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What is a Discourse Approach?

In a business meeting between Hong Kong Chinese and Anglo-North American businessmen, one of the Chinese businessmen might say the following:

> Because most of our production is done in China now, and uh, it's not really certain how the government will react in the run-up to 1997, and since I think a certain amount of caution in committing to TV advertisement is necessary because of the expense. So, I suggest that we delay making our decision until after Legco makes its decision.

This short excerpt is like many others which occur when Chinese or other Asians speak in English to native English speakers from other parts of the world. In most cases there is little difficulty in understanding at the level of the words and sentences. There is the normal amount of "uh's" and other disfluencies found in any section of authentic, real-life language use whether the speakers are native or non-native speakers of the language. Nevertheless, even though the words and sentences of the speaker are quite clear, there is a feeling that it is not quite clear what the speaker's main point is.

Research on discourse shows that this confusion in goals or in interpreting the main point of another's speech is caused by the fact that each side is using different principles of discourse to organize its presentations. In this case the Asian speaker uses a "topic–comment" order of presentation in which the main point (or comment) is deferred until sufficient backgrounding of the topic has been done. The most common form of this structure is this:

> *because* of
> *Y* (topic, background, or reasons)
> *X* (comment, main point, or action suggested)

On the other hand, a western speaker of English tends to expect a discourse strategy of opening the discussion with the introduction of the speaker's

main point so that other speakers may react to it and so that he or she can develop arguments in support as they are needed. That form would be as follows:

   X (comment, main point, or action suggested)
   because of
   Y (topic, background, or reasons)

In the case given above the westerner might expect something more like the following:

   I suggest that we delay making our decision until after Legco makes its decision. That's because I think a certain amount of caution in committing to TV advertisement is necessary because of the expense. In addition to that, most of our production is done in China now, and it's not really certain how the government will react in the run-up to 1997.

This would put the suggestion to delay the decision right at the beginning and then follow this with the speaker's reasons for doing so. The Asian speaker feels uncomfortable putting his suggestion first before he has given his reasoning. This difference in discourse pattern leads the westerner to focus on the opening stages of the discourse as the most crucial while the Asian speaker will tend to look for the crucial points to occur somewhat later.

   The result of these different discourse strategies is that there arise the unfair and prejudicial stereotypes of the "inscrutable" Asian or of the frank and rude westerner.

   Our purpose is to introduce professional communicators to the basic principles of discourse as they apply to communication between members of different groups or, as we will put it, interdiscourse communication. In addition, we describe salient differences which can be expected between speakers of English who come from different cultural backgrounds. We focus particularly on communication between North American or European speakers of English and their East Asian counterparts in contexts of international professional communication.

The Topic

An interdiscourse framework for professional communication can be applied to any situation in which professional communicators are involved in

communication between members of different groups. As we will argue, each of us is simultaneously a member of many different discourse systems. We are members of a particular corporate group, a particular professional or occupational group, a generation, a gender, a region, and an ethnicity. As a result, virtually all professional communication is communication across some lines which divide us into different discourse groups or systems of discourse. It is for this reason we are approaching discourse in professional communication from the point of view of an interdiscourse framework of analysis.

Professional communication

By "professional communicators" we mean anyone for whom communication is a major aspect of his or her work. This includes a very broad range of positions in business and in government, from executives or executive secretaries to translators and copywriters. A recent study in a major East Asian city of positions which could be considered to require professional communication included the following list:

Accountant	Merchandizer
Account executive	Officer
Assistant auditor	Receptionist
Assistant manager	Reporter
Copywriter	Sales executive
Designer	Senior administrative assistant
Editor	Senior clerk
Executive	Senior engineer
Executive secretary	Tour guide
Manager	Trainee manager
Marketing executive	Trainee programmer
Media executive	Translator

Such a list does not, of course, exhaust the positions in government and in business in which professional communicators work. It is only given to suggest the range of employments in which we believe interdiscourse professional communication is a significant aspect of day-to-day professional competence.

We would also like to add teachers (at all levels) to this list of professional communicators. That, of course, raises the question of the possible misinterpretation of the term "professional communication." For some this term

might mean "the communication of professionals" (such as doctors, lawyers, or teachers). We see no need to exclude that use of the term since such professionals find that communication is at the heart of their professional activities as well. Our main concern is that we should not limit our definition of "professional communication" to just those positions which are usually called professional. We believe that intercultural professional communication is a central aspect of the work life of anyone whose work is based upon communication.

Interdiscourse communication

We do not just focus on professional communication but take as our main concern the interdiscourse aspects of such communication. This is because not only in contemporary Asian society, but worldwide as well, a very large segment of day-to-day professional communication takes place in the international language, English. In many cases this communication is between one non-native speaker of English and another. When Chinese from Hong Kong do business in Japan, many aspects of this communication take place in English. When Koreans open an industrial complex in Saudi Arabia, again, English is generally the language in which business is transacted. As a result, the use of English carries with it an almost inevitable load of interdiscourse or intercultural communication.

We do not take the extreme deterministic position that a language solely determines the thought patterns of its speakers. We believe that reality is far too complex to allow for such a simple statement. Nevertheless, we believe that many aspects of western culture, especially western patterns of discourse, which ultimately lead to confusion or to misinterpretation in intercultural discourse, are carried within English as well as transmitted through the process of the teaching and learning of English. These distinctive patterns of discourse are the focus of this book.

