

10 Language and culture

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CHAPTER PREVIEW

KEY TERMS

back-channel cues
coherence system
complementary
schismogenesis
contextualization
cues
conversational
rituals
cooperative overlap
exuberances and
deficiencies
framing
indirectness
interactional
sociolinguistics
interruption
languaculture
linguistic
determinism
linguistic relativity
message and
metamessage
prior text
rate of speech
Rules of Rapport
Sapir-Whorf
hypothesis

Language and culture are closely intertwined in complex ways; indeed, many anthropological linguists argue that they are inseparable. The meaning of utterances comes not only from the words spoken but also from culturally agreed-upon conventions for how those words are used and interpreted, as well as from how they have been used in the past within a given culture. This chapter illustrates the relationship between language and culture by examining representative scenarios of conversational interactions between speakers who grew up in different countries speaking different languages, and between Americans of different ethnic and regional backgrounds. An opening scenario of an interaction between an American student and his German counterparts illustrates culturally influenced aspects of language that can cause miscommunication or mutual misjudgment of intentions and abilities. Next, we introduce the concept of framing and explore how differences in framing can exacerbate discrimination and social inequality. This is illustrated with reference to John Gumperz's studies of crosscultural communication. We move then to discussion of politeness strategies and the conversational styles that result from their systematic use of features like overlap, rate of speech, and indirectness. We then consider the ritual nature of conversation. Differences in conversational rituals are illustrated with examples from language and gender. The concept "complementary schismogenesis" accounts for why things often get worse rather than better when people with different styles talk to each other. Finally, we consider the extent to which language shapes thinking and provides a way to order and see coherence in the world, and we suggest that language and culture are better thought of as a single entity: languaculture.

GOALS

The goals of this chapter are to:

- explore and explain the relationship between language and culture
- identify the role played by language in crosscultural encounters
- show how crosscultural encounters provide insight into how language works to create meaning
- identify the specific linguistic elements that speakers use to convey meaning in conversation and how they can vary from one culture to another
- become familiar with key terms and concepts in anthropological linguistic analyses of linguistic relativity

Culturally influenced aspects of language

An American university student arrives in Germany to begin a study-abroad program. With his deep knowledge of current events and international affairs, he is well prepared for and enthusiastic about the adventure before him. But as he begins to interact with German university students, things start to go wrong. Almost immediately after learning that he is American, many German students launch into vitriolic attacks on American foreign policy or passionate arguments about religion. There is no way that our American student is going to talk about religion with someone he doesn't know. And he is so offended by the attacks on his country and by the belligerent tone used to present them that he usually clams up. If he does try to respond to the accusations, the German students typically try to cut him off or shout him down. The American student comes away from these conversations shaken, increasingly convinced that German students are opinionated, arrogant, and rude. For their part, the German students are frustrated that their attempts to begin a lively interchange have fallen flat. They come away from the same conversations increasingly convinced that American students are uninformed, apathetic, and not very interesting.

This description is based on an article written by Heidi Byrnes (1986), a Georgetown University professor who has worked with many college students preparing for and returning from study-abroad programs in her native Germany. According to Dr. Byrnes, these mutual frustrations and stereotypes between American and German students are common. Although the German students speak English and the American students speak German, they have very different assumptions about how to use language when they talk to each other, and it does not occur to them that they are exercising culturally learned linguistic habits. They believe they are simply trying to talk to each other in ways that are self-evidently appropriate.

Everyone knows that those who live in different countries speak different languages. But as American students quickly learn when they go abroad, knowing the vocabulary and grammar of the language is only a starting

point for successful communication. Members of different cultures not only speak different languages but also have different ways of using the languages they speak – different assumptions about what's appropriate to say and how to go about saying it. In fact, people who live in the same country and speak the same language can also have different assumptions about what to say and how to say it, depending on their ethnic and class backgrounds, geographic region, gender, and other influences.

The ways of speaking that characterize how you say what you mean, which distinguish the Germans' and Americans' use of language in our example, occur at every level of language use, from such obvious elements as what is appropriate to talk about to less obvious aspects of speech like intonation (the musical lift of language) and turn-taking (how to get the floor). When we talk to each other, we tend to focus on what we want to say, and we automatically make these and many other linguistic choices that communicate how we mean what we say. These choices tend to differ from one culture to another. Here are some of the linguistic elements that characterize and distinguish the German and American students' use of language in the situation described above:

Topic (what to talk about). Is it appropriate to discuss politics and religion with someone you have just met? To many Germans it is; to many Americans it is not. As a result, the German students come across to the American students as intrusive and rude, while the Americans strike the Germans as ignorant or apathetic.

Agonism (using an adversarial format to accomplish goals other than literal fighting). Is it appropriate to oppose the ideas of someone you have just met? If so, how strongly? For many Germans, strong expressions of opposition make for lively interchange; to many Americans, such levels of opposition are unacceptably belligerent, so they withdraw, giving the impression to the German students that they have nothing to say.

Amplitude, pitch, and tone of voice (levels of loudness and pitch combined with voice quality). How loud or soft, high-pitched or low-pitched, should your voice be, to indicate emotions or other stances toward what is said? The loudness and assertive voice quality that for many Germans connotes enthusiasm and passionate commitment can seem overbearing, angry, and even intimidating to Americans; this too encourages them to back off or withdraw from the conversation.

Intonation (the music of language). When an utterance ends with rising pitch, it sounds like a question or like an invitation for the listener to signal understanding or agreement (such as *mhm* or *uhuh*). When an utterance ends with falling intonation (that is, the pitch goes down), it sounds like a statement or even a demand. German speakers often use falling intonation where Americans would use rising intonation, so the Americans may come away with the impression that their German conversational partners were peremptory or curt. Conversely, Americans' tendency to end sentences with flat or rising intonation may give Germans the impression that they are tentative or uncertain.

Overlap vs. interruption (speaking at the same time). When does talking at the same time as another speaker constitute interruption (taking the floor away) and when is it a cooperative overlap (talking along to show interest and enthusiasm)? Germans often start speaking while others are speaking in order to show eager involvement in the conversation. To an American who believes that only one person should be speaking at a time, this overlap comes across as an interruption, an attempt to take the floor before the American has finished. The American will probably yield the floor, feeling interrupted, convinced that the German wants only to speak, not to listen. But the German who intended the overlap as a show of enthusiasm will conclude that the American has no more to say or is unwilling to contribute ideas to the conversation.

Turn-taking (how speakers determine who has, gets, or relinquishes the floor). Conversation is a two-party or multi-party enterprise: one person speaks, then another speaks, and so on. Speakers use many linguistic elements to signal when they are done talking, wish to speak, or are taking the floor. We have just seen how differing habits regarding overlap can disrupt turn-taking. All the other elements play a role here, too: topic (Does the speaker seem to have finished? Is the second speaker introducing a new subject?); agonism (Is the second speaker agreeing or disagreeing, and in how strong terms?); amplitude (Does the level of loudness give the impression a second speaker is trying to shout down the first? Is the level so quiet that the first speaker doesn't know the second wants to say something?); and intonation (How peremptory or tentative does a speaker sound?).

Indirectness (communicating meaning implicitly rather than explicitly). What should be stated directly, and what should be implied? If meaning is not explicit, what indirect locutions are appropriate to convey it? Americans might use indirectness by sending out feelers to discover whether new acquaintances share their political views before speaking passionately in support of those views. German students' direct expression of their political views strikes the American students as overly blunt, whereas Americans' subtle indications of their political views are likely to be missed by German speakers altogether, leading them to conclude that American students don't have any.

Framing (how ways of speaking signal what speakers think they are doing by talking in a particular way in a particular context). All the aspects of conversational style described above, along with others, "frame" the interaction by signaling to listeners how they should interpret what is said: are we having a chat? An argument? Are you teasing? Angry? The American and German students perceive different frames. What the Germans regard as a lively conversation, the Americans regard as an unpleasant argument or verbal attack.

