

TALKING ACROSS CULTURES

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Although the subject matter of linguistics is language, it is surprising how little attention has been given by linguists to *talking*, until relatively recently at least. This assertion may seem somewhat surprising, since you may point to *phonetics* as an example of how spoken language forms a central part of linguistic theory, or to *structural linguistics*, which emphasizes the primacy of speech over other modes of language. The study of talking, however, has tended to be only incidental to the main interests of linguists, and this is certainly reflected in the treatment given to speaking in introductory textbooks in linguistics. Traditionally, talking was regarded as merely a manifestation of the speaker's knowledge of linguistic rules. Part of the reason for the neglect of conversation is due to the fact that linguistics typically treats language as the property of the *individual*, shaped by innate cognitive structure and represented most perfectly in the idealized speaker-hearer that provides the model for a theory of linguistic competence.

The view of language I wish to discuss here is a rather different one. It treats language not as a system for the coding of cognitive and propositional meaning in the individual, but as a mechanism for the creation of social inter-

action between two or more speakers. It views language not as a system for the coding meaning, but as a tool for the creation of social relationships. And because our starting point is not a static entity but a dynamic process, our focus will be on the negotiation of social meaning through talking. My interest is hence twofold; it is the social meaning of talking, and the way talking is used to create social meaning. But first a word of justification.

The study of conversational interaction is part of the study of the psychology and sociology of interpersonal behaviour. It is related to theoretical and applied linguistics in a number of ways. It shares the concept of competence with a linguistic perspective of competence, but offers a complementary way of looking at it. Grammatical competence — the purely linguistic component of competence — may be regarded as our knowledge of the rules used to create sentences as linguistic units for the coding of propositional meaning. Communicative competence represents our knowledge of how sentences are used to create communicative acts, such as requests, apologies, denials, descriptions and so on. Social competence is our use of the knowledge of the rules of grammatical and communicative competence to realize and maintain social goals and to create harmonious interpersonal relationships. We don't always succeed in realizing the goals of social competence. I may perform a request that follows the communicative norms for requests in English, but if my request succeeded in angering, puzzling, humiliating or annoying my conversational partner, my social competence has not been successful.

Teachers of English are frequently confronted with the reality of this distinction between grammatical, communicative and social competence, because although the mechanisms for the realization of social competence are extremely subtle, their effects are profound. Misuse or

misapplication of them lies at the heart of much communication conflict, communication breakdown, or misunderstanding, particularly when speakers of different ethnolinguistic and cultural traditions interact through the medium of English. The goals of this paper are thus to illustrate some of the dimensions of social competence, as seen from the study of conversation, and to illustrate how different conversational conventions for the expression of social meaning can lead to misunderstanding in cross cultural encounters.

The social meaning of talking

The distinction made above between grammatical competence on the one hand, and communicative and social competence on the other, divides our knowledge of a language into things we know *about*, and things we *do*. To put it another way we can consider utterances in conversation both in terms of what they *say*, and in terms of what they *do*. It is principally what people *do* through talking that I will discuss here.

Why do people talk to each other? This question may seem obvious as well as trivial, since it is self-evident that people talk to each other because they have things they want to say to each other. But it would be more accurate to say that people talk to each other because they have things they want to *do*. What they say and *how* they say it reflect their social goals. Speaking is thus describable as a form of social encounter. Goffman has convincingly argued that in any action, each actor "provides a *field of action* for the other actors, and the reciprocity thus established allows the participants to exercise their interpersonal skills in formulating the situation, presenting and enacting a self or identity, and using strategies to accomplish other interactional ends." The goals of conversation are thus mutually created during

the course of conversation, and this shapes the direction of conversation. Watson gives the following example:

A. What time is it?

B. Look, we are going to make it, so stop worrying. If we consider this exchange simply in terms of linguistic meaning (i.e. what is *said*), we would arrive at a description of the form of the question and the answer in terms of grammaticality, transformation rules and so on. Watson points out that if we focus on what is *done* through the exchange however, we might arrive at the following interpretation:

Gloss

What time is it?