We have chosen to present as our primary examples, especially in the opening chapters, communications which involve East Asian speakers of English and western native speakers of English. This is partly because this is a rapidly expanding area of research and of perceived need. At the same time, we believe that these examples will be found to also illustrate general principles of interdiscourse analysis which readers may use in situations very different from those presented in this book. Ultimately we will argue that the cultural differences between people in professional communication are likely to be rather less significant than other differences which arise from being members of different gender or generational discourse systems, or from the conflicts which arise between corporate discourse and professional discourse systems.

Discourse

Discourse as a field of study includes many different aspects of language use. Discourse analysts study everything from the topic–comment structures of sentences or paragraphs through the analysis of rambling conversations or jokes. In recent years the study of discourse has been extended to include literary discourse and whole fields of culture and symbolic systems. Our basic interest is in face-to-face conversation within speech events such as meetings, conversations, or interviews. From such forms of discourse we will derive the principles upon which we base our study.

From "discourse" to "Discourse"

Discourse analysis has undergone many changes over the past twenty years, most of which have resulted in researchers taking a much broader view of what discourse itself really is. While our primary analyses are based on what happens in face-to-face conversations and other such social interactions, our long-range goal is to address what James Paul Gee has called "discourses with a capital 'D'." Others have given a variety of names to these broad discourses such as when we speak of "the discourse of entertainment," "the discourse of medicine," "the discourse of law," or turned around, "legal discourse," or "business discourse." Here the meaning intended is the broad range of everything which can be said or talked about or symbolized within a particular, recognizable domain. Our own term for this is the *Discourse System* which we will further clarify in the following chapters.

We have chosen to focus on the Discourse System or the "Discourse" rather than on culture for several reasons. The first reason is that culture is simply too broad a concept to be of much use in analyzing communication between two or more people from different groups. As we will argue below, when women and men talk, even if they are from the same general culture or even the same region of the same country, in the same generation, and perhaps even in the same family, their values, ideas about how to communicate, and communicative styles can be very different and may well be based in different Discourses or Discourse Systems. It is often the case that a woman can talk to and be understood by another woman – a member of this women's discourse system – more easily, even if that other woman is a stranger, than she can to a man who is very close to her.

By the same token, we will argue that generations also form such broad discourses. People born into the so-called Baby Boom generation have a great deal in common that in some cases makes it easier for them to talk to each other than for them to talk to someone of the same gender, region, class, or profession who was born into either an earlier or later generation. In fact, all of these and like discourses form intersecting and cross-cutting

waves of communicative style and form and value which lead us to argue in later chapters that the idea of culture is mostly too large a concept to really capture the complexity of interdiscourse communication. And we argue that all communication is to some extent interdiscourse communication.

The Limits of Language

Mr Wong and Mr Richardson have a conversation. Mr Richardson has enjoyed this conversation and when they are ready to part he says to Mr Wong that they really should get together to have lunch sometime. Mr Wong says that he would enjoy that. After a few weeks Mr Wong begins to feel that Mr Richardson has been rather insincere because he has not followed up his invitation to lunch with a specific time and place.

The difference in discourse patterns expected by many Asian speakers of English and by western speakers of English is the source of the problem between Mr Wong and Mr Richardson. The pattern which we have mentioned above of displacing important points until nearer the end of a conversation, which is often found in East Asian discourse, has led Mr Wong to think that this mention of lunch at the end of the conversation is of some importance to Mr Richardson. Whether it is important to Mr Wong or not, he believes that Mr Richardson is seriously making an invitation to lunch. Mr Richardson, on the other hand, has made this mention of having lunch together sometime at the end of his conversation because it is of little major significance. For him it does not signify any more than that he has enjoyed his conversation with Mr Wong. It is not a specific invitation, but just a conventional way of parting with good feelings toward the other.

This difference in discourse pattern results in a confusion between the two participants in this hypothetical conversation. The problem at root is that language is fundamentally ambiguous. While it is important for both speakers to distinguish between the main point and "small talk," there is nothing in the language used itself to say "This is the important point." That emphasis is supplied by the expectations each speaker has that the other speaker will use language in the same way that he or she does.

The field of conversational analysis has been an active area of research for well over two decades now. On the basis of this research Stephen Levinson (1990) has argued that it is possible to draw four quite general conclusions:

1   Language is ambiguous by nature.
2   We *must* draw inferences about meaning.
3   Our inferences tend to be fixed, not tentative.
4   Our inferences are drawn very quickly.

In the sections which follow we will take up each of these conclusions in more specific detail.

Language is ambiguous by nature

When we say that language is always ambiguous, what we mean is that we can never fully control the meanings of the things we say and write. The meanings we exchange by speaking and by writing are not given in the words and sentences alone but are also constructed partly out of what our listeners and our readers interpret them to mean. To put this quite another way, meaning in language is jointly constructed by the participants in communication. This is the first general conclusion reached in the research on communication.

I may say something is blue in color but it is another question altogether what the color blue means to you. There is never complete agreement among speakers of a language about the semantic ranges of such items as color terms. This is just one example.

Word-level ambiguity in language

Such words as the prepositions "in" or "at" are notoriously difficult to teach and to learn, and this is because their meanings reside only partly in the words themselves. Much of their meaning is given by the situations in which they are used.

For example, if we say:

There's a man *at* the front door

the preposition "at" tells us something about where the man is located, but it does not tell us very much. We know that he is outside the door. We even go further in assuming that he is standing within reach of the door where he has probably just knocked or rung the bell.

