Crosstalk and culture in Sino-American communication

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Chinese and Americans often unwittingly communicate at cross-purposes because they are misled by the cultural trappings of talk. This book aims to clarify their misunderstandings by examining their different ideals and strategies of talk. It draws on cultural, philosophical, and linguistic insights and traces the development of Chinese communicative strategies from Confucius through the "eight-legged essay" to the boardrooms and streets of Hong Kong. Its formal analysis of taped interchanges and in-depth interviews reveals Chinese speakers' distinctive ways of communicating and relating. *Crosstalk and culture in Sino-American communication* will alert people to the pitfalls of cultural misunderstandings and the hidden assumptions and expectations underlying talk.

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General Editor: John J. Gumperz

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For my parents

In the beginning was the Word
(Gospel of St. John)

Dao (道) which can be spoken (道)
is not constant Dao (道)
(*Dao De Jing*)

Foreword
by John J. Gumperz

The last few decades have seen a dramatic increase both in the amount and in the quality and intensity of communication among individuals of different cultural background. In the ever expanding global marketplace where national economies co-exist in close interdependence, international organizations and multi-national companies proliferate, boundaries become more and more porous and populations increasingly mobile. People who grew up in distant parts of the world under historically quite distinct circumstances must now work together as part of the same labor force, jointly participate in local community affairs and compete for access to public facilities. So that, regardless of whether we live abroad or in our own familiar home environment, we are all more and more likely to come into direct contact with others who do not share our basic assumptions and perspectives. Intercultural communication is well on its way to becoming an everyday phenomenon.

Questions of culture have, to be sure, not escaped scholarly attention. A number of first rate ethnographic descriptions and cultural analyses incisively document the far-reaching differences in worldview, beliefs, and value systems among the various peoples of the globe. As a result, many of us have become aware of the complex, previously unsuspected, and often quite subtle ways in which our own perceptions of reality are constrained by taken for granted culturally specific presuppositions. Yet descriptions so far available concentrate almost exclusively on one single cultural tradition at a time. The very term multi-culturalism which has been so useful and important in countering the constantly re-emerging prejudices against the foreign minorities in our midst,

and has by now become an integral part of our everyday language, nevertheless seems to imply that today's issues of cultural diversity can be viewed in terms of finite sets of co-existing, qualitatively distinct unitary systems.

Yet the problem of how this diversity affects everyday communication is still far from well understood. Today's minority groups are after all to a large extent bilingual and bicultural. They cannot therefore be treated as total communicative isolates. We know from experience that it is on the whole easier to get things done in situations where all involved share the same basic background. In culturally diverse communicative environments hidden, normally unnoticed differences in perspectives may bring about radically conflicting interpretations of what is happening. Miscommunications are likely to proliferate and become difficult to repair even when the same language is used and participants seem to agree on what is to be accomplished. What is it about communication and culture that brings about this effect?

There is relatively little in the way of published material available on this issue, at least nothing that even remotely approaches the depth and theoretical sophistication of existing single culture studies. Most of the published materials we have either take the form of relatively abstract quantitative studies or of practical manuals and "how to do it" books. The latter offer essential information on manners and principles of etiquette not usually found in the scholarly literature and frequently illustrated by means of interesting and quite revealing anecdotes. They also provide helpful pointers on what to do or how to behave in typical situations. Yet such practical guides are by their very nature limited to generalized descriptions of behavioral norms. Moreover they tend to presuppose a view of intercultural communication as typically associated with the brief instrumental encounters characteristic of tourist or business travel, where communicative goals are relatively transparent and verbal communication relies in large part on formulaic phrases. Participants in such encounters are cognizant of the fact that they meet as strangers who may have only a limited knowledge of each other's linguistic background. Miscommunications are expected, and when they occur they can, for the most part, be readily attributed to insufficient knowledge of vocabulary or grammar.

It is evident that such simple models cannot account for the communicative requirements of the post-industrial market place. Note that along with the ever increasing diversity, the very nature of interactive tasks has also undergone significant change. Increasingly such more or less organized events as meetings and group discussions or negotiations, as well as employment, counseling and social service interviews of various kinds, both formal and informal, have come to constitute a significant part of the communicative routine both at work and in public life. These play a key role in decision making of all kinds and are therefore particularly important both for individuals and for the economic success of an enterprise. In contrast to tourist encounters, gatherings of the latter kind tend to involve longer often highly complex interactions where delicate power relations must be kept in balance and conflicting interests reconciled. Cognitively and socially demanding problems are likely to arise that place a premium on rhetorical skills and may make it difficult to reach agreement or achieve understanding even when language and culture are shared. Active participation in such situations presupposes functional control of a single language so that intelligibility at the level of grammar and lexicon as such is often not the issue. The basic question is more commonly one of rhetorical effectiveness and it is in this connection that the most serious problems arise. This is not to say that grammar and vocabulary are not important. Rhetorical effectiveness obviously presupposes knowledge of linguistic form. The point is that because of their complexity, problems of misunderstanding are most fruitfully examined on the basis of everyday talk.