All these ways of speaking operate whenever people talk to each other. They are simply the linguistic elements that we use to communicate how we mean what we say and what we think we are doing at each moment in

a conversation. They tend to be invisible, because we take the meaning of these linguistic elements for granted; we find them self-evident. When conversationalists share expectations about these linguistic elements, there is no reason to pay attention to them. But when habits and expectations regarding their use are not shared, we need to pay attention to them, first because listeners may misinterpret how we mean what we say, and second because these ways of speaking also form the basis for judgments we make about each other's intentions and abilities.

The above discussion could give the impression that all Germans share the same communicative habits and all Americans share a different set of communicative habits. But this is not the case. No two individuals have exactly the same ways of using language. "Culture" is a highly complex and multifaceted phenomenon. In addition to individual personality, there are many other "cultural" influences as well, such as geographic region (think of New England, the Midwest, the South, and all the smaller geographic regions within these areas); ethnic groups (among Americans, these include the influence of the countries from which their ancestors came); social class; gender; profession (think of an accountant as compared to a psychologist); sexual orientation; and so on. These cultural influences affect the words, expressions, intonation patterns, turn-taking habits, and other linguistic aspects of how speakers say what they mean. At the same time that these ways of speaking communicate ideas, they also communicate what you think you are doing in a particular conversation, the relationship you have or want to have with the person you are speaking to, and what kind of person you are. Since these linguistic elements vary by cultural influence, they affect what happens when speakers of different cultural backgrounds talk to each other.

In what follows, we will look more closely at how linguistic elements work together to communicate meaning and negotiate social relationships in interaction; how their use can differ from one cultural group to another; and how these differences affect the outcome when speakers of varying cultural backgrounds talk to each other.

Language, culture, and framing

Let's start by looking more closely at the concept of framing, because it governs all the other linguistic signals we will discuss. Framing is the way speakers communicate what they think they are doing in a particular interchange, and therefore how to interpret what they say.

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson ([1955]1972) developed the idea of framing during a visit to a zoo, where he watched two young monkeys playing. Bateson asked himself how the monkeys (and the zoo visitors) knew that although they were behaving aggressively (for example, biting each other), they were not really fighting, but just playing. In other words, "playing" and "fighting" are alternate frames that determine how the bites are to be interpreted. Bateson concluded that whereas the bite was the message (the literal meaning of the action) the monkeys simultaneously communicated to each other a metamessage ("This is play") that

signaled how the bites were meant. A metamessage signals a frame – what the monkeys were *doing* when they bit each other – within which bites are understood as playful.

In conversations between human beings, every utterance is framed by a metamessage that signals how that utterance is intended (for example, literally or sarcastically, angrily or teasingly). The metamessage signals what people think they are *doing* when they speak particular words in particular ways in particular contexts. Everything said in a conversation includes clues to how listeners should interpret the words spoken, so that participants understand not only what is *said* but also what is *going on*. Metamessages are signaled by *how* you say what you mean – that is, all the linguistic elements that we listed above, such as tone of voice, rate of speech, loudness, intonational patterns, and so on. For example, in American English, sarcasm is often signaled by flat intonation and exaggerated stress on key words – *Nice one* after a missed basketball shot, or *Thanks a lot* when a speaker does not really appreciate what another has said or done. Idiomatic words and phrases can also signal how a remark is intended. For example, the phrase *Did you hear the one about . . .* would alert many Americans that a joke will follow. Anyone who has a dictionary and a grammar book could potentially understand what the words mean, but in order to understand how to interpret those words a conversationalist needs to know how the linguistic features frame the utterance.

The concept of framing shows that language and culture are inseparable: you cannot communicate or interpret meaning through language without signaling metamessages – how you mean what you say – and the way metamessages are signaled varies from culture to culture. Imagine, for example, visitors to the United States who speak the language but are unfamiliar with the culture. When asked *How are you?* they may begin to describe a health problem they face and be surprised and offended when the person who asked this question does not listen to the answer. (When this happens repeatedly, they may conclude that Americans are insincere.) The visitors understood the question but not the frame; the question *How are you?* was a routine greeting, not a request for information.

Every group of people has culturally agreed-upon ways of greeting each other that are not meant literally. Anyone who is unfamiliar with the routine is likely to interpret the greeting literally. In Burma, a routine greeting is *Have you eaten yet?* Americans visiting Burma, when asked this question, may think they are being invited to lunch and feel snubbed when their negative reply is ignored. They miss the framing of this question as a greeting. A typical Javanese greeting is the question, *Where are you going?* The expected routinized reply is *Over there*. A visitor unfamiliar with this routine may miss the frame “greeting” and wonder, “What business is it of yours where I’m going?” Any time people talk to each other, being able to understand the language and therefore interpret the message – the literal meaning of what others say – is a start, but it is not sufficient. To really understand what is said, a listener must be able to interpret the metamessages that identify the frame – how the words are meant, what the speaker is *doing* by saying these words in this way in this context. To

do this, one needs to be familiar not only with the language but also with the culture.

Every utterance must be said in some intonational pattern, at some rate of speech, with some combination of pitch and loudness, and so on. But habits for and assumptions about using these linguistic elements to frame utterances differ among members of different cultural groups. Indeed, these ways of framing utterances are a large part of how speakers identify each other as members of particular cultural groups. Culture is constituted in part by ways of using language, and language exists only as it is shaped in particular cultures.

Crosscultural miscommunication

How do such features as intonation and loudness signal the frame for interpreting utterances, and what are the consequences when habits regarding the use of these linguistic features differ? Let’s look at a specific case analyzed by anthropological linguist John Gumperz (1982), the founder of *interactional sociolinguistics*, a subdiscipline of linguistics that examines how language creates meaning in interaction. (Interactional sociolinguistics is a type of discourse analysis.) Gumperz tape-recorded and analyzed real conversations that took place among speakers of different social and cultural backgrounds, and traced some of the problems in the interactions to culturally different habits for using the linguistic features we have discussed. Gumperz calls these linguistic features **contextualization cues**, because they signal, or “cue,” the context in which speakers intend their utterances. Note that “context” in this sense is comparable to the notion of “frame,” because it refers to what speakers think they are doing when they speak, and how they intend their words to be interpreted.

Gumperz’s particular goal was to understand how cultural differences in language use can lead to discrimination against members of minority groups and social inequality. Here is one example of a situation he studied and how he discovered that language was part of the problem. In the 1970s, Gumperz was asked to address a thorny employment situation in London, England. The staff cafeteria at a British airport had recently hired food servers from India and Pakistan for the first time, and both supervisors and customers were complaining that these new employees were “surly and uncooperative.” For their part, the South Asian employees were complaining that they were being discriminated against. To figure out what was going on, Gumperz used the research methods of interactional sociolinguistics. First, he tape-recorded interactions that took place while customers were getting food on the cafeteria line. He then listened to the audiotapes and identified a contrast in the intonation patterns of British and South Asian food servers that helped explain both complaints. When customers chose a meat course, the server asked whether or not they wanted gravy. Both British and South Asian servers made this offer by uttering a single word, *Gravy*. But the British servers said this word with rising intonation while the South Asian servers said it with falling intonation.

This tiny difference in intonation – whether the pitch went up or down at the end of a single word – resulted in very different impressions. To British ears, *Gravy?* said with rising intonation sounded like a question roughly paraphrased as *Would you like gravy?* In stark contrast, *Gravy*, said with falling intonation, was heard by the British as a statement which might roughly be paraphrased, *This is gravy. Take it or leave it.*

Next, Gumperz played segments of the interactions back to both British and South Asian employees. The British cafeteria workers pointed to the South Asians' responses as evidence that they were rude to customers. The South Asian cafeteria workers felt that they had caught their British colleagues displaying discrimination and prejudice, since they were being criticized for saying exactly the same thing as their British co-workers. It was only when their supervisor and English teacher explained how the different intonation patterns resulted in different meanings that the South Asian servers understood the negative reactions they had been getting. Indeed, they recognized that intonation patterns used by their British co-workers had struck their ears as odd. At the same time, the supervisors learned that for speakers of South Asian languages, the falling intonation was simply the normal way of asking a question in that context.