It is not clear just how much it is safe to read into such a sentence, and that is the whole point. This sentence is quite ambiguous in that we do not know very much about just how this man is "at" the door. If we use what is a very similar sentence:

There's a taxi *at* the door

we can see that there is a very different way of being "at" the door. In the case of a taxi we would expect the taxi to be at some distance from the door, in a roadway or a driveway, probably waiting with its motor running. Furthermore, the taxi includes a driver.

One could say that the difference in these two sentences lies not in the preposition "at" but in the two subject nouns "man" and "taxi." The difference lies in what we know about men and taxis and how they wait "at" doors. The point we want to make, based on Levinson's argument, is that what is different in meaning between these two sentences is how objects are "at" a location and that the preposition "at" does not give us enough information in itself. In order to understand these sentences we must call upon our knowledge about the world, which does not reside in the sentences or in any of the words of the sentences.

This is what we mean when we say that language is always ambiguous at the word level. The words themselves do not give us enough information to interpret their meaning unequivocally.

To give just one more example, if we say:

The coffee is *in* the cup

you may draw a number of inferences about just how the coffee is in the cup. You may assume that it is coffee in its brewed, liquid form. You will most likely not assume that we are talking about coffee beans or a jar of frozen coffee powder.

By the same token, if we say:

The pencil is *in* the cup

it is likely that you could draw a picture of that cup and the pencil. The pencil would be sticking out of the cup but more of it would be inside than outside because otherwise the pencil would fall out of the cup. What you do not understand from that sentence is that we have ground the pencil into fine powder, poured boiling water over it, and made a brew of pencil to drink. But there is nothing in the differences between those two sentences or in the words "in" or "cup" which tell you that. These are assumptions you make on the basis of what you know about the world, and the words and sentences only serve to point you in the direction of what you already know.

Sentence-level ambiguity in language

You might think that if words such as the prepositions "at" or "in" or the names of colors are naturally ambiguous, the ambiguity could be cleared up at the level of sentences. Unfortunately, sentences are equally ambiguous.

Our colleague Ray McDermott (1979) has given the example of the simple sentence, "What time is it?," as an excellent example of the ambiguity of language at the sentence level.

If I am walking down the street and I stop you to ask:

> What time is it?

your answer is likely to be something like, "It's two o'clock," or whatever time it is. I will then thank you and go on. Nothing out of the ordinary is understood. But let us change the context to the elementary school classroom. The teacher asks Frankie,

> What time is it?

And Frankie answers, "It's two o'clock." In this case the teacher answers,

> Very good, Frankie.

Notice the difference here. In the first case the sentence, "What time is it?," is part of the speech act of requesting the time and as such it forms a set with the other sentence, "Thank you." In the second case the same sentence, "What time is it?," is part of the speech act of testing a child for his or her ability to tell the time. As such this sentence forms a pair not with, "Thank you," but with, "Very good."

If you doubt that this is true, you can go along the street after reading this and ask somebody the time. When they tell you the time, you answer by saying, "Very good." We assure you that they will consider this to be very odd in the mildest cases or even hostile behavior in more extreme responses.

There are, of course, also many other meanings for this same sentence. If a husband and a wife are at dinner in the home of friends and she asks him, "What time is it?," this question almost certainly could be better translated as something like, "Don't you think it is time we were leaving?"

The point we are making is simply that the meaning of the sentence, "What time is it?," resides not in the sentence alone but in the situation in which it is used as well. Knowing how to interpret the meaning of this sentence requires knowledge of the world as well as knowledge of words and sentences.

Discourse-level ambiguity in language

As a last resort, it might be hoped that we could find unambiguous meaning in language at the level of discourse. Perhaps we could find some way of being specific about the contexts in which sentences are used, and if enough of that information could be made explicit then we could say that language was not ambiguous at least at the level of discourse. Unfortunately, this approach cannot work either. Language remains inherently ambiguous at the level of discourse as well.

Deborah Tannen's (1990a) book *You Just Don't Understand* shows how men and women from the same culture, even from the same families, often misunderstand each other because of different assumptions they make about the purposes or goals of their communication. A man may wish to make a woman happy by giving her a gift of something she really wants. He asks her what she would like to have for her birthday – she can ask for anything. Unfortunately, what she wants more than anything else is for him to know intuitively what she would like to have. According to Tannen, men and women, at least in North American society, tend to differ in their concern for explicitness or for indirection. A woman, according to Tannen, is likely to think it is important for someone to show how well he knows her by not having to ask explicitly what she wants. A man in that situation, however, feels best about the situation if he is told quite directly and explicitly how he can make her happy.

No amount of language used directly could ever clear up this sort of ambiguity. The more clearly they discussed the situation the happier one of the participants would become at the expense of the other. The situation is like that of two little children, a brother and a sister. He wanted to have a chocolate ice-cream cone, so his sister said she also wanted chocolate. The boy then changed his mind and said he wanted strawberry. That made the sister change her request to strawberry. The problem is that he wanted what she did not have and she wanted to have the same as he had.

This sort of difficulty is, unfortunately, in the nature of human interaction and makes it impossible for language to ever become clear and unambiguous.

In the example given earlier in this chapter, Mr Wong expects that the information which comes at the end of a conversation will be the most significant, and so he gives this information special attention. Mr Richardson assumes that what comes at the beginning is most significant, and so he plays down the value of what comes nearer the end. What becomes ambiguous is the emphasis placed on different topics in the discourse. While it might be fairly clear what the actual sentences mean, it is not at all clear how to evaluate them in light of the other sentences.