Experience with intercultural communication indicates that the most tenacious and troublesome interpretive difficulties tend to arise in the course of the process of communicating as such and often for reasons that participants immersed in the interaction, and intent on formulating their own arguments, tend not to be consciously aware of. To understand the communicative mechanisms involved, it becomes necessary to look more closely at the way speech exchanges work. Face-to-face communication, as we all know, is always a collaborative endeavor requiring active contributions from speakers as well as from listeners. This means that in exercising their right to speak individuals take on obligations

towards their partners that require them to do more than merely put information into words. Whatever is said must somehow fit into or be relatable to themes established in the course of the preceding talk. Regardless of whether or not speakers agree, some degree of topical or thematic continuity has to be maintained. To begin with, whatever one speaker says sets up expectations for what is to follow, and this has significant consequences for discourse organization. Questions call for answers, requests or suggestions need to be acknowledged, and assertions need either to be confirmed or contradicted. Furthermore, turns at speaking must be co-ordinated both to allow for speaker change and to give those who hold the floor a chance to complete their arguments. To give just one more example, a simple declarative sentence such as "last night we went to town" often serves as a lead-in to a personal narrative, and those who understand it this way are expected to allow the speaker space to develop his or her story. In sum, conversationalists need to know not only what to say, in the sense of putting their ideas into words. They also have to know how and in what style to express their ideas and how to time their contributions in such a way as to maintain the flow of the interaction.

Complex as it is, conversational collaboration is normally achieved automatically without conscious reflection, as is also the case with the production of grammatical sentences. Yet since the conditions of contextual relevance that affect conversational inference are subject to regular change as the interaction progresses, the co-ordination process cannot be described in terms of grammar-like rules, valid without regard to context. We must assume that conversationalists plan their talk while the interaction is in process on the basis of what they see and hear in the encounter. In doing this they rely on their perception of certain signalling mechanisms called contextualization cues – including among others such features of conversational style as speech rhythm and tempo, intonation, choice of vocabulary or pronunciation – as well as on the content of the talk. In this way they simultaneously assess the significance of the talk at hand in relation to the interaction as a whole and determine what is intended by any one utterance.

Conversational inference is culturally specific in two respects.

First, cultural knowledge is a significant constituent of the background knowledge that we draw on in interpreting what we hear. Secondly, contextualization conventions are acquired in the course of home, school, peer communicative background. When speakers' inferences do not accord with those of other participants, the resulting discrepancies may violate the latter's expectations and conversational collaboration may be affected. Presumed violators may be seen to be interfering with others' rights, and those affected could take offense. The offender might be said to speak too much, fail to respond as expected, be rude or inconsiderate. In other words, not realizing that undetected differences in inferential practices could be at work, we react to violations of conversational expectations as we would to inappropriate language or other violations of accepted etiquette, attributing the problem to a person's ability or personality characteristics.

When inferences clash and background is shared, participants can draw on their knowledge of others' histories to find reasonable explanations for what is happening and thus give each other the benefit of the doubt. Moreover, the problems that arise are often readily repaired. But where the necessary shared background experience does not exist, difficulties arise. Miscommunications become more difficult to repair, since we tend to rely on indirect and therefore culturally specific ways of talking in making good a *faux pas* so as to avoid giving offense. This may raise additional comprehension problems and misunderstandings are likely to be compounded. A frequent end result is that participants lose their sense of what is going on. They may understand individual sentences but cannot fit them into a coherent argument. In the absence of any reasonable explanation there is a tendency to blame the other and fall back on interethnic stereotypes one might not ordinarily use to make sense of what is happening and preserve one's sense of control.

