1 Culture, communication and context

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.

Speakers engaged in intercultural communication in this increasingly globalised world may choose one or more languages in which to communicate. However, regardless of whether it is their first, second or third language, 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. This book endeavours to show how a variety of methodologies may be drawn on to uncover the nuances of language use in intercultural contexts. These nuanced linguistic behaviours are linked to wider non-linguistic socio-cultural and pragmatic processes. We outline these processes throughout the remainder of this chapter. These, in turn, lay the foundation for a more nuanced discussion of language, meaning and (mis)interpretation throughout the remainder of this book.

1.2 CULTURE, SELF AND OTHER

This section provides an overview of sociocultural concepts essential to the study of intercultural communication. Notions of culture, cultural heterogeneity and cultural difference are introduced and critiqued. We then discuss how individuals perceive and categorise the sociocultural practices of the self and the other.

CULTURE

The term culture as we will be using it, refers to the customs, symbols and expectations of a particular group of people, particularly as they affect their language use.

The term **culture** has a wide range of meanings today, because it has actually changed in meaning over time. Goddard (2005, pp. 53) 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 to mean 'cultivating' the human body through training, and later 'cultivating' 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 is associated 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, p. 1).

Goddard (2005, p. 58) makes the point that the 'anthropological' use typically related to people living in 'other places'; however, in contemporary expressions such as *youth culture, gay culture* and *kid culture* the principle of differentiation has shifted entirely to the notion of different 'kinds of people'. It is perhaps unsurprising then that growing numbers of anthropologists are choosing to work for corporations rather than heading off to exotic lands (Ferraro 2002).

We believe Tylor's definition of culture, albeit dated, provides a starting point for discussing intercultural communication. Tylor's anthropological approach implicates the relevance of processes that are cognitive (e.g. knowledge, belief) as well as practical (e.g. art, habits). We engage with both cognitive and practical processes in this book.

Yet, this book's focus on meaning and the (mis)interpretation of meaning in social contexts entails by necessity favouring a focus on practical processes. This means adopting a more **relativist perspective** on culture and the view that 'Cultural meanings are public meanings encoded in shared symbols, not-self-contained private understandings' (Foley 1997, p. 16). Public meanings are, by their very nature, learned meanings. Clifford Geertz (1973) discusses culture in terms of symbolic practices handed down from generation to generation.

A meaning- and symbol-driven approach entails deconstructing essentialist notions of culture (Hall 1997). Research on intercultural communication has historically discussed cultural groups at the essentialist level of nations and national languages. In other words, for instance, an Indonesian was presumed to speak Indonesian and behave in accordance with Indonesian cultural norms. These behaviours, in turn, could be contrasted with those of a US American who was presumed to speak American English and behave in US American ways.

These understandings of culture and language are often, and, in some ways always oversimplistic. For instance, young Indonesians engage in ethnic, national and religious cultural practices (Manns 2012). Furthermore, they vary these practices from moment to moment to construct heterogeneous selves. An essentialist view of a US American doesn't take into account intracultural variation (e.g. African American, Southern American). It also doesn't consider that more than 20 per cent of US

Americans speak a language other than English at home (Ryan 2013). Spanish speakers account for more than half of this number and often mix Spanish and English to express hybrid cultural identities (e.g. Sánchez-Muñoz 2013).

In short, essentialist views of culture and language can be limiting and less relevant in the late modern era (Hall 1995). Yet, it is our view that scholars of culture should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. There is a rich body of research that discusses culture in nationalistic terms. Ignoring this research implies that there aren't differences between, for instance, Indonesians and US Americans, or that such differences are not relevant. These macro-cultural labels are useful to a degree, but they should also be critiqued. This is perhaps clearest in a review of the traditional models for understanding cultural difference.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

Many models have been posited for understanding cultural difference. The two most frequently cited models are those proposed by Geert Hofstede and Edward T. Hall respectively. Both models, however, have been criticised for being essentialist and anachronistic and for having problematic methodologies.

