafeteria employees from India and Pakistan who had been hired for jobs traditionally held by British women. And the Asian women complained of discrimination. Gumperz taped talk on the job to see what was going on, and had Asian and British employees listen to the tape together.

When a customer coming through the cafeteria line requested meat, the server had to find out if he wanted gravy on it. The British women asked, 'Gravy?' The Asian women also said 'Gravy'. But instead of rising, their intonation fell at the end. During the workshop session, the Asian women said they couldn't see why they were getting negative reactions, since they were saying the same thing as the British women. But the British women pointed out that although they were saying the same word, they weren't saying the same thing. 'Gravy?'—with question intonation—means 'Would you like gravy?' The same word spoken with falling intonation seems to mean, 'This is gravy. Take it or leave it.'

Tiny differences in intonation and prosody can throw an interaction completely off without the speakers knowing what caused the problem. Intonation is made up of degrees and shifts in pitch, loudness, and rhythm which make up every utterance. There are cultural differences in how these little signals are used, both to do conversational business as usual, and also to express special meanings

or emotions. When intonational business-as-usual is mistaken for emotional expression, the result is miscommunication. As E. M. Forster put it in *A Passage to India*, a novel which brilliantly portrays the tragic consequences of cross-cultural communication, 'A pause in the wrong place, an intonation misunderstood, and a whole conversation went awry.'

Gumperz has shown, for example, that whereas speakers of British English use loudness only when they are angry, speakers of Indian English use it to get the floor. So when an Indian speaker is trying to get the floor, the British speaker thinks s/he is getting angry—and gets angry in response. The result, both agree, is a heated interchange, but each thinks the other introduced the emotional tone into the conversation.

## 2.6 *Formulaicity*

The next level of cross-cultural difference is the question of what is conventional and what is novel in a language. When I first visited Greece, I had the impression that one after another individual Greek that I met was a poetic soul—until I heard the same poetic usage so often that I realized they were all uttering conventional truisms that sounded novel and poetic to me because I wasn't familiar with the convention. Our native talk is full of figures of speech which we don't recognize as such—until we hear them fractured or altered by non-native speakers (or true poets).

## 2.7 *Indirectness*

Communication in any culture is a matter of indirectness. Only a part of meaning resides in the words spoken; the largest part is communicated by hints, assumptions, and audience filling-in from context and prior experience. Yet how to be indirect is culturally relative.

Americans as a group<sup>2</sup> tend to ignore or even rail against indirectness. We believe that words should say what they mean and people should be accountable only for what they say in words. We tend to forget the importance of the interpersonal level of interaction and think that in some (if not most or even all) instances, only the 'content' counts.

This is the value associated with 'getting down to brass tacks' and 'sticking to facts'—values taken for granted in American business and education, and perhaps more generally by American men. But it gets American businessmen in trouble when they try to skip the small talk and get right down to business with Japanese, Arab, or Mediterranean counterparts, for whom elaborate 'small talk' is big and essential, furnishing the foundation for any business dealings.

Non-Americans, and American women, more often realize that much of what is meant cannot be said outright. This introduces the enormous problem, even within a culture, of figuring out what is meant that is not said. Cross-culturally it becomes a maddening guessing game that most entrants lose.

In an article on Greek vs. American and male vs. female uses of indirectness (Tannen 1982), I demonstrate the operation and benefits of indirectness with the following example. A Greek woman told me that when she asked her father (as a girl) or her husband (as an adult) whether or not she could go somewhere, he would never say no. If he said, 'If you want, you can go', she knew he didn't want her to. If he really thought it was a good idea he would be enthusiastic: 'Yes, of course. Go.' She knew from the way he said yes whether he meant yes or no.

This strikes many Americans as hypocritical. Why didn't he say what he meant? Well, he did say what he meant in a way she had no trouble understanding. But if a Greek-American cousin came to visit the family and asked her uncle if she could do something and he answered in a way his daughter always understood, the cousin would be likely to take his equivocal response literally. Although they spoke the same language—Greek—they would be victims of cross-cultural miscommunication.

Now that commerce with Japan is widespread, there are frequent reports of frustration by Americans because polite Japanese never say no. One must understand from how they say yes whether or not they mean it. Since Americans don't know the system, they don't know what signals to look for—even if they realize (which most don't) that yes often means no.

### 2.8 Cohesion and coherence

I have defined cohesion as 'surface level ties showing relationships among elements' in discourse, and coherence as 'organizing structure making the words and sentences into a unified discourse that has cultural significance' (Tannen 1984b).

Another example from the work of Gumperz illustrates cohesion. Indian speakers often emphasize the sentence immediately preceding their main point, and then utter the main point in a lower voice—as if for dramatic effect. But British English speakers expect the main point to be emphasized, so by the time the Indian is saying the main point, the British listener has switched off.

Kaplan (1966) illustrated differences in establishing coherence (though he didn't use that term) in ESL essays. Some very interesting current work on cross-cultural discourse structure is being done by Koch (for example, Koch 1983) on Arabic vs. English. Argumentation in Arabic, she shows, is by accretion and repetition—highlighting by saying over and over the important point, rather than building up to it, as Americans expect. To Americans such repetition seems pointless and not like argumentation at all.

Habits of cohesion and coherence are very resistant to change. One who learns the explicit vocabulary and grammar of a new language is likely to stuff it into the implicit paralinguistic and discourse casings of the native communicative system.

### 3. SUMMARY: THE PRAGMATICS OF COMMUNICATION

I have described eight levels of differences on which cross-cultural communication can falter: when to talk; what to say; pacing and pausing; listenership; intonation and prosody; formulaicity; indirectness; and cohesion and coherence. This list also describes the ways that meaning is communicated in talk. Communication is, by its very nature, culturally relative. Ways of communicating meaning in talk are learned in the speech community, that is by talking to people with whom one identifies socially. As social networks are always local, not global, people in different communities have different ways of using linguistic means to communicative ends, and their ways of talking, like other cultural patterns, define them as a community. This illustrates Hall's (1959) assertion that culture is communication. To the extent that no two people have exactly the same communicative background, to that extent, all communication is cross-cultural, and understanding cross-cultural communication is a means to understanding language at the same time that it is a means to understanding and, one hopes, improving problems and tasks facing the world and the people in it, including the task of teaching and learning new languages.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on the first half of my keynote address, 'Cross-cultural Communication', presented at the annual meeting of California Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, April 15, 1983, in Los Angeles, California. A complete text of that address will appear in CATESOL OCCASIONAL PAPERS #10, Fall 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Although I here lump Americans together as a group, I caution that they are not a homogeneous group, but are culturally heterogeneous, as my own research has demonstrated for regional, ethnic, and gender differences (Tannen 1982, 1984a).

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