Such uses of contextualization cues are not unconscious; a speaker will readily recognize them when they are pointed out. But they are automatic; we use them without thinking about or focusing on them. In other words, the use of contextualization cues, linguistic elements that frame meaning, is *conventionalized* – associated by longstanding habit with a given intention. In British English, a single word uttered with rising intonation is conventionally associated with a question, and the hearer fills in the missing parts: *Happy?* is likely to be interpreted as *Are you happy?* And *Hurt?* would be interpreted as *Does it hurt?* Although this seems natural to speakers of British English, the link between rising intonation and asking a yes/no question (and the contrasting link between falling intonation and making a statement) is neither logically necessary nor universal. In many South Asian languages, yes/no questions end with falling intonation. When learning and using a new language, we typically concentrate on choosing the appropriate words and on getting the grammar right, but we may automatically use the intonational pattern we would use when speaking our native language. Since we're focusing on the message, we may be completely unaware of the metamessage that is conveyed by the way we said it. This was the case with the South Asian cafeteria workers and their British counterparts.

This example shows how the tiny linguistic features that frame utterances can play a large part in conveying meaning and in negotiating relationships between individuals and between cultural groups. It also demonstrates that differing habits with regard to linguistic signals can contribute to the perception and the reality of social inequality and discrimination. Of course, linguistic processes are not the only factors at play when a minority group faces discrimination and social inequality; many other factors, such as economics and politics, play a role as well, as does outright prejudice. But it is important to acknowledge that linguistic elements may be

part of the problem, as these elements are often invisible and therefore overlooked. A particular irony is that, unless the effect of linguistic differences is recognized, when individuals of differing cultural background spend more time together, the result may be more rather than less prejudice against members of a cultural group. Until Gumperz raised their awareness about their differing uses of intonation, the South Asian and British servers who worked together did not learn to like and understand each other better. Instead their negative impressions of the other group were reinforced repeatedly, like those that arose between the German and American students in our first example.

Box 10.1 The consequences of cultural differences in school

Crosscultural differences in linguistic behavior can have significant negative consequences when the communicative style that children learn in their home communities differs from that expected by their teachers. Susan Phillips (1983) has documented this for children on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation who have Anglo teachers. Jeffrey Shultz, Susan Florio, and Frederick Erickson (1982) have described a similar case with an Italian-American child in a Boston elementary school.

Phillips shows, for example, that Native American children often remain silent in classrooms run by Anglo teachers, because the teachers call on children to speak in front of the class as a whole, and they expect children to claim the floor by raising their hands. These formats for speaking require students to behave in ways that are considered inappropriate in the Native American community, where children are discouraged from drawing attention to themselves by acting as if they know more than or are better than their peers. (The Native American children, however, outshine their Anglo classmates when the teacher allows students to work unsupervised in small groups.)

Shultz, Florio, and Erickson also found that the child suffers when expectations for regulating talk differ at school and at home. They video-taped conversation in an Italian-American child's home and discovered that the child was encouraged to pipe up with his own comments while adults were speaking. Children in this family were not instructed that only one voice should be heard at a time. When the boy spoke up in class much as he did at home, he was chastised for misbehavior and identified as a problem child.

Politeness and interaction

The concept of framing helps explain the relationship between language and culture, but so far we have discussed only how words are spoken, not the ideas that those words express. What you choose to say to a particular person in a particular situation is just as important in communicating

and negotiating social relationships. Norms and expectations about who can say what, to whom, and when vary across cultures as well. To explain the interactive goals that account for what people choose to say, linguists use the term politeness. This term is used in a technical sense, different from the everyday meaning when we say someone is "polite" or "impolite." In linguistic terms, politeness refers to a way of balancing several competing interactive goals. Cultural differences in politeness norms help to explain some of what happens when people of different cultural backgrounds talk to each other.

Linguist Robin Lakoff (1975/2004) identified three Rules of Rapport that speakers try to follow when they interact:

- 1 Don't impose
- 2 Give options
- 3 Maintain camaraderie

Emphasizing different Rules of Rapport leads to different styles of politeness.

Let's see how these politeness rules can shape a simple speech activity (making and receiving an offer of a beverage) and how the emphasis of one rule over the others is part of a culture's characteristic style of politeness. Imagine that someone comes to visit you in your home, and you ask, *Would you like something to drink?*

- A visitor who replies, *No thanks*, despite being thirsty, is applying Rule 1, "Don't impose."
- A visitor who replies, *I'll have whatever you're having*, is applying Rule 2, "Give options."
- A visitor who replies, *Yes, thanks. Have you got a Diet Coke?* is applying Rule 3, "Maintain camaraderie."

Many variations on these replies are possible, each representing slightly different balancings of the three politeness rules. For example, a good friend might not wait for you to offer but might ask, *I'm really thirsty. Have you got anything to drink?* That would evince even more camaraderie. In some cultures, a very close friend or family member might go right to your refrigerator and take a Diet Coke without asking – an even stronger expression of camaraderie.

Language provides many ways of negotiating a simple offer of a drink. But assumptions and habits about the right way to conduct this exchange vary across cultures. When people learn a new language, they usually use it to say what they would say in their native language, and this could make a very different impression than it would in their home culture. For example, in Greece (and in many other parts of the world) it is considered rude to accept food or drink the first time it is offered. Even a second offer is typically deflected. Only on the third offer is it appropriate to accept. In the United States, however, it is typical to accept on the first offer, so the decline of a first offer is taken literally, and second and third offers may never be made. Many a visitor to the US has gone hungry or thirsty because of these different applications of the

politeness rules! They are applying Rule 1, "Don't impose," whereas the American expectation is Rule 3, "Maintain camaraderie." In all cases, the goal is politeness in the technical sense: ways of honoring human needs to display camaraderie and to avoid imposing. Saying *No thanks* when you are thirsty and heading straight for the refrigerator are both ways of being polite in this technical sense. However, when the participants in an interaction apply differing politeness norms, each may judge the other impolite (in the everyday sense). Someone who expects Rule 1, "Don't impose," will judge a visitor who asks for a drink to be impolite, but by the same token, someone who expects Rule 3, "Maintain camaraderie," may judge a visitor who refuses to accept an offer of a drink to be cold and unfriendly.

Growing up in the same country and speaking the same language does not necessarily mean two speakers have grown up in the same "culture." Americans who grow up in different parts of the country, or have different ethnic or class backgrounds, also have different habits and expectations about how to use language to accomplish social goals, with the result that one speaker could do or say something intended to be friendly (Rule 3) that another interprets as rude (a violation of Rule 1). For example, Americans of Greek background may expect that food will be accepted only after several offers – and be put off by Americans of East European background who think it is a heart-warming gesture of close friendship to help themselves from a good friend's refrigerator.

Box 10.2 Ethnic differences: the line between talking and fighting

Thomas Kochman (1981) identifies cultural differences that tend to distinguish the styles of American whites and African Americans. For example, he observes that most whites tend to regard verbal aggressiveness as threatening, whereas many blacks value it as a sign of engagement. He gives an example of a confrontational meeting that took place between university faculty and community representatives. At one point, a black male faculty member pointed a finger at a white female colleague and angrily accused, "Professor ____, you need to know something. You can't make me over into your image. Do you understand that? You can't make me over into your image." When he saw that the woman appeared frightened, he assured her, "You don't need to worry; I'm still talking. When I stop talking, then you might need to worry." Kochman goes on:

When the meeting was over, she accused the black faculty member of having "threatened" her. He was astonished by her accusation. His comment to me afterward was, "All I did was talk to her. Now how can that be threatening?" (p. 44)

Kochman explains that whites tend to regard "fighting" as having begun as soon as violence seems imminent, an impression they may

get from the intensity of anger expressed verbally and the use of insults. In contrast, blacks do not deem a fight to have begun until someone makes a provocative movement. As a result, whites may try to prevent a fight by curtailing verbal disputes, whereas blacks "conceive the danger of violence as greater when people are not communicating with each other than when they are, no matter how loud, angry, or abusive their arguments may become" (p. 58).