Hofstede's work (1980, 1983, 1998, 2010) has been highly influential in the study of **national cultural differences**. Hofstede's research is based on information gained from studies of a multinational corporation (IBM) in 64 countries. He has also conducted subsequent studies concerning students in over 20 countries and 'elites' in 19 countries (Hofstede 1998, p. 11). Hofstede originally proposed four independent dimensions of national cultural differences. He then added a fifth in response to criticisms of Western bias (Samovar et al. 2013).[1]

1. **Power distance** relates to the degree to which members of a culture accept institutions and organisations having power. Hofstede classes 'Latin', Asian and African countries as accepting of power asymmetries. Conversely, he cites Anglo and Germanic countries as being less accepting of such asymmetries.
2. **Uncertainty avoidance** refers to the degree to which members feel uncomfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty and thus the degree to which they avoid these. Latin countries and Japan are among those prone to avoid uncertainty and Anglo, Nordic and

[1] Hoftstede (2013) subsequently posited a sixth dimension, indulgence/restraint, but this has not yet gained currency in academic discourse and is not dealt with here.

Chinese culture countries are those more likely to engage in such 'risky' behaviour.

3. The **individualism/collectivism** dimension marks a distinction between those cultures that place a higher emphasis on individual goals (individualism) in comparison to group achievements (collectivism). Anglo, European and 'developed' countries tend to be individualistic whereas Asian, African and less developed countries tend to value collectivism. It is worth noting that Japan falls between these two poles in Hofstede's scale (Hoftstede & Hofstede 2013).
4. The **masculinity/femininity** dimension presents a masculine culture as having a 'preference for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material success' and a feminine culture as having a 'preference for relationships, modesty, caring for the weak, and the quality of life' (Hofstede 1983, pp. 336–7). Therefore, we see that **masculinity** is more achievement-oriented and **femininity** has a greater focus on relationships and maintaining a balance among people. Masculinity, as such, is linked to Japan and Germanic countries and femininity to Nordic countries. Anglo countries are moderately masculine and many Asian countries moderately feminine.
5. The subsequently added, fifth dimension, **long-term/short-term orientation** (originally known as 'Confucian dynamism'), posits that some societies (long-term-oriented) emphasise future reward, and pursue these through persistence, savings and flexible adaptation. Other societies (short-term-oriented) align more towards the past and present, and do so through national pride, respect for traditions and the perseverance of 'face'. China and East Asian nations have rated highly as long-term-oriented nations whereas Anglo, African and South Asian nations tend to rate as short-term-oriented.

The qualities Hofstede identifies seem to be of value in understanding potentially different patterns of thinking, feeling and acting. However, there are weaknesses in his formulations. For instance, Wierzbicka (1991) draws attention to the extreme polarities inherent in Hofstede's framework. Also, Hofstede has been accused of Western bias, both in his selection of labels and collection of data (Gudykunst 2001). Clyne (1994, pp. 179–86) finds some of the features of Hofstede's model to be useful in understanding the cultural varieties in his corpus of intercultural workplace interaction. Yet, Clyne largely avoids using the labels 'masculinity' and 'femininity',

which we ourselves find overgeneralise and perpetuate gender stereotypes. He instead uses such words as *harmony* and *degrees of negotiation* as well as *assertiveness* and *weakness*.

In spite of the limitations of Hofstede's model, it does contain a useful inventory of parameters along which cultural value systems and the relations within cultures can be analysed. However, it needs to be understood that such categorisations, while useful, are based on general national cultural differences and such simplifications were shown above to have significant limitations.

The second most-cited model for categorising cultural difference is also one of the oldest. This model was devised by Edward T. Hall, considered by many to be the originator of the field of intercultural communication (Sorrells 2013). Hall worked for the US Foreign Service Institute and sought to devise training courses for Foreign Service Officers heading to overseas assignments. Not unlike the authors of this book, Hall (1959, 1966, 1976) was primarily concerned with micro-communicative contexts and the ways in which differing expectations might lead to misunderstanding.

Hall (1976) categorises cultures according to whether they are high-context or low-context. **High-context cultures** are those in which much of the meaning exchanged in a context is done so without or with relatively few words. The messages communicated in such societies are more subtle, indirect and often non-verbal. Furthermore, roles in such societies are more defined and hierarchical. These societies are normally more 'traditional' and more attuned to their environments and one another. Cultures considered high-context include many Asian cultures and the African American and Native American cultures.