Speaker's intent. The sun has already set, it's getting dark, and we're supposed to be there at 7:30, but we have more than an hour's drive left. I'm really worried about it, but I know that my getting worried irritates you.

Interactional task

Communication of concern, desire for reassurance etc.

Look, we're going to make it, so stop worrying.

Speaker's intent. I'm aware of how late it is, but I can't do anything about it, and we'll probably get there on time, anyway. In any case, worrying does no good and only makes me irritable, as you know.

Interactional task

Communication of irritation/reassurance, termination of topic etc. (cited in Watson, 1974)

The goals of conversation are thus as much social as linguistic. The goals may be to establish affiliation with another, to reduce tension, to establish domination, to sound out another, to display one's self in a positive light, to influence someone, to get someone to do something, and so on. In each case, the social goals may not be evident from the words in the sentences themselves, but are interpreted through our understanding of the rules of communicative and social competence.

That talk is as much motivated by social and interactional goals as by the need to convey information is well illustrated by the structure of that particular speech event known as the conversation. Conversations typically open with a ritualized greeting. The topic of these openings, however, is not to be interpreted literally. *How are you?* as a conversational opener in English is thus mutually understood by the participants as *not* being an enquiry into the state of your health, and likewise *When did you eat* as an opener in some Asian languages is not a genuine enquiry into your culinary habits. The point of the opener is to set the tone for a suitable pattern of interaction. The next step in the conversation is to introduce into the conversation topics about which both the speaker and hearer are likely to agree. This is the motivation for small talk about the weather or other non-informative topics about which mutual agreement is likely. Such talk is directed to the face of the hearer. "The raising of safe topics allows the speaker to stress his agreement with the hearer and therefore to satisfy the hearer's desire to be right or to be corroborated in his opinions. The weather is a safe topic for virtually everyone, as is the beauty of gardens, the incompetence of bureaucracies etc.," (Brown and Levinson, 1978). The more the speaker knows about the hearer, the more close to home he will be with the choice of safe topics he can raise with the hearer without a likelihood of disagreement. This

is thus part of a strategy which takes account of the hearer's wants or desire to be thought of as desirable. There is inevitably a degree of formality and politeness during this stage of the negotiation, and this is part of the way of making such encounters easier to handle.

Talkativeness

The social function of talking differs across cultures and this is seen in differences in how much talking participants typically indulge in during certain speech events. For Americans, talking is considered to be a natural way of getting to know somebody. At cocktail parties for example, it would be considered normal and acceptable for strangers to seek each other out, introduce themselves, and get to know each other through talking to each other. In other cultures it may be the custom to observe and form an impression of someone before feeling that talk is appropriate. In Japanese society, silence is valued in many situations where talking would be the norm for Americans. The value of silence is reflected in Japanese proverbs; *to say nothing is a flower; mouths are to eat with, not to speak with; a hundred listenings do not equal one seeing* (Loveday, 1980). A typical Japanese reaction to Americans' use of talk is seen in the following:

"When I went to the United States in 1950 I was greatly surprised, almost perturbed, by the fact that Americans loved to talk incessantly. They even did so during the meal. As a matter of fact they sounded to me almost hypermanic." (cited in Loveday)

There are hence situations where one group favours talking and another favours silence. The voluble group views members of the taciturn group as reserved and shy; the taciturn group may view the voluble group as over-talkative, self-asserting and domineering. These stereotypes result

simply from the misreading of conversational conventions (Scollon and Scollon 1979).

Roles

Since conversation is always *other-directed*, central to the study of conversation as social transaction is the effect of speaker and hearer roles on the form of conversational interaction. When people meet, they come to perceive statuses, rights and duties for each other. They make decisions about the identity they wish to assume during part or all of the transaction. Once their respective roles have been established, the pattern of interaction for that transaction is determined. Roles are functions of the interaction between two or more participants, rather than the static possession of the individual participants. One of the goals of conversation is to discover what these roles are, and to allow roles to emerge. People who interact frequently with each other will generally have worked out reciprocal roles which make their patterns of conversational interaction smooth and predictable (Argyle, 1967).

