Handout. Approaches to Crosscultural Communication

References


Various approaches to ‘intercultural/crosscultural’ communication.

Approach 1: At one extreme: miscommunication occurs only because people are not sensitive to cultural differences (differences in styles of negotiation, body language, etc.). Once people are made aware of these differences, communication can proceed smoothly. The academic (or translator, or interpreter, or management consultant) acts as expert in this scenario. There are numerous courses available on intercultural/ crosscultural communication, often offered by business and management schools.

Two basic assumptions underlie this research tradition (Sarangi 1994:411):
“(i) ethnicity and different cultural backgrounds determine speakers’ discourse strategies (different ways of speaking, different ways of structuring information, etc.); (ii) different discourse strategies and communicative styles can lie at the heart of interethnic misunderstandings”.

**Example:** A bus in London, operated by a West Indian man. He periodically announces: *Exact change, please.* If a passenger does not have the exact change, the bus conductor would repeat ‘*Exact change, please*’, but with a higher pitch, and with a bit of a pause before *please*. It is not uncommon for a white British passenger to walk down the aisle muttering in anger “Why do these people have to be so rude and threatening about it?”. There are reasons why British speakers would interpret an utterance like this as threatening. To separate the word *please* from the rest of the utterance by a brief pause, and say it with a higher pitch, would signal that it is being given additional emphasis. And the falling intonation would indicate finality, that is that the speaker considers the speech act concluded, non-negotiable. This, to a British person, seems excessively direct. Viewed from this perspective on intercultural communication, the problem is purely one of a conflict of norms. Norms of interaction for West Indian English call for such a slight pause, higher pitch and increased loudness for routine emphasis, with no expressive overtones. If anything, the conductor is trying to emphasize the word *please* as an expression of additional politeness. Norms of British English are completely different.

**Approach 2.** A more sophisticated view: miscommunication arises because of different conversational styles, styles of rhetoric, etc. and can be avoided by sensitising relevant groups to differences. The reasons these styles seem natural to those who adopt them is that they become ritualised after a while, and Tannen in particular (a good exponent of this approach) stresses the ritual character of interaction. So, although the styles we are used to will always seem very natural to us, there are always alternative styles that can be explained and justified just as convincingly.

But, there is the additional question of *gatekeeping* here, of powerful groups enforcing their own styles on society. Those groups who happen to be in a position of relative power in society tend to enforce their own styles – it is the styles associated with those groups that tend to be regarded as optimal, effective, natural. Styles associated with disadvantaged groups tend to be denigrated and seen as a sign of weakness, ignorance, emotional instability, and so on. Example (Brian Waldon; note the taken-for-granted heterosexual male perspective on what ‘people’ want out of life):

> Anybody who wishes to have power over his fellows should be regarded with some suspicion. It’s unusual. Most people don’t feel like that. They want a good job, a nice wife, pleasant children, friends and a bit of fun. *(TV Times, 29 September 1990)*

Because these patterns are socialised and ritualised, there are consequences for breaking them: “Because more women or men speak in a particular way, that way of speaking becomes associated with women or men – or, rather, it is the other way round: More women or men learn to speak particular ways *because* those ways are associated with their own gender” (Tannen 1995:15).

Both of the above approaches focus on ‘unintentional’ misunderstanding and neglect deliberate manipulation, stereotyping, demonisation, etc.

**The Problem with Thematising Cultural Differences**

The ‘cultures collide’ model of the world is arguably insensitive to issues of power and manipulation. It obscures the real issues in situations of conflict. It is also disempowering for the people involved in the interaction. It ignores both the frequent and deliberate ‘will to
misunderstand’ and the many acts of resistance to processes of stereotyping and demonisation that characterise ‘crosscultural’ communication.

Scholars like Blommaert would argue that the emphasis on ‘miscommunication’ and ‘misunderstanding’, and the prevalent view of intercultural encounters as demanding extra effort, obscure prejudice, racism and manipulation.