Low-context cultures, conversely, are those in which detailed verbal messages are favoured. Individuals from these cultures share less background information and intimate information about one another and consequently can rely less on non-verbal contextual cues. The messages conveyed in these cultures tend to be direct and verbose and these cultures value people who 'speak up' and 'say what's on their mind' (Samovar et al. 2013). These societies are typically less 'traditional' and include North American, German and Scandinavian cultures.

Miscommunications may occur when those from a low-context culture communicate with those from a high-context culture. Hall (1959) proposes cultural distance as a major factor in determining whether miscommunication will take place. For example, communication between a Japanese individual (among Hall's highest-context cultures) and a German

(among the lowest-context cultures) would be expected to be particularly problematic.

This problematic communication, for instance, might take place along lines of credibility (Samovar et al. 2013). When meeting a high-context Japanese individual, our low-context German might find the Japanese silence to be an indication that he or she is hiding something and thus being dishonest. Conversely, the Japanese individual might find the talkativeness of the German off-putting or even meaningless, and, thus, untrustworthy.

As with Hofstede's framework, there are pros and cons in drawing on Hall's observations. Cultural distance has been found to be less of a predictor of communication problems than intergroup history, especially histories beset with social inequality or intergroup rivalry (Brabant, Watson & Gallois 2007). Further, Hall's discussions of context have received less academic scrutiny and works that have drawn on this model have generally accepted it without question (Cardon 2008). This lack of scrutiny has led to problems in intercultural classrooms where students have found Hall's observations to be dated or inaccurate (Hastings, Musambira & Ayoub 2011).

Hofstede's and Hall's are but two of many frames for illustrating similarities and differences of cultural value systems. There are many other models that emphasise, among other things, cultural adaptation (Kim 1977, 1988) and the negotiation of cultural anxiety and uncertainty (Gudykunst 1995). A full discussion of intercultural models is beyond the scope of this language-focused book. However, they are addressed in any number of general introductory texts (e.g. Martin & Nakayama 2004; Samovar et al. 2013; Sorrells 2013).

The ways in which individuals interpret culture, cultural practices, contexts and meanings are influenced by their view of the self and the other. Self and other categorisation are dealt with in the following section.

CATEGORISING SELF AND OTHER

The categorisation of the self and the other are critical in how we create and interpret meanings within contexts. This section introduces traditional and contemporary frameworks for understanding how individuals categorise the self and the other.

Social psychologist Henri Tajfel (1982) suggests that people often categorise themselves positively at the centre (**in-group**) to create and promote self-esteem and pride and classify others negatively on the outside

(**out-group**). Positive in-group stereotypes are utilised to develop self-esteem and mark oneself as being different from the out-group (see also the 'in-group favouritism principle': Ting-Toomey & Chung 2005).

Tajfel's notions of the in-group and the out-group overlap with the concept of ethnocentrism. Sociologist William Sumner (1906, p. 13) defined **ethnocentrism** as 'the technical name for this view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it'. Sumner adds: 'Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders.' This positive valuation of the in-group, often at the expense of the out-group, is perhaps the most potent impediment to successful intercultural communication (Cargile & Bolkan 2013).

Ethnocentrism can be a complex affair as we have multiple selves, or rather social identities, and these vary from moment to moment (see Onorato & Turner 2002; Djenar 2008). These multiple selves are the product of our varied and complex backgrounds and experiences. For instance, as noted above, a US American may also align with Latino culture. This might be because the individual grew up in a Latino country or within a Latino community in the United States. In conversations, the individual may choose to emphasise his or her US American identity in one context, the Latina/o in another or indeed reduce both in favour of any number of other social identities relevant to the immediate context.

Implicit in the categorisation of the self is the othering of the out-group. While linking certain characteristics to different cultures serves as a useful guide in understanding relations and linguistic communication, such categorisations may lead to some level of stereotyping and overgeneralisation. El-Dash and Busnardo (2001) point out any categorisation of a group results in some level of stereotyping. **Stereotypes** are the generalised and ideological beliefs that any two cultures or social groups are opposites (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012).

Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012) discuss stereotyping in 'positive' and 'negative' terms. **Negative stereotyping** is seen as a method of reiterating a binaristic contrast as a negative group difference. Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, pp. 273–4) identify four major steps in negative stereotyping. First, one might contrast two cultures or two groups on the basis of a single dimension, like finding migrant shopkeepers of a particular culture curt and uninterested in their customers. Second, rather than working towards mutual understanding, an individual might focus on this difference as a problem for communication. Third, one might assign a positive value to one strategy or one group and a negative value to the other strategy or

group. For example, an individual in Australia, the United Kingdom or the United States might view Anglo shopkeepers in a positive light (e.g. they always say *please* and *thank you* and make small talk) and view shopkeepers from other cultures negatively (e.g. shopkeepers from culture x focus only on the transaction at hand). Lastly, the fourth step entails re-generalising this process to the entire group. For instance, the individual might decide all people from culture x are curt and rude because of an interaction with shopkeepers (or even a single shopkeeper) from culture x.

Such binary contrasts are used both within a society and between different societies. For example, the in-group may be Westerners (taken from their perspective) and the out-group Asians. Of course, placing all people of 'Western' nations in one category and 'Asian' nations in another creates a stereotype already. However, here all Westerners may contrast themselves with all Asians and state that the out-group 'refuse(s) to introduce their topics so that we [the Westerners] can understand them' (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 274). Scollon, Scollon and Jones emphasise that such negative stereotyping 'leads to the idea that somehow members of the other group are actively trying to make it difficult to understand them' (2012, p. 274).

Positive stereotyping, in contrast, can be divided into two main strategies: the solidarity fallacy and the lumping fallacy. The **solidarity fallacy** relates to falsely combining one's own group with some other group in order to establish common ground on one single dimension (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012). Scollon, Scollon and Jones review Tannen's (1994) observations about the conversational norms of North American men and women and Chinese men and women. Tannen observes that US American men have a tendency to stress information over relationship, while US American women favour relationship over information (see also Hofstede's dimensions). The solidarity fallacy develops when US American women group themselves with Chinese people in general in contrast to US American men to emphasise both the similarities between themselves and the Chinese, and the difference from US American men. While such groupings may assist in understanding the similarities between US American women and the Chinese in general, it can lead to the misconception that all cultural characteristics of the two groups are similar or the same.

The second type of positive stereotyping is the **lumping fallacy**. This occurs when a person makes a false grouping in reference to two other groups (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 275). An example of this would be the statement that Westerners consider all Asians to be members of

the same group, thus ignoring the contrasts between the groups and that such groupings include a diversity of different cultures and languages. In summary, negative stereotyping involves regarding members of a group as being polar opposites, whereas with positive stereotyping the members of different groups are viewed as being identical (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2012, p. 275).

Stereotypes, whether positive or negative, limit our understanding of human behaviour and can lead to miscommunication in intercultural discourse because, as Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012, p. 272) conclude, 'they limit our view of human activity to just one or two salient dimensions and consider those to be the whole picture'. People need to consider the differences and similarities that exist between people and cultures. In other words, no individual member of a group encompasses or displays all of the characteristics of his or her group. Individuals belong to a variety of different groups and thus their identity and characteristics can be asserted differently, depending on the situation. This is especially so for those who relate to more than one ethnic or cultural group.

Culture has been shown to be a complex phenomenon here. Furthermore, the ways in which individuals position the self and the other with regard to culture(s) have been shown to be potentially limiting. Yet, individuals from different cultures need to communicate with one another perhaps more than ever in the era of globalisation. The remainder of this chapter introduces the role that language plays in intercultural communication and lays the foundation for the rest of this linguistically focused book.

1.3 COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE AND VARIATION

COMMUNICATION

Communication in its most basic sense may be defined as 'a sharing of elements of behaviour or modes of life' (Cherry 1996, p. 12). Animal communication is often linked to mere response to direct environmental stimulus. For instance, a bee may communicate to other bees the direction and distance to a food source. A male grasshopper communicates to others its desire to mate (as well as its satisfaction at having done so). Communication plays a critical role in the sharing and regulation of behaviour and modes of life for both human and non-human animals alike.