The interactive bases of intercultural misunderstandings were systematically investigated in a series of comparative studies of contacts between native speakers of English and English-speaking native speakers of South Asian languages and African Caribbeans in Britain. Analysis of recordings made in industry, counseling centers, employment offices, and similar institutional settings revealed that even though non-natives had good functional control

of English grammar, their interactions with native English speakers showed a much higher rate of miscommunications than native-native encounters. Miscommunications were especially frequent in longer encounters, when speakers engaged in intricate communicative tasks such as arguing a point, explaining cognitively complex facts, or defending a controversial point. Here non-natives, even those who speak English well, tended to fall back on rhetorical and contextualization conventions characteristic of their own home language and community. The mismatch in communicative style seriously interfered with conversational collaboration and as a result both sets of speakers felt a loss of control. A number of individuals reported that they felt lost. Customary persuasive strategies did not seem to work, and attempts at repair strategies proved ineffective. Unable to see that the problem was in large part communicative, members of each group tended to blame the other. South Asians, for example, complained they were rarely given an opportunity to say what they wanted to say, that interlocutors were not interested in their problems and made no effort to see their point of view. Native English speakers saw the Asians as uncooperative, unable to respond to questions, not trying to understand what was really wanted, being longwinded and vague in their arguments and in general either unable or unwilling to cooperate. The problems were so great that they seriously interfered with assessments of personal ability in interviews and other situations where communicative effectiveness was important.

In the present volume Young applies a related communicative perspective to the study of Chinese–Western relations. Arguing that interpersonal communication plays a much greater role in creating and reinforcing pejorative intercultural stereotypes than has commonly been assumed, she begins by examining a number of anecdotal Western reports about the Chinese that have been appearing at frequent intervals over the last century. The remarkable similarity in the stereotypes reflected in accounts written at different periods of time suggests that these have their origin in Westerners' reaction to Chinese use of native language discursive strategies in their English talk. In the rest of the book Young turns to a detailed discussion of the differences between Chinese- and English-based discursive practices, using as her point of departure

tapes of natural interactions recorded in a variety of institutional settings. Included in the analysis are grammar, discourse markers, discourse organization, rhetorical strategies, and cultural ideology. The treatment of the last two topics is of particular interest. In the West, classical Chinese culture is usually discussed from a historical perspective. Young demonstrates that many of the same principles and modes of interpretation continue to survive in the English language use of Chinese in Western academic and technological settings.

By the end of the book the reader will have obtained a unique picture of the Chinese discursive and cultural tradition as an integrated system, of the ways in which it differs from English, and of how these differences affect everyday talk. It would be too much to claim that a book such as this can give detailed guidelines for everyday interaction. In specific encounters a host of unforeseen problems tends to arise that cannot be predicted in advance. What the book does is to provide the basic background knowledge to enable us to recognize communicative problems for what they are, to become aware of the ever-present danger of stereotyping, and perhaps avoid some of the grossest misjudgments.

Preface

Chinese and Americans often approach each other with very different assumptions and perceptions. These contribute significantly to the difficulties persistently marring Sino-American interactions. They have inspired, in turn, stock American images of the inscrutable Chinese.

This complex issue is the most prominent yet least understood chapter in US–China relations. The bewildering uncertainty bedeviling exchanges between Chinese and Americans regularly occurs across a range of international and national settings despite dramatic shifts in historical, ideological, and political winds. It also reappears in the cross-cultural interactions of Americans with some of the English-speaking children and grandchildren of transplanted Chinese in the United States. Surprisingly enough, despite historic recognition of the issue, and despite a large literature on the subject, the process by which it occurs and continues to occur has not received systematic attention.

This book represents my attempt to come to grips with this recalcitrant issue. What I shall describe, analyze, and explain are some underlying sources and typical displays of Chinese communicative behavior. What I am interested in are some of the wider implications for the pattern of perceptions and interactions that exists between Chinese and Americans; that is, for the way in which they come to view each other.

We can break this discussion down as follows: What are some prominent features of Chinese communicative strategies? How do these features relate to presumed Chinese personality characteristics? To what extent do these culturally based communicative patterns provide a justifiable basis for some of the images and

stereotypes that arise in Sino-American interactions? In examining these issues, we will also be grappling with the following questions: What Chinese cultural ideals of interpersonal interaction influence the conduct and manner of their verbal output? What do Chinese strategies of face-redress reflect about how Chinese visualize and enact social relationships? Furthermore, how do cultural, inter-actional, and linguistic systems interact to affect the interpretation of messages? How do the systems fit together? Why do they fit together in certain patterns? What holds the patterns together? We shall also raise the following kinds of questions: What cultural ideals influence the layout, makeup, and playout of ideas? What sorts of information do conversational participants rely on to signify intent and decipher messages? What forms do these signals take? How do these signals function in the cross-cultural inter-pretation of meaning?

By the end of the book, the reader should have developed a finer-tuned understanding of why Chinese and Americans are so often so ill-attuned to one another, and an appreciation for why Western perceptions of Chinese inscrutability have lasted so long.