1 | Culture, communication and interaction

1.1 INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK IS INTENDED as an academic reference for undergraduate and graduate students and interdisciplinary researchers who do not have specialised knowledge of linguistics. Key concepts relevant to an understanding of language issues in intercultural communication are drawn from the research areas of pragmatics, discourse analysis, politeness and intercultural communication. Relevant academic literature and recent research conducted by the authors is exemplified and explained throughout the book so that students can become familiar with the way research in this field is reported and can follow up on the ideas presented.

An understanding of intercultural communication is crucially related to an understanding of the ways in which the spoken and written word may be interpreted differentially, depending on the context. The message received is not always the one intended by the speaker or the writer. This book systematically examines sociocultural and pragmatic aspects of the language context, and discusses a wide range of factors that contribute to the interpretation of language in context. The authors argue that an understanding of how these principles interact in a given language, and in intercultural communication, is crucial to the development of mutual understanding in the global world.

Although speakers engaged in intercultural communication typically choose a single language in which to communicate, individuals typically bring their own sociocultural expectations of language to the encounter. Speakers' expectations shape the interpretation of meaning in a variety of ways. To manage intercultural interaction effectively, speakers need to be aware of the inherent norms of their own speech practices, the ways in

which norms vary depending on situational factors and the ways in which
speakers from other language backgrounds may have different expectations
of language usage and behaviour.

Representative research methodologies are exemplified throughout the
book, although there is no single chapter devoted to methodology.

1.2 CULTURE, COMMUNICATION AND INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION

Some of the key ideas relating to the study of culture, communication and
intercultural communication are presented here and developed in more
detail in each chapter.

CULTURE

The term culture, as we will be using it, refers to the customs and expecta-
tions of a particular group of people, particularly as it affects their language
use.

The term **culture** has a wide range of meanings today, because it has
actually changed in meaning over time. Goddard (2005:53 ff.) provides
an excellent account of some of these changes. In its earliest English uses,
culture was a noun of process, referring to the tending of crops or animals.
This meaning (roughly 'cultivating') is found in words such as *agriculture,
horticulture* and *viviculture.* In the sixteenth century *culture* began to be used
about 'cultivating' the human body through training, and later about 'cul-
tivating' the non-physical aspects of a person. In the nineteenth century the
meaning was broadened to include the general state of human intellectual,
spiritual and aesthetic development (roughly comparable to 'civilisation'),
giving rise to the 'artistic works and practices' meaning that which is associ-
ated with music, literature, painting, theatre and film. Goddard reports that
the 'anthropological' usage of culture was introduced into English by Tylor
in the late nineteenth century in his book *Primitive Culture.* Tylor defined
culture as 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art,
morals, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by man
as a member of a society' (Tylor 1871:1).

Goddard (2005:58) makes the point that the 'anthropological' use
typically related to people living in 'other places'; however, in contempo-
rary expressions such as *youth culture, gay culture, kid culture* the principle
of differentiation has shifted entirely to the notion of different 'kinds of

people'. Even so, Tylor's definition of culture seems to us to still be very relevant.

Research on intercultural communication often relates to cultural groups at the level of nations and national languages; however, we need to be aware that many of the major languages of the world such as German, English, Spanish and Arabic are spoken by people of different nationalities, often in geographically distant areas and that each national variety of these pluricentric languages will have at least some of its own codified norms (Clyne 1992; Clyne, Fernandez & Muhr 2003).

Research on **cross-cultural communication** typically compares communication practices of one language/cultural group with another, while studies on **intercultural communication** focus on features of the shared communication between speakers from different language/cultural backgrounds.

Most modern research on cross-cultural and intercultural communication takes into account that communication is affected by different aspects of the context, including cultural expectations, social relations and the purpose of the communication.

DIRECTNESS AND INDIRECTNESS

At the level of sentence grammar, mappings between one language and another can be relatively straightforward; however, even with simple sentences, the communication context can influence the interpretation of an utterance.

Grice (1975) and Searle (1969, 1975) were among the first researchers to grapple with the difference between direct and indirect messages. They identified the importance of context to the interpretation of meaning, and examined the way in which inferences can be drawn. Such analysis is even more important for intercultural communication because different sociocultural expectations may be involved. Grice's work has been criticised, more recently, for its anglocentric approach (e.g. Clyne 1987, 1994; Wierzbicka 1991, 1994a). Social interaction, cultural norms and numerous environmental factors need to be taken into account when interpreting conversational implicature (Levinson 1983:127).