High-involvement and high-considerateness styles

In my own work (Tannen [1984]2005), I have combined the concepts of framing and of politeness phenomena to describe how Americans of different backgrounds use language, and how these differences lead to problems. The first two Rules of Rapport, "Don't impose" and "Give options," are closely related, both serving people's need for independence – that is, not to be imposed on. The third Rule of Rapport, "Maintain camaraderie," serves the need for involvement – that is, to be connected to others. Any two people can have different ideas about which goal to focus on, and how to use language to do so. In our opening example of an American student in Germany, the German student who launches into an animated political argument is focusing on the need to show involvement, using a "high-involvement" conversational style. The American student who resists talking about politics or religion is focusing on the need to avoid imposition, using a "high-considerateness" style.

Let's look at how several of the linguistic elements we discussed at the beginning of this chapter can characterize either "high-involvement" or "high-considerateness" styles among speakers who come from obviously different cultures as well as among Americans of different ethnic or regional backgrounds.

Overlap

We saw earlier that all speakers have assumptions and expectations about conversational overlap, that is, two (or more) speakers talking at once. Avoiding overlap honors the need not to be imposed on, so it is associated with a "high-considerateness" style. Embracing overlap as a show of enthusiasm and interest honors the need to be connected, so it is part of a "high-involvement" style. Both styles can work well among speakers who share assumptions about conversational overlap. High-involvement speakers enjoy talking over each other and have no trouble getting or keeping the floor when they want it and saying what they want to say while someone else talks along. The same is true for conversations among high-considerateness speakers: they take turns and get to say what they want. But when speakers using the two styles interact, their impressions of each other may be the opposite of what each intends. High-involvement speakers

might chime in to show their enthusiasm, but high-considerateness speakers tend to think that anyone who begins talking before they are finished is trying to interrupt them. They will probably stop speaking in order to avoid an unpleasant and unacceptable situation, yielding the floor but resenting the interruption. High-considerateness speakers who wait for their turn at talk may find few opportunities to join the conversation and give the impression that they are not interested.

This is just what happened when American women living in Paris spoke to French women, in a study conducted by Molly Wieland (1991). Wieland tape-recorded four separate dinner parties attended by native French women and Americans who had lived in France for at least two years. The American women all spoke French fluently, but when they took part in the conversations, they applied their American norms for turn-taking and overlap. The American women believed that only one voice should be heard at a time, so when two American women's talk overlapped, one quickly gave way to the other. In contrast, the French women frequently overlapped each other, with both speakers continuing to talk until they had finished what they had to say. Each regarded the other's overlap as supportive and cooperative. Because of their different attitudes toward overlap, whenever a French and American woman started to speak at the same time, it was almost always the American who gave way, and they frequently regarded the French women as rude for interrupting. Furthermore, the French women frequently talked along with another speaker as a way to contribute, while the Americans awaited their turn. As a result, the American women had a hard time getting a word in edgewise. The French women told Wieland that they got the impression the American women were uninterested and thinking of other things when they listened silently (and from the American point of view, attentively).

Not all Americans share an overlap-resistant style of speaking, as my own research (Tannen [1984]2005) indicates. I tape-recorded a Thanksgiving dinner conversation which included, in addition to me, four other Americans and one British woman. After transcribing the entire conversation and analyzing the transcript, I found that the three speakers who had grown up in New York City (I was one) tended to talk along with others to show enthusiasm; for us, overlap was cooperative. In contrast, the two speakers from southern California and the British woman tended to stop speaking when someone else started; they interpreted overlap as interruption. (Differing assumptions about overlap were part of an array of linguistic features that distinguished the New Yorkers' style as high-involvement and the others' style as high-considerateness.)

When speakers use – and interpret – overlap differently, conversations between them can have unintended outcomes. In the conversation I analyzed, the New Yorkers' overlaps were interpreted as interruption only by the Californians and the British speaker. When a New Yorker overlapped with a Californian, the Californian usually hesitated or stopped speaking, and the conversation became halting and awkward. When New Yorkers overlapped other New Yorkers, talking-along had the opposite effect: it greased the conversational wheels rather than causing them to grind to a halt.

Crosscultural misunderstandings like these are not the result of any individual's conversational style; rather, such misunderstandings result from the interaction of participants' differing styles. New Yorkers' overlapping habits appeared interruptive only when they interacted with overlap-resistant speakers. However, the two-way nature of crosscultural differences typically eludes participants in the throes of conversation. A speaker who stops talking because another has begun is unlikely to think, "I guess we have different attitudes toward cooperative overlap." Instead, such a speaker will probably think, "You are not interested in hearing what I have to say," or even "You are a boor who only wants to hear yourself talk." And the cooperative overlapper is probably concluding, "You are unfriendly and are making me do all the conversational work here" or even "You are a bore who has nothing to say."

Back-channel cues

The tendency to overlap as a way of showing enthusiastic listenership has been documented for speakers in many cultures, including Germany (Straehle 1997), Antigua (Reisman 1974), and Japan (Hayashi 1988), though the forms of overlap and their frequency are not always the same. Linguists call the verbalizations speakers make to show that they're listening back-channel cues. In Japan, according to Japanese linguist Haru Yamada, listeners typically provide very frequent back-channel cues, called *aizuchi*, that are typically accompanied by rhythmic head nods. Yamada, who grew up in both Japan and the United States, had external evidence that *aizuchi* is more frequent in Japanese than it is in English. A friend told her that he can always tell from a distance whether she is speaking English or Japanese, because when she speaks English, she nods occasionally, but when she's speaking Japanese, her head jerks up and down constantly. *Aizuchi* may range from the repetition of a single word *hai*, which functions rather like the English expressions *mhm* and *uhuh*, to entire sentences, such as *Nn, Nn, Nn, tashika ni soo desu yo ne*, which Yamada (1997: 97) translates as 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, that's exactly right'. This apparent agreement means only 'I'm listening and I'm following,' not 'I agree,' but Americans often take these expressions of attention literally and feel misled if it turns out that their Japanese interlocutor does not in fact agree.

Misunderstandings resulting from different uses of back-channel cues can also occur among Americans who have different norms for their use. For example, researchers who recorded cross-sex conversations (Fishman 1978, Hirschman 1994) discovered that women tend to say *mhm*, *uhuh*, and *yeah* frequently during a conversational partner's stream of talk, whereas men typically offer fewer back-channel cues and are more likely to offer them only at the end of another's turn. Especially problematic are the different ways these back-channel cues tend to be used: women typically use them to indicate 'I'm listening,' whereas for men they tend to mean 'I agree.' As a result, just as with Americans and Japanese, an American man might feel misled when a woman has (from the man's point of view) indicated agreement with what he was saying, and then turns out to disagree. Here too, the result can lead to negative stereotypes of the other

group: you can't trust women; when you talk to them, you don't know where you stand. At the same time, the lack of back channels from men helps give women the impression that men are not listening to them.

Americans of different backgrounds can also have divergent expectations about how loud and expressive a listener response should be. The New Yorkers in my study often showed appreciation of another's comment with expressive reactions such as *Wow!* or *That's incredible!* This often gave the non-New Yorkers the impression that they were overreacting to, or even doubting the veracity of, what they had heard. Similar confusion – from different expectations regarding how extreme listener reactions should be – caused trouble for a woman who grew up in New York City but raised her own children in Vermont. When her daughters came home from school and told their mother about something that had happened during the day, their mother might exclaim *Wow!* or *Oh-my-god!* The daughters would look around to see what had frightened their mother. When they realized that she was simply reacting to what they had said, they accused her of overreacting. Not realizing that their mother's reaction was a standard enthusiastic response in the high-involvement style their mother had learned growing up, they thought they were witnessing a quirk (if not a pathology!) of her personality.