The ambiguity of language is not the result of poor learning

In this book, which emphasizes interdiscourse aspects of professional communication, it is important to emphasize now that the ambiguity of language is not the result of poor learning. In other words you should not think that if people just had better vocabularies, better grasp of English grammar, or better concepts of the nature of discourse these ambiguities would be cleared up. The point we are making is that ambiguity is inherent in all language use. There is no way to get around the ambiguity of language. What is most important is to recognize that this is the nature of

language and to develop strategies for dealing with ambiguity, not to try to prevent it from developing.

We must *draw inferences about meaning*

We hope that by now our position is clear. Language is always inherently, and necessarily, ambiguous. That leads to the second point we want to make about communication. It means that in order to communicate we *must* always jump to conclusions about what other people mean. There is no way around this. A crossword puzzle is much like the way language works. The first few entries are somewhat difficult, but where we are not sure, a few guesses seem to fit. These then fill in a couple of squares and help us to make more guesses. If those guesses seem to work, we will consider our first guesses to be fairly reliable. We do not consider them to be right answers until the whole puzzle is done and there are no more squares to fill in. If all of the words we have guessed fit in then we draw the final conclusion that our earliest guesses were correct.

Language works in a comparable way. When someone says something, we must jump to some conclusion about what he or she means. We draw inferences based on two main sources: (1) the language they have used, and (2) our knowledge about the world. That knowledge includes expectations about what people would normally say in such circumstances.

Our inferences tend to be fixed, not tentative

A third conclusion of the past two decades of research on conversational in-ference and discourse analysis is that the inferences we make tend to become fixed conclusions; they do not remain tentative in our minds.

There is a good reason why it should work this way, otherwise we would be always wandering around in uncertainty about what anything might mean. When someone says, "There's a man at the door," we draw the inference that this means that the man is standing at the door and waiting for someone to go to answer his call. We do not immediately begin to con-sider all the possibilities of what such a statement might mean. That would lead to complete communicative immobilization.

Many researchers in the field prefer to use the distinction between "marked" and "unmarked" to capture this aspect of communication. When we say that we make certain assumptions about the man at the door, those are the unmarked assumptions we are making. In other words, as long as nothing to the contrary leads us to expect differently, we assume that the

world will operate the way we have come to expect it to operate. The unmarked expectation for men at doors is that described above. If the man at the door was dead or injured and lying at the door, we would expect the speaker to say, "There's a man lying at the door," or, perhaps, "There's somebody at the door, and he's in trouble." Something would be said to indicate that the unmarked expectation was not in effect in this case.

In other words, when there is no reason to expect otherwise, we assume the world will behave normally and that our unmarked expectations about it will continue to remain true. These fixed expectations are not tentative but are really the main substance of our concept of the normal, day-to-day world that we take for granted without questioning.

Our inferences are drawn very quickly

The fourth point we want to make, based on the research of the past two decades, is that the inferences we draw in ordinary conversation (as well as in reading written text) are drawn very quickly. Most researchers suggest that such inferences must be drawn every time it becomes possible for speakers to exchange turns, and that such occasions occur approximately once every second in normal conversation.

The use of the term "inference" might lead to confusion, however. In using this term we do not want to suggest that these processes of conversational inference (or what we would really prefer to call practical inference) are conscious, cognitive operations. It would be better to think of our actions in ongoing social interaction as deriving from our senses of who we are more than from any conscious process of inferential interpretation. We want to avoid thinking, "I have acted this way because she/he said X, Y, or Z" because it is closer to the point to think, "I have acted this way because that's who and what I am." That is to say, the processes of conversational (or practical) inference arise out of our customary ways of being in social situations, not out of any conscious process of self-reflection and analysis. From this point of view it is dangerous to over-emphasize the cognitive or reflective aspects of conversational inference and conversational strategizing.

What this Book is Not

We do not want to dwell on what we are not doing in this book as that is ultimately a very large universe. It is important to make a distinction, however, between studies of cross-cultural communication and intercultural communication. This is never a hard and fast distinction, of course, and a

quick review of library and internet sources will show the reader that many people are coming to blur this distinction in their use of the terms. The basic distinction that we are trying to capture is the distinction between comparing communication systems of different groups *when considered abstractly* or *when considered independently of any form of social interaction* and looking at communication *when members of different groups are directly engaged with each other*. We would call the former type of study cross-cultural communication studies and what we are presenting in this book we would call intercultural communication, or better yet, interdiscourse communication. Our emphasis is on *people in social interaction with each other*, not upon abstract or independently conceived differences between members of different groups.

Our reasons for doing this are based in the research literature as well as in practical necessities. There is a very large and ever-growing research literature in anthropology, communication, sociology, education, business, and linguistics – to name just some of the fields – in which differences between different systems are compared. We find this literature fascinating and very useful in deriving preliminary hypotheses for studying social interactions among people who are members of different groups. Ultimately, however, there is a difficulty with that literature in that it does not directly come to grips with what happens when people are actually communicating across the boundaries of social groups.

To give just one example, we could say, for example, that it is a widespread practice in China (and Hong Kong and Taiwan) to eat with chopsticks and that it is the practice in North America and Europe and many other places to eat with knives, forks, and spoons. We could very elaborately describe these practices which are often quite complex and have to do with how and when the utensils are picked up, how they are held, how they are placed again on the table or on other utensils and so forth. None of this would tell us, however, what would happen when a Chinese exchange student eats in a cafeteria in a British university nor what a South African would do on her first visit to Taiwan. Furthermore, as we have often observed, it is quite likely that each might try to adopt the other's custom and many times we have seen the North American eating with chopsticks while his or her Chinese counterpart enjoys the meal with a knife, fork, and spoon, each quite happy engaging in this cultural cross-over.