There are two closely related aspects to the concept of role that deserve consideration here; one has to do with the presentation of self, and the other concerns the relative status of the participants.

Presentation of self

One of the goals of talking is to present a picture of oneself to others. Scollon and Scollon point out that English speakers typically present a positive display of their own abilities and achievements, talk freely about past accomplishments and future plans and goals. In first encounters, interviews, etc., they display themselves in the best light possible without, however, overstating or under-

stating the picture they present. One way this is achieved is through what Pawley calls the 'reduction' principle. This is a strategy we adopt where we typically understate our achievements slightly, so that our conversational partner can emphasize them for us. I had a good example of this recently when I congratulated a speaker on a presentation he had made at a convention. The exchange went like this.

A. That was a first class presentation.

B. Well, you've heard it all before.

A. No, it was an excellent synthesis and very clearly presented too.

This system of self-presentation apparently differs from that in some cultures. Scollon and Scollon point out that in the Athabaskan system, it is considered inappropriate, and even bad luck to display oneself in a positive light, or to talk too directly about the future. Consequently, in cross cultural encounters "the Athabaskan thinks of the English speaker as boastful or careless with luck and with the future, while the English speaker thinks of the Athabaskan as unsure of himself and withdrawn" (Scollon and Scollon, 1979).

Status

It would appear that there are two basic choices open to participants in assessing roles and statuses. They may see their roles as being of equal status, in which case they adopt conversational strategies which mark *affiliation*, or they see their roles as of differing status, in which case they adopt conversation strategies which mark *dominance* or *dependency*. Conversational strategies are part of the means by which participants communicate whether an affiliative or non-affiliative relationship is intended. Two relevant aspects of this process are degrees of display and strategies for politeness.

*Display**

For some social encounters, one participant takes the role of spectator, and the other assumes the role of exhibitionist. What makes the case of North Americans interesting is that the function of display and exhibitionism is the reverse of what is found in many cultures. In many transactions, in North American custom the one who is in the dominant position often acts as spectator, and the one in the subordinate position plays the role of exhibitionist. Children are expected to show off or display their abilities before their parents and other adults. They are expected to be talkative, to ask questions of adults. Children in school are like-wise expected to display their abilities before the teacher who, like the parent, acts as spectator. However this role is often reversed in other cultures, where the adult plays the role of exhibitionist who displays his knowledge and abilities for the child to learn. This can lead to misunderstanding and stereotyping. On the one hand a person from a culture where children are not encouraged to display before adults, may feel that American children are precocious and ill-mannered, whereas the truth is that only some of them are. On the other hand adults encountering children from cultures where display is not expected before adults, may feel that children, both in and out of classrooms in that society, are passive, shy and reserved.

* This section is based on Scollon and Scollon, 1979.

Face and Politeness

Crucial to the successful management of social interaction through language are strategies which take account of the status of speaker and hearer. Language has developed into an extremely subtle medium for the communication of

information which indicates the degree of affiliation or distance of speaker and hearer. Successful use of these strategies creates an atmosphere of politeness which enables social transactions to proceed without threat to the face of speaker or hearer.

Goffman describes *face* as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 1974: 319). Whenever two people meet, there are two aspects to the face-preserving negotiations that conversation is directed to. "The person will have two points of view — a defensive orientation towards saving his own face, and a protective orientation towards saving the other's face." (1974: 325). In functional terms this comes down to strategies for what is communicated as politeness. Recent work in linguistic anthropology (Levinson and Brown 1978) suggests that the need for politeness strategies is universal; however, their realization in particular languages is subtle and varied. Incorrect application of devices for communicating politeness can lead to misinterpretation of communicative intent; it can lead to judgements that the other person was rude, aggressive, tactless, over familiar, etc., which all derive from threats to the face of one of the participants. Such judgements give rise to cultural stereotyping in many contexts.