In this, as in all cross-style encounters, it is always the relative difference that matters, not absolute style. The level of enthusiasm that seems too extreme to one listener may seem too understated to another. The same woman who thinks a man is not listening because he provides fewer back-channel cues than she expects, may feel that a Japanese speaker is rushing her along, because he is providing more back-channel cues than she expects. Any time expectations regarding back-channel cues differ, speakers can come away with the wrong impression – of whether the other person agrees or not and of whether the other person was interested or even listening.

Turn-taking

Overlap and listener response, along with rate of speech and pausing, work together to accomplish the exchange of turns in a conversation. Those who value overlap as a show of involvement often leave shorter pauses between turns, perhaps because long pauses would give them the impression that the conversation is foundering. Those who avoid overlap because it seems intrusive often leave longer pauses between turns, perhaps to be certain that the previous speaker won't be inadvertently interrupted. Whenever two speakers have differing senses of how long a pause between turns should be, the speaker who expects longer pauses has a hard time getting the floor, because the shorter-pauser is likely to begin speaking while the longer-pauser is still waiting for the right amount of pause. This is exactly what happened in the Thanksgiving dinner conversation that I analyzed. The Californians rarely started speaking when a New Yorker was speaking, and often stopped speaking if a New Yorker overlapped. The New Yorkers expected shorter pauses between conversational turns and therefore frequently claimed the floor before the Californians had a chance to start talking.

Here's an example (Tannen 1984: 93) of the three New Yorkers talking companionably, overlapping each other's talk without interrupting. Steve was trying to explain the precise location of a building that housed a radio station with the call letters WINS. The two other speakers are Steve's brother Peter and his best friend, Deborah (that's me). Left brackets indicate overlap.

- 1 Steve: Remember where WINS used to be?
 2 Deborah: No.
 3 Steve: Then they built a big huge skyscraper there?
 4 Deborah: No. Where was that.
 5 Steve: Right where Central Park West met Broadway. That
 | building shaped like that.
 6 Peter: Did I give you too much?
 7 Deborah: By Columbus Circle? ... that Columbus Circle?
 8 Steve: Right on Columbus Circle.
 | Here's Columbus Circle, | here's Central Park West,
 9 Deborah: Now it's
 | the Huntington Hartford Museum.
 10 Peter: That's the Huntington Hartford, right?

As you can see from the brackets and the placement of the lines of dialogue, two people were speaking at once for much of this segment, and there is no indication that the overlaps annoy or interfere with the speakers. In lines 5-7, all three were speaking at the same time: Steve was describing the building he had in mind: line 5 *That building shaped like that*. (He made a pyramid with his hands to illustrate the shape.) Peter was serving turkey: line 6 *Did I give you too much?* I was suggesting the location Steve was describing: line 7 *By Columbus Circle?* My comment did not cause Steve to stop or slow down, so his ratification in line 8 *Right on Columbus Circle* overlapped with my overlap. As Steve continued his description: *Here's Columbus Circle, here's Central Park West*, I overlapped to offer another guess about the location: line 9 *Now it's the Huntington Hartford Museum*.

The next overlap is a particularly good example of a high-involvement style. In line 10 Peter spoke almost at the same time that I did, offering the same guess: *That's the Huntington Hartford, right?* But it turned out that we were wrong. Steve replied with three *No's* in quick succession: *Nuhnahnno*. Now, think of an exam in which two students who sat next to each other wrote the same answer. If that answer happens to be wrong, the teacher may well suspect that one copied from the other. And this is precisely what happened in this conversation. When I played the segment back to Peter, he said that he had had no idea of the location his brother was referring to, but had assumed I did. So Peter had piggybacked on my overlap, talking at the same time that I did by repeating what I said just a split second behind me. Because he shared expectations regarding overlap and pacing, Peter was thus able to participate in the conversation even when he did not have much knowledge of what we were talking about. In contrast, the other three dinner guests were not able to participate, even

when they had the knowledge and ideas to contribute, because they were not comfortable talking-along and rarely encountered the pause they needed to begin speaking.

Box 10.3 Interactional sociolinguistic methodology

The practice of analyzing interactions in which the researcher participated has a long history in discourse analysis; it is similar to the practice of participant observation in the field of anthropology. Interactional sociolinguists acknowledge that there are disadvantages as well as advantages in analyzing conversations they themselves took part in. For example, if the goal is understanding conversation among friends, recording at a natural social gathering makes available for study patterns of language use that do not emerge among strangers and would be inhibited by the presence of an outside researcher – patterns such as playful routines, irony and allusion, or reference to familiar jokes and assumptions. Furthermore, people who regularly interact with each other create a special language between and among themselves, a language that is called upon and built upon in their continuing interactions. Awareness of this history of the discourse is necessary to truly understand what is going on, and is available only to those who have shared in that history.

Analyst participation is related to another aspect of interactional sociolinguistics. The objection is inevitably raised, "How do you know this is what is really going on? It is just your interpretation." To this the interactional sociolinguist replies, "That's right." Interactional sociolinguistics is a hermeneutic discipline; all analysis in this paradigm is essentially interpretive. But, as with interpretation in such fields as literary analysis and psychology, any interpretation posed is offered as one among many, not a definitive one. Furthermore, interpretations are based on internal and external evidence. Since all interpretation has a subjective character, acknowledging and correcting for subjectivity is, in the end, less dangerous than assuming an impossible objectivity. Another way of addressing the danger of subjectivity is playback. Segments of the interaction that are identified for analysis are played back to those who participated (as well as to others), and their interpretations – of what they meant and understood – are elicited. Such comments are not taken at face value, but offer further material for analysis as well as a potential corrective to the analyst's interpretations.

There is a final paradox inherent in recording conversation for analysis; the researcher is committed both to collecting natural data and to securing the informed consent of participants. So long as participants are aware of the presence of the tape-recorder, their talk may not be completely natural. Sociolinguists argue, however, that if there is a relatively large number of participants who have ongoing

social relationships, they soon forget the tape-recorder. But if they forgot they were being taped, was their consent not effectively canceled? In my own work, I correct for this by allowing participants to see what I plan to write about them before it goes into print, to make sure that I do not inadvertently expose any aspect of their lives that they would prefer to keep private.

Asking questions

Along with rate of speech and turn-taking, a high-involvement style includes habits regarding asking questions – when, how many, how quickly, what about – that differ from those of high-considerateness style speakers. The New Yorkers in the Thanksgiving dinner conversation asked more questions, and the questions they asked often came quickly, with marked high pitch, one after another. These questions could catch the Californians and the British woman off guard, impeding their flow of speech and even puzzling them. For these high-involvement speakers, questions indicate enthusiastic listening, and speakers are not obligated to stop mid-sentence to answer them – nor even to answer them at all.

For example, Steve was telling about having lived in Quonset huts when he and Peter were children, after their father returned from military service in the Second World War. (Quonset huts were a form of temporary housing that the government had constructed to accommodate the many returning veterans.) When this segment begins, Steve had just commented that there were rats in the Quonset huts.

- 1 Steve: Cause they were built near the swamp ... We used to go ... hunting frogs in the swamps.
 2 Deborah: Where was it. Where were yours?
 3 Steve: In the Bronx
 4 Peter: In the Bronx. In the East Bronx?
 5 Deborah: How long did you live in it?
 6 Steve: Near the swamps? ... Now there's a big cooperative building.
 7 Peter: Three years.
 8 Deborah: Three years?