This rather homely example points up our concern to analyze situations in which members of different groups are in social interaction with each other and the interpretive processes they must bring to bear to understand each other in those highly altered hybrid and culturally mixed intermediate situations which are the normal situations of intercultural communication. Further, as such research has established, in many situations some aspects of so-called cultural difference are of no relevance at all whereas other

aspects that might be thought extremely minor might assume central importance. As an example of this, it might be the case that religious belief is of central personal and cultural importance to two business people as individuals and as members of their home sociocultural groups. Yet in a business meeting, this might never be a factor in successful communication. At the same time, what might seem a trivial matter – whether you hand something to a person with one or two hands – might turn out to be the basis for one party deciding that the other was treating him rudely and make all the difference in a successful business encounter.

For this reason, in this book we have set aside – not as unimportant but rather as not directly relevant – aspects of cultural, group, or social differences that are not directly involved in social interactions between members from different groups. Our focus is on social interactions, on how they develop an internal logic of their own, and how people read those social interactions in making decisions and in taking actions that have consequences far beyond those situations themselves.

Language, discourse, and non-verbal communication

We focus our attention in this book to a considerable extent on language, which may lead some readers to wonder if we mean to neglect what is sometimes called "non-verbal communication." This is not our intention at all and throughout the book many examples are given of the importance of non-linguistic symbols. Having said this, however, we do think it is important here to clarify why we give over so much of our space to a focus on language and on discourse. We do this for two reasons: first, we believe that the role of discourse and of language is, in fact, central in interethnic communication, not just one of the factors which can be set aside whenever convenient; secondly, we believe that the claims sometimes made about the role of non-verbal communication are wildly exaggerated and are badly in need of correction.

To take up the first point first, our research has shown that when people communicate *within* customary communities of practice or groups in which they are regular and familiar members, much of the communication proceeds on a very basic level of practice. That is, when we communicate with people very much like ourselves, much of what we do and say *can* be taken for granted and *is* taken for granted by others. In this realm of the very familiar, non-verbal communication does actually play a very significant role. Nevertheless, when communication begins to cross the lines of our discourse systems, as we will argue in later chapters, we become hyper-conscious of communication itself and this hyper-consciousness tends to be produced meta-linguistically or meta-discursively. That is, we begin to

talk about the fact that we do not understand what somebody else means or we comment on how differently from our expectations someone is behaving. While it would go beyond our purposes to argue it in full here, we believe that in interdiscourse communication, the role of language and of discourse itself is highlighted as a central focus for the participants in that communication, and so from this point of view we believe that an excessive focus on differences in non-verbal behavior of members of different groups *when they are in interaction solely within those groups* does not really address the central issues of intercultural communication we are analyzing in this book.

The second issue, however, is of importance and should be briefly addressed. We see in many books on communication and intercultural communication statements like the following:

> In most two-person conversations the words communicate only about 35 percent of the social meaning of the situation; the nonverbal elements convey more than 65 percent of the meaning. Another estimate is that the nonverbal message carries 4.3 times the weight of the verbal message. (Westbrook Eakins and Eakins 1982:292)

Again, in another place:

> Mehrabian (1972) argued that in face-to-face communication non-verbal cues convey about 93 percent of the meanings and Birdwhistell (1970) also indicated that 65 percent of human communication is nonverbal. (Chen and Starosta 1998:83)

And in yet another place our colleague Deborah Tannen is cited as follows:

> Linguist Deborah Tannen estimates that as much as 90 percent of all human communication is nonverbal, though other scholars argue that the percentage is much lower. (Neuliep 2000:233)

Such statements are, of course, absurd in any genuinely objective sense of the word. Nobody has ever put forward any means of quantifying the "social meaning of the situation" and we are very skeptical that such a quantification could ever be done. One wonders whether if "non-verbal" was to include lip movement, tongue movement, laryngeal movement, and so forth, would there be any meaning at all of "the word" that would not be non-verbal in that case? Does such a statement mean to distinguish between the abstract (the word) and the concrete (the physical manifestation)? In that case we would be indulging in the ancient philosophical question of the relationship between form and substance.

There is actually an historical reason such estimates are given and Edward T. Hall's excellent autobiography (Hall 1992) clarifies where these rather

extreme and surprising estimates come from. When Edward Hall and George Trager were working at the US Department of State in the 1940s and 1950s they developed a chart in a flash of one afternoon's work. It consisted of ten words (Hall 1992:214):

> INTERACTION and MATERIALS
> ASSOCIATION and DEFENSE
> SUBSISTENCE and PLAY
> SEXUAL DIMORPHISM and LEARNING
> TERRITORIALITY and TEMPORALITY

These ten words first were written across the top of a cell matrix and then were repeated down the side of the matrix to give a 100-cell matrix of cells starting with (from left to right) Interaction and Interaction, Interaction and Materials, Interaction and Association, Interaction and Defense, and so forth. They then began to think of what human communicative behavior fits into each cell. Hall estimates that because most of these cells include non-verbal behavior, "eighty to ninety percent of communication might eventually be situated in this nonverbal unconscious realm of culture" (1992: 248).