In a recent thesis by Brown and Levinson a convincing case for the role of politeness strategies as face saving and face preserving devices is outlined. They argue that for many types of speech transactions, a threat is involved in some way for either speaker or hearer. Requests, for example, are threats in that they impose on the freedom of action of the hearer. The hearer has to make a choice, either to accept or refuse. In either case, some sort of challenge to face is involved. Promises can be seen as restricting the future self-determination of the speaker, and thus threaten the speaker's

face. Criticisms are threatening to the hearer's face, and apologies, to the speaker's face. Speech acts can be seen to involve costs to either the speaker, the hearer, or to both. An assertion, for example, commits the speaker to an opinion which the hearer may not share. Hence, as we saw earlier, the importance of small talk on safe topics which both speaker and hearer are likely to agree on in the opening stages of conversations. The basic thesis that Brown and Levinson propose is that in conversation, speakers estimate the "cost" of a particular speech act, in terms of its relative threat to speaker, hearer, or both. To do this, speakers make use of their perception of the degree of social distance between speaker and hearer, degree of dominance or affiliation, and the relative status of a particular type of act within a given culture. Then they choose appropriate strategies. There are two basic role-related and face-preserving strategies open; *affirmative politeness strategies* and *deferential politeness strategies* (which Brown and Levinson refer to respectively as strategies for positive and negative politeness).

Affirmative politeness strategies

Affirmative politeness strategies indicate rapport between speaker and hearer; they mark solidarity and closeness, assuring the hearer that his face is valued by the speaker, that they share the same wants, needs, etc., or are members of the same group.

The following are examples of such strategies:*

1. Notice or attend to the hearer's interests, wants, needs, goods etc.
What a beautiful vase. *Where did it come from?*
2. Exaggerate interest, approval, sympathy etc.
How absolutely marvellous for you!
3. Intensify interest to the hearer; e.g., Use the historical present.

* These are taken from Brown and Levinson 1978

I come down stairs and what do I see?

(here the speaker communicates to the hearer that he shares some of his wants or face needs by intensifying the interest of his contribution)

4. Use in-group identity markers.

Help me with this bag will you mate?

(Further examples would be the use of slang, dialect, or other markers of in-group membership.)

5. Seek agreement.

Lovely day, isn't it?

(One chooses safe topics so that you can be seen to share the hearer's views by agreeing with him.)

6. Avoid disagreement.

A. *Wasn't the food lovely?*

B. *I thought it was very different, a very interesting change from the sort of food I usually have.*

(Rather than say NO, speakers will go to considerable length to hide disagreement).

7. Presuppose, by raising or asserting common ground.

Wouldn't you like a drink?

(Here a YES answer is presupposed, indicating that the speaker knows the hearer's wants, tastes, or habits, thus partially minimizing the imposition of the suggestion).

8. Joke.

How about lending me this heap of old junk? (said of the hearer's new Cadillac).

(Jokes stress the shared background knowledge and values of speaker and hearer).

9. Include both speaker and hearer in the activity.

Let's stop for something to eat.

(Here, instead of *I want to stop for something to eat.*)

Deferential politeness strategies

These seek to minimize the face-threatening cost of a particular speech act. They protect the hearer's face by stressing his want to have his freedom of action unhindered. They indicate respectful behaviour, just as affirmative politeness strategies mark familiar and friendly behaviours. They are consequently more conventionalized.

Examples are:

1. Be conventionally indirect.
Would you be able to pass me the salt?
2. Hedge.
I wonder if you can help me?
(Here one doesn't assume that the speaker is willing to do what one wants. One makes minimal assumptions about his wants).
3. Be pessimistic.
I don't suppose you can help me?
4. Minimize the imposition.
I wonder if I can trouble you for just a second.
5. Give deference.
This dress is not very good I'm afraid, but it's the only one in your size that I've got.
6. Apologize.
I hope you don't mind me asking you something.
7. Impersonalize speaker and hearer.
It appears that there is a stain on your shirt.
8. State the act as a general rule.
Passengers will please refrain from flushing the toilets while the train is in the station.