My first question (line 2) *Where was it. Where were yours?* overlapped Steve's explanation in line 1 that the Quonset huts had rats because there were swamps nearby. He answered my question in line 3 *In the Bronx*, and Peter answered as well, again overlapping: line 4 *In the Bronx. In the East Bronx?* But my second question, line 5 *How long did you live in it?* never got an answer from Steve, who simply went on with his explanation of where the Quonset huts were located: line 6 *Now there's a big cooperative building.* (Peter overlapped Steve to answer my question in line 7: *Three years.*) The high-involvement habits regarding overlap and questions worked together. This example shows that part of the reason a high-involvement questioner can throw out questions exuberantly is that a high-involvement speaker is under no obligation to stop what he's saying and answer them.

Indirectness

Another important element of conversational style is indirectness – conveying meaning without saying it explicitly. It is not possible to articulate everything we mean in every utterance. Some of the meaning must always be 'read between the lines,' based on past conversations and expectations about what will be said, and from culturally agreed upon meanings that are associated with particular expressions. Cultures differ in how much indirectness is expected, when it is expected, and what form it will take. For example, Americans who travel to Japan, even those who speak Japanese well, find it difficult to interpret what Japanese speakers mean, because Japanese culture places great value on indirectness. Haru Yamada explains that the Japanese have a word, *sasshi*, for the guesswork that is expected and valued, by which listeners fill in unstated meaning. She gives an example (1997: 37-38) from a conversation between two Japanese bank executives, Igarishi and Maeda. Igarishi asks Maeda's opinion about a proposal, and Maeda responds, *Sore wa chotto ...* ('That's a little ...'). He says no more, but Igarishi understands that Maeda does not approve of the proposal, and he tells another colleague as much on another occasion (and even infers why Maeda disapproves).

Although this level of indirectness is more extreme than is typically found in American conversations, we all use forms of indirectness in conversation. For example, two American college roommates were frustrated by a third who habitually left her dirty dishes in the sink. Reluctant to tell her outright that she should wash her dishes, the two neatniks put up a sign, *We love a clean sink*. In another case, a student was annoyed that one of her roommates habitually left her hair dryer in the bathroom. Rather than telling her to please keep her hair dryer in her room, she asked, *Is that your hair dryer?* In both instances the indirect communications were effective: the dirty dishes disappeared from the kitchen sink, and the hair dryer disappeared from the bathroom. These indirect requests honored the roommates' need not to be imposed on (even while imposing on them).

When assumptions regarding the use of indirectness are not shared, the result can be miscommunication. This happened to a young man in one of my classes named Scott. While at home during winter break, Scott was sitting with his mother at the kitchen table. Looking out the window, his mother remarked on how much snow had fallen during the night and how long it would take to shovel it. Scott agreed – then finished his breakfast and went to his room to watch television. Later his mother angrily chided him for lounging around while she was busy cleaning the house, and she added that the least he could have done was to shovel the snow as she had asked him to. Scott was incensed because he was certain she had not asked him to do anything, and he would have been glad to help her out if she had asked him. Neither realized that different uses of indirectness were at fault. Scott truly believed he had not been asked to shovel the snow because he had interpreted his mother's observations literally. His mother believed she had asked him to shovel the snow, and it never occurred to her that he had missed her meaning.

Differences in assumptions about indirectness can lead to accusations of dishonesty or manipulateness. Thus a journalist who traveled to

Japan asked his Japanese host whether he could see a particular robot and was told, *That might be possible*. He was fairly optimistic that if it was possible, it would be arranged, so he felt misled when he later discovered not only that he could not see the robot, but that there had never been any possibility that he could. But a Japanese person would have known that *That might be possible* is a considerate and polite way to say *No*. In parts of India, it is considered rude to ask for something directly, so an accepted way of requesting something is to compliment it. Conversely, a person who receives a compliment on a possession is expected to offer it as a gift. An American woman who married an Indian man had no idea of this cultural convention by which compliments are an indirect way of making requests. When her husband's mother came to the United States for a visit, the American woman helped her mother-in-law unpack and ooh'd and aah'd over the beauty of her saris and her jewelry. Her mother-in-law later asked her own daughter (an Indian who also lived in the United States), *What kind of woman did he marry? She wants everything!*

Mutual stereotyping

When participants in a conversation have different norms for using language, they often come away with negative impressions of the other person. When speakers see others as members of identifiable cultural groups, the result often is cultural stereotyping. Understanding high-involvement style goes a long way toward explaining why natives of New York City are often stereotyped as pushy and aggressive. And understanding high-considerateness style might explain why many New Yorkers regard Americans from other parts of the United States as somewhat dull and uninteresting.

Around the world, members of groups who tend to speak more slowly tend to be negatively stereotyped (by faster speakers, of course) as dull. For example, Finns tend to speak slower and to be silent more often than Swedes. Finnish linguists Jaako Lehtonen and Kari Sajavaara (1985) suspected that this difference might have something to do with the negative stereotyping of Finns as slow and dull by neighboring Swedes. Moreover, they suspected that such differences might account for ethnic and regional stereotypes in other parts of the world as well. They found similar patterns of stereotyping in country after country where one ethnic or regional group tends to speak more slowly than others: in German stereotypes of East Frisians, in French stereotypes of Belgians, and in Swiss stereotypes of residents of Berne or Zurich. Even Finns themselves stereotype their slower-talking compatriots from a region called Hame (pronounced hab-may) as dull. As we saw in the work of John Gumperz with South Asian speakers in London, such negative stereotypes can have important social consequences, affecting decisions about educational advancement, job hiring, and even social policies on a national scale.

The ritual nature of conversation

Within the United States, women and men often have different habits with regard to indirectness when it comes to deciding what to do. For example, a woman and a man were riding in a car. The woman turned to

the man and asked, *Are you thirsty? Would you like to stop for a drink?* The man wasn't particularly thirsty, so he answered *No*. Later he was perplexed to learn that she was annoyed with him because she had wanted to stop for a drink. He became annoyed in turn, wondering why she didn't just say so. He assumed that her question was an indirect way of expressing her desire to stop for a drink, and this could have been the case. But there is a more complex – and more likely – explanation. When the woman asked, *Would you like to stop for a drink?* she did not expect a yes/no answer. Rather, she expected the man to ask, *Do you want to?* She then might have said, *I don't know; what do you want?* After they had both expressed their inclinations and preferences, they might or might not stop for a drink. Either way, she would feel satisfied because the decision had been made taking both their preferences into account. In other words, her frustration was not because she did not get her way, but because her question had shown that she was interested in what he wanted, whereas his peremptory response indicated he was not interested in what she wanted.

Culturally learned conventions for using language to communicate are not simply a matter of the meaning of words and utterances but also a matter of **conversational rituals**: how you expect an interaction to go in its totality, how you expect utterances to follow in sequence. In this interchange, the woman's question was meant to begin an exchange – a conversational ritual by which a general question leads to mutual expressions of inclinations and preferences, leading to a decision. The purpose of this ritual is as much to share perspectives as it is to come to a decision. But when the man answered *No*, the ritual sequence the woman expected was short-circuited. The man had not expressed an interest in her preferences (or worse, he had revealed a lack of interest in them) and, on top of that, it seemed to her that he had made a unilateral decision that they would not stop.

Of course, the man had a conversational ritual of his own in mind. According to his self-report, his reply meant that he wasn't thirsty, not that he was averse to stopping for a drink if she wanted to. He assumed that if she wanted to stop for a drink, she would say so, even though he had said he was not thirsty. The conversational ritual he expects is that one person throws out a possible decision and anyone who is differently inclined states an alternative option. He therefore interpreted the woman's subsequent silence as agreement, whereas she had become silent because she was annoyed.

Language and gender

Misunderstandings like this occur frequently between women and men. There is ample evidence that many American women are more inclined than most American men to use indirectness when it comes to making a decision or expressing preferences about what to do. This doesn't mean American women are always more indirect, however. There are other contexts in which many men are inclined to be more indirect than women. One such context is apologizing. For example, a neighbor of mine once wrote me a note saying, "I guess I wasn't much help" when he owed me an

apology. I took this to be an indirect way of giving me one. Robin Lakoff (2001) describes an indirect apology that she received from her father. When he sent her a copy of *The Portable Curmudgeon*, she understood it to mean, "I'm just an old curmudgeon; please forgive me."

