

The Language and Intercultural Communication Reader

Edited by
Zhu Hua

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The Language and Intercultural Communication Reader

Language is key to understanding culture, and culture is an essential part of studying language. This reader focuses on the interplay between language and intercultural communication.

Reflecting the international nature of the field, this reader covers a wide range of language and cultural contexts: Arabic, Chinese, English (British, American, Australian and South African), Greek, Hebrew, Japanese, Samoan and Spanish. Divided into six parts, it covers: culture, language and thought; cultural approaches to discourse and pragmatics; communication patterns across cultures; teaching and learning cultural variations of language use; interculturality; and intercultural communication in professional contexts. With contributions written by eminent authorities in the field, as well as cutting-edge materials representing current developments, the book explores the breadth and depth of the subject, as well as providing an essential overview for both students and researchers.

Each part begins with a clear and comprehensive introduction and is enhanced by discussion questions, study activities and further reading sections. Alongside a comprehensive resource list, detailing important reference books, journals, organisations and websites, and an annotated glossary of key terms, the final section offers advice on how to carry out research in language and intercultural communication.

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- The authors' original writing styles and conventions have been kept as much as possible.
- Minor textual omissions are indicated in the text with [. . .]. A brief note is provided in the square brackets where there is a substantial omission.
- The numbers for sections, subsections, examples, tables and figures are adjusted where appropriate in the *Reader* to make the selection coherent as a whole.
- The references and citations have been reformatted and adjusted.
- Where the selection comes from a monograph, cross-references to other chapters in the same monograph have been omitted where appropriate.

How to use the *Reader*

This *Reader* is aimed at advanced undergraduate and beginning postgraduate students on courses in intercultural communication, language learning and teaching, pragmatics and discourse analysis of a range of subjects, including languages and linguistics, TESOL, communication studies, cultural studies, anthropology and cross-cultural psychology. It can be used either on its own as a core course text or as a supplementary collection of key reading for other texts.

Special features of the *Reader* include the following:

- The general 'Introduction' outlines the main themes in the field of language and intercultural communication, paying particular attention to different disciplinary perspectives. It provides a broader context to the various papers selected for the *Reader*.
- The 'Introduction' to each part of the *Reader* aims to guide the student through the selected articles by giving a brief summary of each paper and highlighting its contributions to the field and links with other papers in the *Reader*. It can be read together with relevant sections in the general Introduction.
- 'Notes for students and instructors' are specially designed to facilitate the teaching and learning experience and aid classroom use. Each section consists of two types of exercise. 'Study questions' are aimed at a fairly basic level, to be used by the students themselves for checking comprehension and reviewing the key issues in each chapter. 'Study activities', on the other hand, are intended to be used, either in class by the instructors and students for discussion, or after class by the students to apply the key theoretical models or analytical frameworks to their own projects. The 'Further reading' sections contain additional sources of material for follow-up.
- The last chapter, 'Studying language and intercultural communication: methodological considerations', aims to provide guidance to students in their research activities and empirical studies. It summarises and compares the key research designs and data collection methods in the study of language and intercultural communication. The examples are drawn from the selected papers in the *Reader*, wherever possible, thus providing an opportunity to see methods or designs *in action*, as well as reviewing the methodological perspectives in each paper.

- A comprehensive 'Resource list' details important reference books, journals, corpora, organisations and websites.
- An annotated glossary of key terms in language and intercultural communication is provided, to which the student can refer in his or her studies.

The six parts of the *Reader* can be read in any order, although it is recommended that the Introduction be read first. Students are encouraged to think of the strengths and limitations that come with each perspective, as well as to compare from different perspectives. The rationale behind the selection of individual articles can be found in the general Introduction, as well as the Introduction at the beginning of each part.

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ZHU HUA

INTRODUCTION

Themes and issues in the study of language and intercultural communication

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION, as a field of enquiry, is concerned with how people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds interact with each other, and what impact such interactions have on group relations, as well as individuals' identity, attitudes and behaviour. Although some would differentiate intercultural communication from cross-cultural communication (i.e. comparative studies of communication patterns in different cultures), more and more people now use intercultural communication as an umbrella term to include both interactions between people of different cultures and comparative studies of communication patterns across cultures.

Intercultural communication naturally entails the use of language. Many studies of intercultural communication are either oriented towards language use or focus on the interplay between cultural differences and language use. In what follows, I will review a number of themes in the field of language and intercultural communication. Under each theme, I will discuss the following:

- Who are the researchers?
- What are the key research questions?
- What are the context and purpose of the studies?
- What is the main disciplinary background?
- What does it have to say about the interplay of language and intercultural communication?