The form of conversational interaction is consequently shaped in subtle ways by the use of affirmative or deferential politeness strategies which take account of degrees of affilia-

tion between speaker and hearer, the status of the participants, and their social distance. What happens if there is failure in the match between conversational strategies and the perceived statuses of the speaker and hearer? The result is what has been termed a pragmatic error (Kasper 1979) that is, an error of social competence. The case of Germans speaking English is an example that has been studied from this perspective. Kasper has looked into the reasons why Germans sometimes appear impolite, brusque or aggressive, when they speak English. Consider the following examples, from her data, taken from interaction between a native speaker of British English (X) and a German speaker of English (Y). In each case the German's utterances were judged as inappropriate by a native speaker of British English, and the native speaker's reconstruction of more appropriate way of replying is shown as the Reconstituted Utterance (RU).

1. (Y's landlady has made some sandwiches for Y for her journey back to Germany.)
X. I hope it'll be enough.
Y. Yes of course it will be enough.
RU. Yes, thanks, that'll be fine.
2. (X has lent Y £25.)
X. Is that not enough?
Y. That would be enough, yes of course.
RU. Yes of course. That's marvellous.
3. (X has taken Y's seat in the library.)
Y. Pardon me. Will you please give me back my seat?
RU. I don't know if you're aware of it, but you're sitting on my seat. Could I have it back do you think?

4. (X and Y are quarrelling about the library seat.)
Y. Well I'm very angry about that.
RU. Well look, I'm quite upset about this.

In commenting on these errors Schmidt points out; "two major generalizations can be made. First, the German learner's utterances are notably devoid of affirmative politeness devices. Second, in cases where expressions of thanks primarily threatening to the speaker's face as with expressions of thanks and apologies (examples 1 and 2) the German speaker is much less direct than the British speaker, and used hedging devices; in cases where the speech act is primarily threatening to the hearer's face, as with suggestions, requests and criticisms (examples 3 and 4) the German speaker is more direct than the British speaker and does not make use of either positive or negative politeness devices."

The following example, this time from an observation of Chinese speakers of English in Hong Kong, likewise indicates how an utterance that is constructed according to the rules of grammatical and communicative competence fails at the level of social competence by not taking account of the speaker's face. Consider the following exchange:

A. Do drop round and visit us sometime.

B. Yes of course, if I am free.

B's response here is inappropriate, but why? Firstly, A's sentence functions as an invitation. In Brown and Levinson's terms, invitations constitute a threat to the speaker's face — since there is the possibility of rejection or refusal — and to the hearer's face, since they impose on the hearer's freedom of action. Now in English the threat to the hearer's face is minimized by framing the invitation ambiguously; it is a weak, rather than a firm, invitation since no time or date is communicated. In this way it takes account of the threat to the speaker's face. B's reply however, by hedging and not

responding with an apparent firm intention (Yes I will; Thank you, I would love to) presents a threat to the speaker's face. B's reply probably reflects simply an unfamiliarity with the convention that in English, one replies to such an invitation as if one has a firm intention to take up the offer, but to actually take up the invitation would constitute a stronger threat to the speaker's face, by imposing on his freedom of action. Thus the following would also be an inappropriate reply:

A. Do drop round and visit us.

B. Thank you, I'll come on Thursday at 5 p.m.

Ethos

Conversation as social interaction must also be seen in terms of the culturally specific patterns of interaction that determine the "ethos" of social behaviour in a particular society. In some societies, social interaction is generally warm, easygoing, friendly; in some it may be stiff, formal or deferential; in some there may be typical displays of self-achievement and importance; yet in others participants are typically distant, cautious or even suspicious in their performance of conversational transactions (Brown and Levinson). Due to different perceptions of social distance between participants, different perceptions of the power speakers have over hearers, different perceptions of dominance and affiliation, and differences in the degree to which particular speech acts are regarded as impositions or as representing challenges to speaker or hearer face, we find marked differences in the daily etiquette and social pattern of conversational interaction in different cultures. Brown and Levinson suggest that we may roughly contrast cultures in terms of whether they favour affirmative politeness, or whether they tend to favour deferential politeness. Cultures differ in terms of the "cost" or weightiness they assign to particular speech acts. In some cultures, namely those fa-