Expectations about how men and women tend to speak (that is, gender norms) vary across cultures, as do norms regarding the use of indirectness. For example, among a small community of Malagasy speakers in Madagascar, indirectness is the norm. It is unacceptable, for example, to express anger directly, though it can be expressed to an intermediary who passes the sentiment on. It is men, however, who observe this norm; women typically break it, expressing anger and criticism directly. The linguistic anthropologist who studied this community, Elinor Keenan (1974), notes that when she and her co-worker encountered a couple walking while they were riding in a car, it was the woman who flagged them down, requested a ride, and asked directly for sensitive information such as where they were going, where they had been, and how much things had cost. Women also are the ones who criticize inappropriate behavior in the community. It is interesting to note that whereas indirectness is associated with women in the United States, and directness is associated with women among the Malagasy, in both cases the style of speaking associated with men is more highly valued. In Malagasy culture, women's directness – though relied upon to get important social tasks done – is disparaged, while men's indirectness is admired as verbal skill. This is similar to the way that Japanese admire those who are skilled in *sasshi* – the ability to guess at others' meaning that has not been put into words. In contrast, in the United States, indirectness is often associated with dishonesty and manipulation, so many women who use indirectness feel guilty about it when it is called to their attention.

Box 10.4 Gender differences grow up

The idea that conversation between women and men can be regarded as crosscultural communication traces to anthropologists Daniel Maltz and Ruth Borker (1982). Maltz and Borker combined the research findings of anthropologists and sociologists who had studied how boys and girls, and men and women, use language, with the theoretical framework of John Gumperz, and concluded that Gumperz's framework could account for some of the frustrations that arise in cross-sex conversations. Studies of children at play had revealed that boys and girls tend to play in sex-separate groups; that their play follows very different rules and patterns; and that these differences account for some of the differing habits and assumptions that lead to frustration when women and men talk to each other. Researchers like Marjorie Harness Goodwin (1990) found that girls tend to play in small groups or pairs, and their friendships are formed through talk. Girls discourage behavior that seems to put one on a higher footing than another. Boys play in larger groups; their groups are more hierarchically organized, and they use language to assert dominance and to attract and hold attention.

These differences explain, for example, why women ask more questions: they regard questions as a way to keep conversation going, something they want to do because they value conversation as a sign of friendship. They also explain why women often discuss problems with each other, matching experiences, and expressing understanding – and why they are frustrated when men hear the statement of problems as requests for solutions. Discussing and matching problems is a way for women to maintain talk and also maintain the appearance of equality. Giving advice, on the other hand, frames men as experts.

Complementary schismogenesis

In many of the preceding examples, you might be wondering why people who talk to each other frequently, such as family members and roommates, don't come to understand each other's styles and adapt to them. Sometimes they do. But sometimes the opposite happens; the more two people with differing styles interact, the more frustrated they become. Things seem to get progressively worse rather than better. Often, what happens is complementary schismogenesis – a process by which two speakers drive one another to more and more extreme expressions of divergent ways of speaking in an ever-widening spiral. What begins as a small difference becomes a big one, as each speaker tries harder to do more of what seems obviously appropriate. Here is a hypothetical example. An American man asks a Japanese woman directly if she'd like to go to lunch. She does not want to, so she declines the invitation by saying, *That's a very nice idea, maybe we could have lunch one day*. Because she has left the door open, he asks again. This time she replies even more indirectly: *That's an idea . . . lunch is nice . . .* Befuddled by this ambiguous response, he tries to pin her down: *Are you trying to tell me you never want to have lunch with me, or should I keep asking?* He regards this as the best way to cut through the ambiguity. However, given her conviction that it would be unacceptable to reply directly, her next reply is even more indirect: *Gee, well, I don't know, lunch, you know . . .* Her talking in circles confuses him even more; he has no idea that it was the directness of his question that drove her to these extreme circumlocutions. For her part, his continuing to pester her after she has made her lack of interest clear reinforces her determination to avoid having lunch with him. She has no idea that her refusals were not clear to him, and that his increasing directness was provoked by her indirectness.

The term "complementary schismogenesis" was coined by Gregory Bateson ([1935]1972) to describe what happens when divergent cultures come into contact: each reacts to the other's differing pattern of behavior by doing more of the opposing behavior. As an example, Bateson describes a hypothetical situation in which a culture that favors assertiveness comes into contact with a culture that favors submissiveness. The submissive group will react to aggressive behavior with submissiveness, to which the first group will react with more aggressiveness, and so on, until

each is exhibiting far more aggressiveness and submissiveness, respectively, than they normally would. This pattern is one of the most surprising and frustrating aspects of crosscultural communication. We would like to believe that exposure to people from a different culture would lead to mutual understanding and accommodation. Sometimes it does, but at other times, initial differences become exaggerated, so that the other ends up doing more of the behavior we dislike, and we find ourselves acting in ways we would not otherwise act and may not even like in our selves. This is what happens when, for example, speakers differ with regard to how long a pause they regard as normal between turns. What begins as a small difference ends up as a big one, with one person talking nonstop and the other silent. We rarely stop and question whether the other's behavior is in part a reaction to our own. Though each believes the other chose that form of behavior, both may be frustrated with the resulting imbalance. You might say it is the inseparability of language and culture that is the culprit driving complementary schismogenesis.

Box 10.5 Personal space and complementary schismogenesis

There are spatial correlates to the linguistic elements we have discussed. The anthropologist Edward T. Hall has written many books on proxemics, the study of how people use space "as a specialized elaboration of culture" (Hall 1969: 1). One of Hall's (1959: 205) examples of proxemics corresponds to what happens when speakers have different expectations about the appropriate amount of pause between turns. Hall notes that each person has a sense of the appropriate conversational distance between strangers. If someone you're talking to gets too close, you automatically back up to adjust the space between you. If someone stands too far away, you automatically move in. But our sense of conversational distance varies by culture. Hall notes that he has seen an American and a foreigner inch their way down a long corridor as the foreigner tries to get comfortable by closing the space between them, and the American keeps backing up to adjust the distance between them to what is comfortable for him.

The gradual trip down the corridor is another example of complementary schismogenesis. Each person ends up in a place he had no intention of going as he reacts to the other's behavior without realizing that the behavior is a reaction to his own.

Language and cultural relativity

Our discussion so far has shown that language and culture are inseparable, because language is learned and used in cultural context. In order to emphasize the inseparability of language and culture, linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar (1994) refers to them collectively by a single term, *linguaculture*. It helps to have a single word because the phrase "language

and culture" creates the notion of two separate entities; in other words, the language itself shapes the way we think about things. Moreover, language gives the world a sense of coherence by providing ways to order the many objects, people, and experiences we encounter.

The claim that language shapes thinking is referred to as the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*, named for its original proponent, Benjamin Lee Whorf, and his teacher, the anthropological linguist Edward Sapir. Some scholars make a distinction between strong and weak forms of this hypothesis. The strong form is called *linguistic determinism*; the idea that the language you speak is like a straitjacket that determines how you think. According to linguistic determinism, you can never really conceive of culture and language as one because your language does not give you a single word to represent them. Few linguists believe in linguistic determinism. In contrast, the weak form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, *linguistic relativity*, claims that a language makes it easier to conceive of ideas for which it has words or obligatory grammatical categories, but it is still possible to think in other ways; it just takes more effort. Agar explains linguistic relativity this way:

Language isn't a prison; it's a room you're comfortable with, that you know how to move around in. . . . But familiarity doesn't mean you can't ever exist in another room; it does mean it'll take a while to figure it out, because it's not what you're used to.