By doing so, I hope to map out the context and put things in perspective for each theme, which is echoed in the grouping and selection of the readings for this Reader and further explored in the introduction to each part of the *Reader*.

Theme 1: culture, language and thought

A fundamental theoretical question underlying the study of language and intercultural communication is the relationship between language, culture and cognition. It is a question that concerns many different fields of enquiry, from anthropology to cognitive science, and can be traced back to as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, when Franz Boas (1940)

argued that one could not understand another culture without having direct access to its language. The widely acknowledged founder of the field of intercultural communication, Edward Hall, also made a strong claim that 'culture is communication and communication is culture' (1959, p. 191). The most often cited hypothesis on the relationship between language and culture, among various speculations and arguments, is perhaps the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, also known as 'linguistic relativity'. The hypothesis suggests that thought is influenced by language, and at the same time it also influences language. Although the hypothesis does not concern culture directly and explicitly, many followers extend this hypothesis to the relationship between culture and language. For example, Gumperz & Levinson (1996, p. 1) state, 'culture, through language, affects the way in which we think, . . . especially our classification of the experienced world'.

Evidence supporting the existence of a close, two-way relationship between language and culture and between language and thought comes from several areas of enquiry, including vocabulary, syntax and cognitive studies (for a review, see Gumperz & Levinson, 1996; Kramsch, 2004; Risager, 2006). Apart from an often-cited example of elaborate words for different kinds of snow in Eskimo languages (cf. Pullman, 1991), how frequently a word is used in a language is also a key indicator of the importance of that concept or idea in the relevant culture (see key-word studies by Wierzbicka, 1997). In addition, recent work on ethnosyntax has gathered a growing body of evidence to suggest that the grammar and semantics of a language are entwined with the culture of its speakers (Enfield, 2002). An example of cultural differences in motion paths or the manner of action can be found in Slobin (2000). Some cross-cultural differences in cognition have also been identified. For example, it is claimed that some cultures tend to group by categories, whereas other cultures prefer groupings by relationship (Nisbett, 2003; a section is reproduced in this Reader).

However, not everyone agrees on the interrelationships between language, culture and thought. Many researchers argue for the existence of universality in grammar (Chomsky, 1965). Others, for example Berlin & Kay (1969), advocate universal patterns in colour terms. Among many prominent opponents of linguistic relativity is Steven Pinker (1994), who is adamant that no differences in thinking are linked with different languages.

Clearly, the interrelationships between language, thought and culture are subject to an ongoing debate, with evidence coming forward from different disciplines. The enquiry is critical to our understanding of how languages work in different cultural contexts and how to account for culture-specific communication styles. Many approaches and themes in language and intercultural communication relate, either explicitly or implicitly, to the broader question of the relationship between language, culture and cognition. One such example is the cultural value approach.

In order to understand the way people of different cultures communicate and behave, a number of scholars in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s dedicated themselves to the categorisation of national cultures in terms of value and belief systems, referred to as cultural dimensions or value orientations. Working for IBM, the Dutch psychologist Geert Hofstede collected questionnaires from more than 100,000 IBM employees in forty countries and identified four cultural dimensions, including *individualism* vs. *collectivism*, *high-* vs. *low-power-distance*, *masculinity* vs. *femininity* and *high* vs. *low uncertainty avoidance*. Later, he added *long-term orientation* as a fifth dimension. Hofstede argued that people carry software-like 'mental programs', of which national culture is an important component (Hofstede, 1991, 2001; also see Chapter 3 in this Reader for a review of his work). Other scholars following a similar approach include Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner (1998), Shalom Schwartz

(1992, 1994) and Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck (1961). Their work is also extended by the cross-cultural psychologist Harry Triandis (1990, 1995), who reconceptualised the dichotomy of individualism vs. collectivism.

Underlying the work of the cultural-value approach is an assumption that cultural values have a determining effect on an individual's style of communication. For example, people from an individualistic culture are often associated with an explicit or direct verbal communication style, and the wants, needs and desires of the speaker are embodied in the spoken message. In contrast, people from a collectivistic culture tend to communicate indirectly and within the group itself; interpersonal harmony and cooperation are important purposes of communication.

Over the years, cultural-value studies have been criticised for their essentialist and over-generalised view of culture, i.e. members of a cultural group are treated as the same, sharing definable characteristics, whatever the context may be (e.g. McSweeney, 2002). Nevertheless, the classification systems proposed by various scholars do act as a convenient tool in revealing the cultural differences in values and beliefs. The studies following this particular line of enquiry are still widely cited in business and organisation management studies and applied in intercultural training.