Key ideas relating to the study of conversational implicature, of how people determine the literal and/or non-literal meaning of an utterance in a particular context, and the theory of speech acts, are examined in Chapter 2, along with modifications necessary to make this type of analysis relevant to intercultural communication.

POLITENESS

The relationship between directness and indirectness and politeness is examined first in a general way, and subsequently using examples from cross-cultural research on speech acts and politeness.

Different languages have different ways of marking politeness. People from some cultures tend to favour directness, while people from other cultures favour less directness. Even so, directness may also vary in relation to social context. The relationship between directness and politeness as examined by Blum-Kulka (1987:133 ff.) illustrates that while these notions may be related, they are not one and the same. This field of research suggests that politeness may be better defined as doing what is appropriate in a given cultural context. Directness and politeness are examined in Chapter 3, drawing particularly on the research paradigms of Brown and Levinson (1987), Goffman (1955, 1967), Ehlich (1992), Fraser (1990) for politeness and face, Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper (1989) and Wierzbicka (2003) for cross-cultural research on speech acts, and the research of Ide (1989, 1990), Matsumoto (1988, 1989), Meier (1995a,b) and Watts, Ide and Ehlich (1992) who challenge the universality of aspects of these paradigms. The research of Wierzbicka (1991, 2003) and Sharifian (2004) provides further insight into the ways courtesy and respect can be conveyed in different languages.

SPEECH ACTS AND POLITENESS ACROSS CULTURES

Speech acts, such as requests, may differ according to cultural preferences for directness or indirectness. For example, in the case where a person wants a favour from another person, the preferred strategy may be to hint and talk about the topic (Richards & Sukwiwat 1983). In another cultural context, it may be more appropriate to ask directly. In some cultures it is acceptable for the person asked not to respond verbally but to simply carry out the requested action. The growing body of research on the inter-relatedness between direct and indirect speech acts and politeness in different cultural contexts is examined in Chapter 4, beginning with the seminal work of the CCSARP project (Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Patterns, Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper 1989), which is based on discourse completion tests conducted with native speakers of eight languages. Cross-cultural variation of requests, complaints, apologies, acceptances of apologies and compliments are exemplified, drawing on the work of House and Kasper

(1981), Cohen and Olshtain (1981), Blum-Kulka (1987), Suszczyńska (1999), Clyne (1994), Cordella (1990), Smith (1992), Sugimoto (1998), Hobbs (2003) and Wierzbicka (2003).

CONVERSATIONS

People from different cultural backgrounds may have different expectations of conversation. Clyne and Platt (1990) point out that intercultural communication conflict can develop where one party considers the other to be either offensively forward or arrogantly uncooperative. Routines for greeting and leave-taking can vary considerably from culture to culture, as can the use of laughter and expectations concerning the organisation of speaker turns. Preferences for different communication channels (e.g. face-to-face communication versus the use of the telephone or email) also differ between different cultures and sub-cultures, as do the appropriate length of a speaker's turn in conversation and attitudes to interruptions and silence. These features of conversation are examined in Chapter 5, drawing particularly on the research paradigms of Schegloff (1968, 1982), Schegloff and Sacks (1973), Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), Albert and Kessler (1976, 1978) for turn-taking, adjacency pairs, back-channelling and repetition, and exemplified by the research of Goddard (1977), Clark and French (1981) and Sifianou (1989) on telephone use in different cultures, and Gavioli (1995) on the function of laughter in different cultural contexts. Intercultural conversation is exemplified from research in the Australian workplace from Clyne (1994) and Béal (1992) and from Kjaerbeck (1998) from intercultural business negotiation in Mexican and Danish.

POWER AND STEREOTYPING

Stereotyping is the process by which all members of a group are asserted to have the characteristics attributed to the whole group (Scollon & Scollon 2001:168). We need to remember that no individual member of a group is the embodiment of his or her group's characteristics. Furthermore, people belong to a multitude of different sub-groups and thus cannot be defined by their membership to any one particular group. Cultural differences in the concept of self and others, and related perceptions of power are also important in understanding the social expectations and conventions which underlie language use. They are also used to interpret linguistic meaning in a given interaction. However, any categorisation of a group results in some level of stereotyping (El-Dash & Busnardo 2001). Thus, while linking

certain characteristics to different cultures serves as a useful guide, such
categorisations may lead to some level of overgeneralisation.

