

The Language and Intercultural Communication Reader, edited by Zhu Hua.

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Language plays an important role in any communication as it is through language that we negotiate meaning and understand the world around us. This Language and Intercultural Communication Reader has twenty-two chapters divided into six parts, covering key topics in this field of study from

- language, thought and culture,
- theoretical considerations on cultural approaches to discourse and pragmatics,
- empirical examples of communication patterns across cultures,
- teaching and learning cultural variations of language use,
- interculturality, and
- intercultural communication in a professional context.

Each part has an introduction that clearly sets out the tone for the chapters and briefly outlines what is to follow. Each part finishes with study activities and discussion questions.

Do we see the world the same way when we use a different language? There is an ongoing debate about the relationship between language, culture and thought. It is not about putting sentences together, but what to say in a culturally appropriate way, and when to do so that makes our communication effective and is key to successful intercultural communication. We may also come across pragmatic transfer i.e. carrying over meaning from our language background when using a foreign language.



Here is a brief description of the chapters I found most interesting and useful.

Part 1 focuses on the relationship between language, culture and thought. For example, in Chapter 1 Benjamin Whorf presents and discusses the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, claiming that language influences thought and at the same time thought also influences language. Of course, there are opponents to this view and it is an ongoing debate.

Chapter 3 (Samovar, Porter, Stefani) discusses Hofstede's value orientations and Hall's high and low context communication. While there has been much debate about their use recently as new ways to approach the field are emerging, it is in defence of Hofstede's work as still being valid.

Part 2 looks at theoretical accounts for cultural differences in language use, including East Asian languages. It describes the concept of face and politeness theory, etc. The author points out that what counts as politeness is culture and language specific, raising the question, "What does it mean to show respect in your culture and how do you use language (or other means) to do so?"

Chapter 4 (Scollon and Scollon) makes an interesting observation, stating that one of the ways we reduce the ambiguity of communication is by making assumptions about the people we are talking to. The idea of 'self' differs in Western and Eastern worlds. They describe the involvement and independent face in communication and that any communication is a risk to face – there is no faceless communication.

What does it mean to speak in the West and East? This is summarized in Chapter Six (Ide) by the popular saying in the West, "A man is as good as his word" and a Chinese philosopher's words that the "Dao" that can be spoken is not constant Dao. Ide points out that in the East, everything exists in relation to the other things, while the Western value of the individual is seen as the central unit of society. Language use is bound to the context in a variety of ways – we cannot just assume that because a person is from culture A, he or she will speak that way. We need to look at the whole interaction and the relationship. Chapter 8 (Goddard and Wierzbicka) looks at cultural scripts, stressing that we must be able to understand the meanings of the relevant culturally important words - words for local values, social categories, speech acts, etc.

Part 3 has articles on a variety of speech acts and communication patterns across cultures. It states how cross-cultural differences exist in many aspects of discourse and communication.

Chapter 9 (Blum-Kulka and Olshtain) analyses requests and apologies in interaction. One of the challenges is: To what extent is it possible to determine the degree to which the rules govern the use of language in context vary from culture to culture and from language to language? Second language speakers might fail to communicate effectively, even when they have an excellent grammatical and lexical command of the target language (e.g I want your help, can be a bit too direct in some languages, while normal in others.). Olshtain in this Chapter points out that we need to establish first how situational and individual sources of variability account for the actual use in two languages, the learner's native language and the learner's target language. Knowing the vocabulary and grammar of any target language is not enough.

Chapter 11 (Nazzari) analyses the pragmatic functions of the recitation of Qur'anic verses by Muslims in their oral genre, describing the reasons underlying this usage.