Theme 2: cultural approaches to discourse and pragmatics: theoretical considerations

Although the relevance of 'cultural membership' to the study of discourse involving speakers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds seems obvious, it was not until the 1980s that the connection began to materialise in systematic analyses of the discourse patterns of speakers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This was partly because discourse studies were, and still are, a very diverse field, and partly because those working in intercultural communication had relatively little knowledge of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics, two fields that provided much input and methodology to discourse-oriented approaches to intercultural communication. In fact, it is still true that many intercultural communication researchers look to psychology and sociology in developing general theories and models. Examples of earlier cultural approaches to discourse include Gumperz (1978, 1982), Gumperz & Tannen (1979) and Gumperz, *et al.* (1979). This body of work is part of so-called interactional sociolinguistics, which is concerned with how speakers signal and interpret meaning in interaction. It provides a framework for a close analysis of intercultural interaction and attributes breakdowns in intercultural communication to differences in discourse strategies and styles and/or the misinterpretation of contextualisation cues.

In the meantime, linguistic pragmatics, i.e. the study of language use in context, has made a significant impact on discourse-oriented intercultural communication studies, especially through the notions of politeness and face proposed by Goffman (1967), Lakoff (1973) and Brown & Levinson (1978). This line of enquiry, represented by Scollon & Scollon (2001b, one section of which is reproduced in this Reader), shares a similar approach with interactional sociolinguistics. However, instead of framing communication breakdown in terms of mismatches of contextualisation cues, the pragmatics approach uses the theoretical construct of *face* (namely, the positive social value a person claims for her or himself) and *politeness strategies* (the interactional strategies to address the hearer's positive and negative face) to account for intercultural differences in interaction.

Although the notions of politeness and face have inspired numerous subsequent studies of various languages to account for observed intercultural differences, their very universal appeal is under constant challenge. A number of studies, for example Matsumoto (1988, 1989), Ide (1989), Mao (1994), de Kadt (1998), Gu (1990, reproduced in this Reader), etc., have challenged the universalities of these notions and argued for culture- and language-specific renditions of these key notions. Some studies have also made an attempt to differentiate 'common-sense politeness', whereby politeness is associated with courtesy and good manners, from 'linguistic politeness', a technical term to describe whether and how speakers address the face-want in interactions (Ehlich, 1992). Watts (2003) further proposed the term 'politic behaviour' to describe both linguistic and non-linguistic behaviours that the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction.

Over the years, many alternative models or approaches have been proposed. Some studies, such as Li Wei (1996) and Ide (2005, reproduced in this Reader), advocate the use of local cultural terms to interpret a cultural phenomenon. Spencer-Oatey (2002, reproduced in this Reader), in her rapport-management model, has brought the interpersonal aspects of the notion of face (i.e. motivational concerns) into a clearer focus. Wierzbicka and her colleagues (Wierzbicka, 2003; Goddard, 2006) have also proposed a culturally and linguistically '*neutral*' method, i.e. 'cultural scripts' written in 'natural semantic metalanguage', to describe cultural practices and thereby to ensure *like for like* comparison between cultural practices. Several scholars (e.g. Sharifian, 2005) have adopted the 'cultural schemas theory', which attempts to capture the cognitive processes underlying human behaviour for social interactions (for a review, see Nishida, 2005), in understanding cross-cultural differences in interaction.

Theme 3: communication patterns across cultures: empirical explorations

Whereas the works outlined in Theme 2 focus on providing theoretical accounts of the cultural approaches to discourse and pragmatics, an impressive number of empirical studies have emerged in the last three decades. These studies have examined various aspects of language use that may vary from one culture to another and from one language to another and can be grouped, very broadly, into the following types.

The first type is focused on comparing patterns of speech acts across cultures. Very often referred to as cross-cultural pragmatics – the study of speech acts by language users from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds – these studies investigate how speech acts or events, such as request, apology, greeting, refusal, persuasion, invitation, gift offering and acceptance, etc., are realised in different languages and to what extent a speaker's choice of linguistic politeness strategies is influenced by factors such as relative power, social distance and degree of imposition in a given culture. The first systematic cross-cultural and interlingual study is the CCSARP project reported in Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984, reproduced in this Reader). Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper (1989), Gass & Neu (1996), Wierzbicka (2003) and Hickey & Steward (2005), among others, contain comparative studies of a number of differing cultures.

The second type of empirical study of communication patterns across cultures is the ethnographic study of cultures. As perhaps the most used methodology in the study of language and intercultural communication, ethnography proves an effective tool for discovering, describing and interpreting culturally specific interaction patterns. (More discussion on ethnography can be found in the last chapter of the *Reader*; see also Blommaert, 1998.) There are a number