Of course, in a ten by ten 100-cell matrix, the ten overlapping cells are simply redundant: Interaction and Interaction, Materials and Materials, and so forth. So from the outset, 10 percent of the cells were non-functional. Further, virtually every functional cell not only includes non-verbal, unconscious behavior as Hall rightly pointed out, but virtually every functional cell also contains verbal and conscious action. Thus Hall's highly enthusiastic estimate of 80 to 90 percent is really quite a misleading statement. We feel that rather than simply repeating this very unreliable estimate which has never had any further substantiation but which has stayed active in the intercultural folklore, it is best to focus on those aspects of intercultural communication where research has shown profitable results and these aspects are primarily in the area of language and discourse.

Methodology

The ideas which are presented in this book have been derived over a period of decades of our own research and through the reading of a research literature. The primary methodology upon which this research has been based is most often called ethnography from "ethno" (people) and "graphy" (to describe). Many books have been written on ethnographic methodologies as used in anthropology, sociology, education, and increasingly in business and government and perhaps the essential point made by all of them is

that it is difficult to clearly set out the steps and procedures of ethnographic methodology. Nevertheless there are four general processes which are common to all ethnographic studies and four types of data which bring to these studies not only concrete and vivid reality but also the validity and reliability of any scientific pursuit.

Four processes of ethnography

Ethnographic research methodology is based on fieldwork, participant observation, "strange making," and contrastive observation. Fieldwork is a quite general term which means that the researcher goes to the place where the phenomenon occurs naturally rather than trying to set up artificial or laboratory conditions for its study. This is one of the main distinctions, actually, between most cross-cultural communication research and intercultural communication research. Whereas most research in cross-cultural communication sets up experimental, survey, or test situations which are normally quite far removed from people actually engaged in social interaction, fieldwork takes the ethnographic researcher to the places where intercultural communication is happening. This means that the research is conducted in offices where job interviews are being conducted, in business meetings, in restaurants, taxis, hotels, and other places where tourists and travelers are encountering people different from themselves, but also in family conversations between members of different genders or generations, in classrooms where expatriate teachers are teaching "local" students and all the other situations of normal life in our contemporary world where people who are different from each other engage in social interaction.

This leads to the second process which is normally called participant-observation. This idea follows quite directly from the idea of fieldwork. If we are to study intercultural or interdiscourse communication in situations where it is actually happening as part of a day-to-day reality, the researchers themselves must be or must become participants in those situations. In practice this works in one of two ways:

1 The researcher studies a situation in which he or she is already a legitimate participant, such as his or her own family or office, and brings to that participation the formal observational procedures of the researcher.
2 The researcher studies a new situation and therefore has to work over a period of time to apprentice himself or herself to that situation to become a legitimate participant.

Of course in the first case the observations are rich in nuance and understanding of the situation but might easily be colored by less than objective

involvement. In the second case the observations might well be quite object-ive, but to that extent may not truly represent the lived experience of the actual participants.

This leads to the third process, the process sometimes called "strange making." This is simply a way of talking about what happens when a person takes up the dual stance of participant and of observer. As participants we normally do things without thinking much about them. As observers we must come to see these day-to-day activities as "strange" so that we can isolate them and see them *as if* we did not know exactly what was going on. Either way, whether the researcher comes in as a new participant or brings his or her research project to the familiar, the process "makes strange" what is normally taken for granted and this is an essential aspect of ethnographic research which has made an enormous contribution to studies of intercultural communication.

Finally, perhaps the most crucial aspect of all studies of intercultural or interdiscursive communication is that of contrastive observation. We want to know not only *what do people do* but also *how might they have done otherwise*. The surest way to learn how someone might have done otherwise is to contrast their action with the actions of people in other places, at other times, or in other groups. We only come to see the North American practice of handing a business card with one hand as strange when we come to realize that many Asians hand out a business card with two hands. In this contrastive observation, both practices are "made strange," and we can see that in both cases a perfectly natural option – one or two hands – is chosen and fixed upon as *the* way to do it.

Four types of data in ethnographic research

Of course ethnographers use a very wide range of technologies for produc-ing their data which include photography, video, film, audio tape recording, hand-written field notes, and the collection of artifactual materials. They conduct interviews and focus groups, they attend significant ceremonies, meetings, and social events, and they also use products and materials pro-duced by the members of the groups under study such as works of film and literature and TV and other media of entertainment. The data which are collected can be divided into four types which provide a kind of triangula-tion or cross-checking to provide both reliability (the idea that other re-searchers would find the same thing) and validity (the idea that what is observed and described really corresponds to something in the world and not just the researcher's own preconceptions). These four types of data can be called:

1   Members' generalizations.
2   Neutral (objective) observations.
3   Individual member's experience.
4   Observer's interactions with members.

In the first case, the researcher is concerned with getting an answer to the question: What do people in this group say is the meaning of this action? That is, the idea is to see what people themselves say about what they are doing. Of course, we are aware that people can easily give rationalizations of their actions and behavior that are wide of the mark of reality. Nevertheless, it is crucial in intercultural communication to know how the ingroup, the members of the society or group, themselves characterize their own actions.

These members' generalizations, of course, then have to be checked against more objective observations. This is often accomplished with some objective data recording such as with tape or video recording, photography or some other means of documenting what actually happens as opposed to what people say *should* happen.