vouring affirmative politeness, "impositions are thought of as small, social distance, as no insuperable boundary to easygoing interaction, and relative power never very great." The North American culture may be cited as an example. In contrast there are cultures such as in Japan, where impositions are thought of as great, where social distance is significant and status powerful. Such differences influence the degree to which particular acts are seen as face-threatening, as well as the particular kind of acts which are regarded as presenting face challenges. "In England and the USA, offers are not very threatening acts, but in Japan, an offer such as a glass of ice water can occasion a tremendous debt." Geertz in his studies of Javanese linguistic etiquette has likewise shown how conversational interaction among Javanese takes account of the much greater threat to face posed by requests and refusals in Javanese culture, than the same speech acts constitute in American culture.

In practical terms, what this amounts to is the degree to which culturally-specific restrictions apply to particular speech acts. Ueda, for example, discusses how these factors apply to requests in Japan. Requests, as we saw earlier, are face-threatening acts since they restrict the hearer's freedom of action and also pose threats to the speaker's face through the possibility of refusal. While these are universal characteristics of requests, their cost or "weightiness" is much higher in Japanese culture than in North American or British culture. "In Japan one is best advised to accept the requests, though there are many requests one does not want to or seems unable to accept." Loveday observes that disagreement is likewise avoided by Japanese speakers. "Because of the overdifferentiated importance of group affinity, it is understandable that Japanese rarely express disagreement in conversation. As Nakane says, "One would prefer to be silent than offer the words such as 'no' or 'I disagree'

[consequently] the westerner is frustrated by the polite, but to him, incomplete response, while the Japanese is frustrated and more often than not, offended by the open expression of dissent which he interprets as aggression and by the constant demand for negative/positive judgements to be made" (Loveday, 26).

It is because of the need to accommodate such factors through conversational interaction that Japanese are frequently described by foreigners as "illogical" or "ambiguous" in their speech. They have a greater tendency for deferential politeness strategies and for indirectness in their approach to the realization of particular socially weighted speech acts than do their North American counterparts.

This can be related to different values attributed to group versus individual identity across cultures. In Japanese society, group membership and solidarity is regarded as more important than individual identity, whereas the opposite is true for American culture. The Japanese learns to value conformity to the group. "Real friendship means total acceptance by the group, and they reject the [American's] concept of what friendship involves with its back-slapping heartiness, baring of one's inmost soul, and indulgence in heated arguments about disputatious subjects" (Roggendorff 1980). Japanese and Americans are thus reported to differ in what they feel is appropriate to reveal about themselves in inter-personal encounters. Americans are consequently much more prone to disclose personal inner or private experience, topics which would be avoided in similar situations by Japanese, who avoid conversational topics which might lead to disagreement, or witty verbal display, for fear of disturbing the harmony of the group.

Second language learners need to know which topics and speech acts have language-specific conversational restrictions. They need to know what one can request and decline in a language without causing offence, the degree to which

other people's beliefs can be disagreed with; in short, the appropriate conversational strategies that define the interactional ethos of that culture.

Conclusions

The dynamics of conversation as a mechanism for personal interaction are influenced in subtle ways by the role attributed to talking in different cultures. The cross cultural study of conversational interaction is only in its infancy, but clearly offers useful insights to language teachers and students of cross cultural communication. It helps explain how much talking people do; when, why and how they talk, as well as the topics they feel appropriate in conversation. Often, conversational behaviour from non-native speakers which seems irrational, puzzling, insensitive, or oversensitive merely reflects a difference in communicative style transferred from another language and culture.

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