**First problem:** individual cultures are deliberately projected as uniform, homogeneous entities and difficulties that arise in communication can then be reduced to the opposition between the two unified entities or cultures. This is a convenient way of projecting miscommunication as inevitable, and certainly not deliberate.

The **second problem** with viewing ‘problems’ of intercultural communication as ‘involuntary’, ‘accidental’, the result of inevitable interference of cultural habits, subconscious assumptions about the world, etc., is that this view “slights activities of social exclusion and other ideological strategies deployed by the powerful in intercultural communication” (Meewis & Sarangi 1994:312). It also provides a convenient backdrop for the type of world depicted in Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996) – a narrative of the world he has been elaborating since 1993 or even earlier:

… cultural characteristics and differences are less mutable and hence less easily compromised and resolved than political and economic ones. In the former Soviet Union, communists can become democrats, the rich can become poor and the poor rich, but Russians cannot become Estonians and Azeris cannot become Armenians. In class and ideological conflicts, the question was “Which side are you on?” and people could and did choose sides and change sides. In conflicts between civilizations, the question is “What are you?”. That is a given that cannot be changed. (Huntington 1993:27)

… [t]he survival of the West depends on Americans reaffirming their Western identity and Westerners accepting their civilization as unique not universal and uniting to renew and preserve it against challenges from non-Western societies. (1996:20-21)

**Linguistics (Pragmatics) of Contact not Community**

Pratt (1987). At least four main criticisms of linguistics (some of which apply to work that goes under the heading of cross cultural/intercultural communication).

Traditional linguistics (inc. pragmatic theory)

(a) ignores social differences: “Despite whatever social differences might be at work, it is assumed that all participants are engaged in the same game and that the game is the same for all players” (1987:51). Cf. Brown & Levinson’s ‘Model Person’ in Politeness Theory.

(b) ignores complex interaction among social, cultural and linguistic groups: “No one could … imagine a linguistic theory … that argued, for instance, that the best speech situation for linguistic research was one involving, for instance, a room full of people each of whom spoke two languages and understood a third, and held only one language in common with any of the others. A UN cocktail party, perhaps, or a trial in contemporary South Africa. Here … is where you can most readily see how language works – it depends on what workings you want to see, or want to see first” (1987:50).

Implication: cross cultural communication is much more pervasive and more central to all social interaction, and hence requires more elaborate and nuanced modes of theorisation.
(c) situates itself within structures of authority and describes communication from the perspective of dominant groups: “the analysis situates itself within those same structures of authority that govern the exchanges themselves” (1987:53).

(d) creates its own rigid, idealized communities: “the tendency to postulate social subgroups existing separately from each other gives rise to a linguistics that seek to capture identity, but not the relationality of social differentiation” (1987:59).

Interest in marginalised social groups such as Black Americans (as in the work of the sociolinguist William Labov) tends to create rigid speech communities, to the extent that Labov for instance denounces the speech of a black middle-class speaker who fails to speak in BEV in an interaction with a white interviewer. So the interview is treated as a one-sided display by the black interviewee of the speech patterns associated with his ‘community’.

A linguistics of contact places at its centre “the workings of language across rather than within lines of social differentiation, of class, race, gender, age” (1987:61). “A linguistics of contact will be deeply interested in processes of appropriation, penetration or co-optation of one group’s language by another – and in how or whether to distinguish among those three kinds of contact” (ibid).

Thus, Labov’s black interviewee may be seen as intervening in and appropriating (rather than passively copying) white English.

But a linguistics of contact also recognises the complexity that arises from the combination of heterogeneity within any ‘theorised’ group or community and the potential for hijacking the discourse features of such idealised groups and communities.

Example – the cultural studies article written by a physicist, Alan D. Sokal, as a parody. It was accepted for publication and appeared in the Spring/Summer 1996 issue of Social Text under the title ‘Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity’. See http://www.physics.nyu.edu/sokal/.

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