Chapter 12 in Part 3 is entitled *The Silent Finn Revisited* (Sajavaara and Lehtonen). They point out the stereotypes people have about the Finnish communication style and how different nationalities perceive Finns. The authors mention that labeling people's communicative behavior in general terms may be highly misleading. They also say a national image is a generalization embedded in memory and that the behavior that gives rise to stereotypes is true and real. They furthermore stress that it is the interpretation of the behavior derived from misguided expectations resulting from different cultural framework that leads the observer astray. The saying, "You speak only when you have something to say" – is shared with other Nordics. Therefore, "if you don't have anything to say, you keep silent". They also explain that Finns make silent observations to gather information rather than ask questions as some other cultures might opt for. The authors point out that the difficulty starts when people make use of their own conceptual categories to organize their observations about the behavior of others. They

also say that the forms and topics of small talk in Finland are different, but it is not possible to say that there is less of it. Hofstede's indices tell us very little about this. They explain that speaking is controlled in Finland, like elsewhere, by various situational norms such as silence in church, constraints on 'chatter' at the dinner table, etc. In addition, Finnish cultural behavior also comprises a number of values and fundamental conceptions of appropriate behavior which give an outsider an impression of silent culture.

Part 4 analyses different angles to language learning.

Chapter 13 (Holliday), entitled *Small Culture* points out that labels like "Indian" or "woman" are no more than starting points. He stresses that imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. However, small culture is a dynamic, ongoing group process which operates in changing circumstances to enable group members to make sense of and operate meaningfully within these circumstances. The author states that the perpetrators are "standardly unaware" of the discursive forces surrounding them and at their disposal.

Chapter 15 (Mauranen) looks at signaling and preventing misunderstanding in English as lingua franca communication. Mauranen points out that many misunderstandings were related to discourse pragmatics. She further stresses that speaker intentions with respect to speech act functions were misunderstood, and relevance was being assigned incorrectly to interlocutors' utterances. This goes to show the importance of making sure the other party understands what we are trying to communicate; we could do this by rephrasing our initial utterance or by using other strategies. The good news is that lingua franca speakers appear to work hard to achieve mutual understanding and show considerable awareness of the requirements of the communicative situation in which they find themselves and are able to regulate their language and interaction accordingly.

Part 5 focuses on some of the recent developments in the field that sees cultural differences as socially and discursively constructed through interaction.

Chapter 16 (Sarangi) looks at gatekeeping interviews and how questions and information giving can be misinterpreted, simply because there are hidden purposes behind the questions and culture specific ways of structuring information. Perceptions about what is acceptable and unacceptable in the interview context may differ. Sarangi emphasizes that a situational reading of the data seems to capture more closely the complexities, not the principle of cultural difference. Thus, to be better communicators we should ask the questions in such a way that the receiver understands our intention. We often ask questions to find out something that is important to us, but this may not be interpreted or understood in such a way by the hearer.

Part 6 discusses the applications of the study of language and intercultural communication in a range of professional contexts.

Chapter 19 (Clyne, Ball, Neal) addresses intercultural communication in professional contexts. The authors point out that communication breakdown in interethnic situations is very often a result of the hearer's failure to understand the speaker's communicative intent because of culture-bound differences in rule variants. They stress that for example, turn length varies widely between cultures. Intercultural

communication depends on the notion of mutual intelligibility – making sure the other person understands. Most of the intercultural communication breakdowns studied in the chapter is due to pragmatic and discourse rules.

Chapter 21 (Bargiela-Chiappini, S. J. Harris) analyses the interruptive strategies in British and Italian management meetings. The authors state that interruptions are not necessarily dysfunctional in management meetings that are task oriented, but are a necessary part of the process of reaching agreement.

Chapter 22 (Marquez Reiter and E. Placencia) looks at service encounters in two cities (Montevideo, Uruguay and Quito, Ecuador) where Spanish is spoken but there are many sociocultural differences underlying the language use owing to historical, political and social development.

The Reader is useful for students and researchers in the field of language and intercultural communication. The Conclusion of the Reader addresses key issues in conducting research projects on language and intercultural communication. I found the language of the Reader complex, as the field of study and issues analyzed require concentration and are topic-specific.

The Reader has a wide resource list at the end, not only books but also useful websites, professional bodies and organizations, etc. A glossary of key terms at the end of the Reader helps readers understand the main concepts.

As a concluding remark, any use of language is influenced by many different variables and to be successful communicators, we should first know how, in fact, we use our own language and then how to use it to communicate with others to make sure our communication is meaningful and mutually intelligible. Culture as it lives in individuals has many dimensions and it would make sense to look at the situational variables when looking at communication between speakers.