These topics are examined in Chapter 6, drawing particularly on the
work of Fairclough (1989, 2000), Fairclough and Wodak (1997), Giddens
(1982, 1993), Gottlieb (2006), Hofstede (1980, 1983, 1991), Pennycook
(2001) and van Dijk (1987, 1996).

NAMING AND ADDRESSING

Modes of address and naming systems vary greatly from culture to culture.
For example, among Sikh Indians, men and women may have similar
'given' names and sex is marked by the use of 'Singh' for males and 'Kaur'
for females. However, in Australia, 'Singh' has been adopted as a surname
by Sikh Indians (males), and has in some cases been passed on as the family
surname for females as well as males in the subsequent generation. There are
so many naming systems that Clyne and Platt (1990) suggest that people
need to be alert, to enquire and not to be surprised about differences when
they encounter people from different cultural groups.

The variety of naming practices available to identify individuals in a
society are examined in Chapter 7, drawing on the research paradigms of
Braun (1988), Brown and Gilman (1960), Geertz (1976) and Goffman
(1968), which show how different forms of address can contribute to a
person's sense of identity and the relationship between the individual and
their social context.

Brown and Gilman's (1960) paper is used to illustrate the ways in which
second- and third-person pronoun forms can be used to signal familiarity
and formality/deference in some Indo-European languages. The ways in
which nouns and pronouns of address, kinship terms, and honorifics are
used as part of complex systems of familiarity, respect and deference in
different languages are exemplified through the research of Suzuki (1976)
and Koyama (1992) for Japanese, Geertz (1976) and Koentjaraningrat
(1989) for Javanese, as well as Hvoslef (2001) for the language of the
Kyrgyz Republic, one of the fifteen new states after the dissolution of the
Soviet Union.

ORGANISATION OF WRITTEN DISCOURSE

Variation in the organisation of writing across cultures has been studied
from a cross-linguistic perspective, particularly over the last two decades.
Differences of expectation with regard to the appropriateness of topics
and the sequence of topics may differ across cultures. In different cultures

people may place more weight on verbal or written undertakings. Texts and arguments can be organised in different ways. There may be a preference for more or less formally oriented texts. Some cultures, such as the English culture, favour presenting ideas in a linear progression, while in other cultures the presentation of ideas may be more 'digressive' or tend towards different rhythms, such as symmetry or parallelism. The issues of cultural differences in the organisation of ideas and written discourse as observed by Kaplan (1972, 1988) and exemplified by Hinds (1980) for Japanese, Eggington (1987) for Korean, Kirkpatrick (1991) for Mandarin letters of request, Ostler (1987) for Arabic prose, and Clyne (1980, 1987) and Clyne and Kreutz (1987) for English and German are further examined in Chapter 8.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN PROFESSIONAL AND WORKPLACE CONTEXTS

One important intercultural communication issue in professional and workplace contexts is the practice of translating and interpreting, which needs to be sensitive to most of the issues discussed thus far in this book. Translators face a particular challenge to balance pragmatic equivalence and impartiality. Pragmatic equivalence is sensitive to the cultural and linguistic norms of the respective languages. Some central issues relating to the practice of translating and interpreting (e.g. Widdowson 1978; Larson 1984) are examined in Chapter 9, along with some examples of translation challenges in advertising.

The medical and legal professions, which rely heavily on question and answer sequences, are also particularly problematic for intercultural communication, whether or not interpreters are involved. Different cultural norms may pertain to the way questions and answers are posed, and there are also other issues that are specific to each of these professions. These are discussed with reference to the research of Davidson (2000), a case study of medical interpreting in the United States, and Pauwels, D'Argaville and Eades (1992) relating to the provision of evidence by Australian Aboriginal clients in the courtroom.

Different cultural expectations may also shape the behaviour and interpretation of different parties engaged in intercultural business negotiation. This is also exemplified in Chapter 9 with reference studies reported by Marriott (1990) for a Japanese–Australian business encounter, and by Spencer-Oatey and Xing (2003) for a Chinese–British business encounter.