As an example of the difference between these two types of data we have the situation in which the mother of one of the authors was holding our infant child in her lap. We were asking her about her views about baby talk. She said that she felt it was a very bad influence on a child for an adult to use any form of baby talk and that she always insists on speaking properly to infants. That was very nice, of course, but the record we have of that same conversation in which she expressed those opinions was fully larded with baby talk to the infant in her lap. This is a case of the member saying that baby talk is bad and *within the same social interaction* using baby talk to talk to an infant.

Of course we know that people are inconsistent and these two sorts of data help to highlight these inconsistencies. The importance of this for our studies of interdiscourse communication is that the second kind of data keeps us from taking members' generalizations at face value. It protects us from making the same generalizations in our own analysis. After all, it is a person's actual behavior which is of importance in interdiscourse or intercultural communication. At the same time, however, it is important to know what members feel about themselves and their own communication. If the researcher is involved in training, for example, it is of no use to begin a training project by railing against (or for) the use of baby talk to infants if everyone in the training session believes that he or she never uses baby talk. They will simply see your comments as irrelevant. They must first be brought to see the contradictions between their own stated beliefs and their actual behaviors for such analysis to be useful.

The third type of data is also very important in achieving a degree of triangulation. Often a member of a group will say something like, "We

always do X; but of course, I'm rather different and don't do that." It is very common for members of groups to state both a general, normative principle of behavior and then to also state an individual departure from that behavior. Michael Bond, for example, has found that in Hong Kong university-aged students are quite ready to describe characteristics of the typical Hong Konger but at the same time are also very unwilling to agree that those characteristics apply to themselves. This third type of observation can best be achieved through such means as case histories or life stories where subjects describe in vivid and concrete detail their own personal experiences. These individual and sometimes idiosyncratic observations give the researcher an idea of the range of variation allowed within a particular cultural group or discourse system and are essential to establishing first, how broadly a generalization can be made, and secondly, to what extent members are willing to accept general descriptions as descriptions of their own personal behavior.

Finally, the fourth type of data, and perhaps the most crucial while at the same time most difficult type of data to get is achieved by returning the analyst's observations and generalizations to the group about which they are made. We often feel that a description of our own behavior is an attempt to discredit or disadvantage us, and so it is very difficult for us to hear the descriptions others make of our own behavior. Nevertheless, when an ethnographer takes his or her analysis of a situation or a type of behavior back to the people about which it has been observed, it provides an unequalled opportunity to see ourselves as others see us. As ethnographers we begin to understand how those we have studied see our studies and our observations. We know of no ethnographers who do not feel that this is by far the most rewarding part of his or her research, as painful as it sometimes is to have people tell you that the little piece of knowledge you think you have produced is basically all wrong. For the serious ethnographer this is a new starting point – a starting point for a much deeper understanding of the behavior he or she was trying to study in the first place.

Interactional sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis

Much of the ethnographic work we have just described here has been extended through the methodologies of interactional sociolinguistics. This school of research arose with the widespread use of the convenient tape recorder and has now been extended through the use of video recording. Because an objective record can now easily be made of ongoing social interactions, researchers have been able to set aside the somewhat questionable opinion surveys on which earlier research was based and to base their observations on actually occurring phenomena. When these tapes and

transcriptions are then played back to the original participants as well as to other members of the same group in focus groups significant triangulation is achieved which provides the basis for generalizing beyond the original actual participants.

Finally, to these ethnographic and interactional sociolinguistic methods have been added the methods of critical discourse analysis, especially when we have developed our arguments about the Utilitarian Discourse System in chapter 6. Here the goal is to uncover the underlying ideological principles which are shaping the discourse, particularly in its historical formation. In this way we have been able to argue that the contemporary businessman who says you should just say the 5 W's and the 1 H (Where, What, When, Who, Why, and How) and be done with it has not originated this idea himself but is, in fact, speaking with the borrowed voice of the philosophy of utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill centuries before him.

What we have presented here are the methodologies which have been the basis for the research reported here in this book. In chapter 12 we will return to the question of methodology from a somewhat different point of view. There we will take up the question of how the ideas presented in this book can be used to develop further research and as the basis for training and consultation in intercultural and interdiscursive communication.

What is Successful Interdiscourse Professional Communication?

Language is ambiguous. This means that we can never be certain what the other person means – whether in speaking or writing. To put it another way, language can never fully express our meanings. Of course it is not surprising that research should confirm what philosophers in both the east and the west have told us for millennia. But what does this mean for intercultural professional communication?

In the first place it should be clear that communication works better the more the participants share assumptions and knowledge about the world. Where two people have very similar histories, backgrounds, and experiences, their communication works fairly easily because the inferences each makes about what the other means will be based on common experience and knowledge. Two people from the same village and the same family are likely to make fewer mistakes in drawing inferences about what the other means than two people from different cities on different sides of the earth.

The ambiguous nature of language is one major source of difficulties in interdiscourse communication. Where any two people differ in group

membership because they are of different genders, different ages, different ethnic or cultural groups, different educations, different parts of the same country or even city, different income or occupational groups, or with very different personal histories, each will find it more difficult to draw inferences about what the other person means.

In the contemporary world of international and intercultural professional communication, the differences between people are considerable. People are in daily contact with members of cultures and other groups from all around the world. Successful communication is based on sharing as much as possible the assumptions we make about what others mean. When we are communicating with people who are very different from us, it is very difficult to know how to draw inferences about what they mean, and so it is impossible to depend on shared knowledge and background for confidence in our interpretations.