TOWARDS SUCCESSFUL INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Research on spoken discourse in the Australian multicultural workplace by Monash researchers (e.g. Clyne 1994; Bowe 1995; Neil 1996) involving participants from different cultures who are engaged in natural communication in a language that is not a first language to any of the speakers, has shown that individuals can develop ways to construct a 'common ground' and avoid many of the problems inherent to intercultural communication. The research findings of Bowe's study of automotive manufacturing workers, and of Neil's (1996) study of hospital ancillary staff, reported in Chapter 10, illustrate that speakers involved in intercultural communication on a daily basis find ways to use language creatively and collaboratively to ensure that the intended message is received and that potential miscommunication is circumvented.

Giles' (1977:322) notion of accommodation, and Sharifian's notion of conceptual renegotiation (Sharifian forthcoming), are also examined to illustrate dimensions of the way in which individuals can adapt to the challenges of intercultural communication.

The book concludes with some cautious optimism. Although, in the early stages, individuals may approach intercultural communication through the ethnocentric prism of their own immediate culture and misread the intentions of their intercultural communication partners, as they become more aware of the ways in which sociocultural conventions shape language use, individuals may be more able to understand intercultural communication and communicate more effectively.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Goddard, C. 2005 'The lexical semantics of culture'. *Language Sciences* no. 27, pp. 51–73.

Neil, D. 1996 *Collaboration in Intercultural Discourse: Examples from a Multicultural Australian Workplace.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, Chapter 2, pp. 27–68.

Scollon, R. & Scollon, S. Wong 2001 *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach* 2nd edn. Oxford: Blackwell, Chapter 7, pp. 122–37.

2 | Direct and indirect messages: The role of social context identified by Grice and Searle

At the level of sentence grammar, mappings between one language and another can be relatively straightforward; however even with simple sentences, the communication context can influence the interpretation of an utterance. It is at the level that might be called 'reading between the lines' that cultural differences may arise and these may contribute to misunderstandings in intercultural communication. In this chapter we will examine some of the ways in which we can identify and understand aspects of this complexity.

During the 1950s and 1960s the philosopher John L. Austin, his pupil H. Paul Grice and other like-minded scholars including John Searle, tried to explain how people draw inferences in everyday communication. These researchers came to be known as 'ordinary language philosophers' (Thomas 1995:29).

Austin (1962, 1970) attempted to determine the distinction between what a speaker says, what the speaker actually means, and what the hearer thinks the speaker means. Austin's initial work on the communicative intent, form and effects of utterances was outlined in his paper *How to do Things with Words* (1962). This work has formed the basis for much research into this aspect of language, an understanding of which is also crucial to the study of intercultural communication.

The following example illustrates one of the ways in which an English speaker may 'read between the lines' in a conversation.

On arriving home from school, a teenage child says to his mother:
'I've come straight home from school today.'
The child's mother is a bit taken aback! She is puzzled by what the child means, why he said it – if it was really true, what else he might have been doing.

What is it about such a statement that raises so many questions and leads the hearer to draw the implicature that the comment has something other than its literal truth value? It is questions like these that Grice set out to explore.

2.1 GRICE'S MAXIMS

Grice (1975) identified four expectations that adult English speakers seem to use in interpreting literal and implied meaning in a conversation. He called these expectations **conversational maxims,** which work together with a general principle he called the **Cooperative Principle**.

Grice's maxims (1975:45–7) can be summarised as follows:

Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange).

Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality: Do not say what you believe to be false.

Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relevance: Be relevant.

Manner: Avoid obscurity of expression.

Avoid ambiguity.

Be brief.

Be orderly.

Cooperative Principle:

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

These maxims represent **norms** that hearers can expect speakers to have followed, if they are engaged in **cooperative conversation**. (Grice stated the maxims as imperatives, but we need to understand that he was intending them as normative rules of interaction.) Allan (1991) makes the good point that the maxims should be regarded as 'reference points for language interchange' and not as 'laws to be obeyed'. In effect, we use these norms as a base, against which conversational exchanges can be compared. When we encounter communication that does not meet these norms, we then search for **non-literal interpretations** (**conversational implicatures**).

The above example about the mother's suspicion when her son said that he had come straight home from school can be accounted for with reference to Grice's maxim of **Quantity**: *Make your contribution as informative as is*