Expecting things to go wrong

Let us return to the example we gave above. Mr Wong feels that Mr Richardson has been insincere because he did not live up to his suggested invitation for lunch with Mr Wong. Mr Richardson probably feels that Mr Wong has been vaguely difficult to understand because he is not likely to have placed his main topics at the beginning of the conversation. Each has formed a somewhat negative opinion of the other on the basis of his wrong inferences about what the other meant. What do we do to fix this sort of miscommunication?

One solution might be to teach both Mr Wong and Mr Richardson what the other person's expectations are. Then Mr Richardson will know that Mr Wong will want to pay close attention to what comes at the end of their conversation, and Mr Wong will know that Mr Richardson will want to pay more attention to what comes at the beginning.

But have we fixed things? In this scenario they have just switched assumptions. The problem is that now neither of them knows which system the other is likely to use, since they now know both systems.

And yet to some extent we have fixed things. What both Mr Wong and Mr Richardson now know is that they cannot be certain how to interpret the speech of the other. That, in turn, means that they should hesitate to draw any negative conclusions about the actions of the other, since they cannot be sure whether they have correctly interpreted the other's intentions.

It also means something else. If both Mr Wong and Mr Richardson know that there are two possible systems for arranging topics and for giving emphasis to a topic in a discourse, they are both likely to pay closer attention to topics at both the beginnings and the endings of their conversations. In

other words, they have both come to expect problems of interpretation. This leads them to question their own immediate interpretations and will also lead them to probe the other conversationalist further to see if their interpretations are correct.

Two Approaches to Interdiscourse Professional Communication

We have adopted two approaches to improving professional communication between members of different discourse systems. The first approach is based on knowing as much as possible about the people with whom one is communicating. This approach might be called the approach of increasing shared knowledge. The second approach is based on making the assumption that misunderstandings are the only thing certain about interdiscourse professional communication. This approach might be called dealing with miscommunication.

Increasing shared knowledge

We begin in chapter 2 from the point of view of increasing shared knowledge. We focus on the scenes and events in which our communicative actions and activities take place. Chapter 3 then turns to the question of how our identities as participants in speech events are both developed and maintained in interpersonal communication. The overall goal of these two chapters is to outline the two major areas in which shared knowledge works to reduce the ambiguity inherent in communication.

Dealing with miscommunication

Chapter 4 turns the focus toward dealing with miscommunication. It begins by introducing discourse analysis through the study of conversational inference. Through a study of cohesive devices such as conjunction, schemata or scripts, prosodic patterning of rhythm, intonation, and timing, we discuss the processes used by participants in speech events to interpret meanings.

Chapter 5 picks up the question of what causes the widely observed difference between westerners and Asians in their use of deductive and inductive strategies for introducing topics. We argue that it is not any inherent difference between westerners and Asians, but what makes the difference is that relationships of face politeness are treated differently.

Both strategies may be used either by westerners or by Asians, but there is a tendency for Asians to be concerned with showing deference or respect in interactions with non-intimates, in contrast to westerners, who tend to emphasize egalitarian interpersonal relationships. These differences in face relationships lead to the use of different rhetorical strategies.

Because differences in rhetorical strategies can lead to the development of differences in interpersonal power, chapter 5 discusses the sources of power disparities in discourse. The chapter closes with a study of focused and non-focused interaction.

Regular patterns of discourse tend to form systems of discourse in which cultural norms lead to the choice of certain strategies for face relationships. These face relationships lead, in turn, to the use of particular discourse forms. Those different discourse forms imply certain modes of socialization which complete the circle by predetermining cultural norms. In chapter 6 we introduce the concept of the Utilitarian discourse system, which plays out in the field of discourse the philosophical position of Utilitarian economic and political ideology.

Having provided the background in the preceding chapters, chapter 7 then turns the focus directly on the broadest form of interdiscourse communication, intercultural communication. The approach we take is to emphasize the need both to share knowledge and to assume that miscommunication will occur and will need to be dealt with. In chapter 7 the question of culture is raised. There are many aspects of intercultural communication which have been brought up in the research literature. We discuss history and worldview, the functions of language, and non-verbal communication. The pernicious problem of binarism and stereotyping is shown to be one which arises when someone knows enough to contrast two cultural groups or discourse systems, but remains unaware of further dimensions of contrast and commonality.

Chapters 8–11 then take up the question of the different kinds of discourse system. Chapter 8 begins by presenting an outline guide for the study of discourse systems. It then takes up the first of two goal-directed discourse systems, the corporate discourse system. Chapter 9 considers a second goal-directed discourse system which cuts across the corporate system, the professional discourse system. Chapters 10 and 11 then use two involuntary discourse systems, the generational discourse system and the gender discourse system, to illustrate how problems of interpretation arise in discourse because of our different interpretive frameworks. Chapter 11 concludes by pointing out that each of us is simultaneously a member of multiple discourse systems which may make competing demands on us for membership and identity.

Chapter 12 concludes the book by returning to questions of methodology. There we describe how we and others have used our methodology as well as this book to do new research in intercultural communication. We also take

up the question of how our approach to intercultural communication has been used in conducting training and consultation programs.

We believe that the most successful professional communicator is not the one who believes he or she is an expert in crossing the boundaries of discourse systems, but, rather, the person who strives to learn as much as possible about other discourse systems while recognizing that except within his or her own discourse systems he or she is likely to always remain a novice. We believe that effective communication requires study of cultural and discourse differences on the one hand, but also requires a recognition of one's own limitations.