In other words, learning a particular language while growing up in a given culture provides ways of representing the world that come to seem natural; later, learning a different language which is associated with a different culture pulls you up short and makes you realize that there are other ways of conceptualizing the world. A language frames the way you see the world.

Anyone who has tried to translate from one language to another quickly encounters words in the original language for which there is no counterpart in the other. Equally significant, though perhaps less immediately obvious, in translating you have to add words for which there was no counterpart in the original. Citing the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, the anthropological linguist A. L. Becker (1995) refers to these liabilities of translation as *exuberances* and *deficiencies*. "Exuberances" are the many meanings that are added by the translation which do not exist in the original language. "Deficiencies" are the many meanings that are lost in translation because the second language does not have words or grammatical categories to express them.

Exuberances and deficiencies between languages go much deeper than the challenge of finding words in one language to correspond to words in another. The very grammatical structure of a language provides what Becker calls a *coherence system* by which speakers learn to view and order the world. For example, in English, as in other western languages, verbs come in forms that indicate tense. So when they utter verbs, English speakers must indicate whether the action denoted takes place in the present, took place in the past, or will take place in the future. The language

itself forces English speakers to pay attention to temporality, and we come to take it for granted that temporality is fundamental to understanding events in the world. Temporal causality provides a "coherence system" for native speakers of English – a way of making sense of, and ordering, the world. In contrast, South Asian languages such as Burmese, Malay, and Javanese do not have grammatical tense. A speaker may well use a verb without indicating whether the action occurred in the past, occurs in the present, or will occur in the future. Therefore, Becker says, "a common Western exuberance in translating Southeast Asian texts is to add temporal causality, the basic coherence system in tense-marking languages" (p. 226). This exuberance – what gets added in a translation – alters the world created by the original text.

At the same time, Becker shows that "[t]he deficiencies of the translation – those things in the Burmese that have no counterpart in the translation – include things at the core of the Burmese system of discourse coherence" (p. 236). For example, just as English words must indicate tense, Burmese nouns must have linguistic particles called classifiers that distinguish the universe of discourse. In Burmese, when you refer to a river, you must classify the river as a place (the destination for a picnic), a line (on a map), a section (fishing areas), a distant arc (a passage to the sea), a connection (tying two villages), a sacred object (in mythology), or a conceptual unit (rivers in general) (Becker 1975). Just as verbs in English require linguistic markings that indicate tense, nouns in Burmese require classifiers that characterize the context in which the noun is being used. The categories identified by these classifiers provide a coherence system by which Burmese speakers order the world, just as we tend to order the world by temporal sequence.

In addition to the exuberances and deficiencies introduced by grammatical categories and words that are particular to a given language, another way in which language is inseparable from culture is that much of the meaning we glean from an utterance comes from how those words have been used in the past, what Becker calls prior text. Thus a cowboy movie is about prior cowboy movies more than it is about events that occurred on the American frontier. A viewer who had never before seen a western would miss many layers of meaning that would be obvious to a viewer who had seen many. Memories of prior text are necessary for all but the most rudimentary understanding of a language, and it is this memory – or the lack of it – that is the biggest barrier when speakers talk to each other across cultures. You might say that the reason an American does not realize that *Have you eaten yet?* is a greeting, not a literal question, and that a Burmese doesn't realize that *How are you?* is a greeting, not a literal question, is that they lack the prior text that a native speaker has.

Understanding what is lost and what is added when texts are translated from one language to another reveals a few of the many ways that a language both reflects and creates a world. Similarly, the linguistic elements that vary from one culture to another are the very elements by which language works to create meaning. There is simply no way to speak without making choices about level of loudness, voice quality, words and

grammatical structures, how to get the floor, how to frame the words to signal what you think you're doing when you speak, and so on – and all these choices vary depending on the culture in which the language was learned. That is why it is misleading even to speak of "language and culture"; the very words imply that the two can be separated.

Box 10.6 Translating culture

A survey of 1,000 translators and interpreters has identified a word from Tshiluba, a language spoken in south-eastern DR Congo, as the world's most difficult word to translate. The word *ilunga* means 'a person who is ready to forgive any abuse for the first time, to tolerate it a second time, but never a third time.' In second place was *shlimazl*, which is Yiddish for 'a chronically unlucky person.' Third was *Nao*, used in the Kansai area of Japan to emphasize statements or agree with someone.

The definitions seem pretty straightforward, but the problem is trying to convey the cultural experiences and assumptions surrounding these words. This is even more difficult to do at the speed of simultaneous interpretation. Interpreters also have difficulty with the technical jargon of politics, business or sport. For example, *googly* is a cricket term for 'an off-breaking ball disguised by the bowler with an apparent leg-break action.' If you don't understand cricket, it won't be easy to appreciate a good *googly*. *Naa!*

(From BBC News Online, Tuesday, June 22, 2004)

Chapter summary

This chapter has explored the relationship between language and culture. We have shown that, as the term "languaculture" implies, language and culture are inseparable, because language is composed of linguistic elements that vary by culture. Speakers use a range of linguistic elements to convey meaning in conversation, but the appropriate ways to use these elements vary from culture to culture. These cultural differences affect encounters between speakers from different countries as well as between Americans of different cultural and regional backgrounds, and even between women and men. Crosscultural encounters provide insight into how language works to create meaning and how language shapes the way a speaker perceives and orders the world.

The relationship between language and culture has been illustrated by real-life examples of conversations, including an opening anecdotal example of German and American college students, as well as detailed analysis of tape-recorded conversations that took place between Americans of different regional and ethnic backgrounds. Linguistic

phenomena that vary by culture include topic, intonational patterns, turn-taking, attitudes toward and uses of overlap, and indirectness. Systematic differences in uses of these linguistic phenomena have real-world consequences, as the interactional sociolinguistic work of John Gumperz demonstrates. To the extent that speakers use language and expect language to be used in predictable, culturally coherent ways and sequences, conversation can be said to have a ritual nature. When conversational rituals are shared, the result is not only successful communication, but also a satisfying sense of coherence in the world.

Exercises

Exercise 10.1

Linguist Roger Shuy (1993: 8-9) gives the following example of a crosscultural encounter with very significant consequences. A Japanese industrial engineer was prosecuted for allegedly trying to buy industrial secrets from someone representing an American company who was actually an undercover FBI agent. The tape-recorded evidence against the Japanese engineer included the following conversation:

Agent: You see, these plans are very hard to get.

Engineer: Uh-huh.

Agent: I'd need to get them at night.

Engineer: Uh-huh.

Agent: It's not done easily.

Engineer: Uh-huh.

Agent: Understand?

Engineer: Uh-huh.

The prosecution claimed that the agent's statements made it clear that the information the engineer was requesting was secret, and that the engineer's affirmative responses proved that he was aware of this and sought to obtain them illegally. What role do the linguistic features, indirectness and back-channel responses, play in this conversation? How are crosscultural differences relevant in assessing whether or not the evidence proves the engineer's guilt?

Exercise 10.2

Tape-record and analyze a naturally occurring conversation, following the methods discussed in Box 10.3 on 'Interactional sociolinguistic methodology'. Listen to the tape and identify a small segment (about a minute or two) to transcribe. You may choose a segment in which some problem or misunderstanding arose, or a segment which went especially smoothly, or just a segment in which you noticed one of the features discussed in the chapter. You may look for any aspects of the conversation that relate to linguistic elements mentioned in the chapter, including but not limited to:

- intonational contours and tone of voice
- turn-taking
- cooperative overlapping or interruption

- what's appropriate to talk about
- loudness and pitch
- indirectness
- turning

Exercise 10.3

Do linguistic field work in your own life. Think of a conversation you had in which a speaker (maybe you) used indirectness. Was it effective? Was there any misunderstanding? Did the participants in the conversation seem to appreciate or resent the indirectness? Negotiations with roommates or family members about accomplishing chores are often a rich source of examples.

Exercise 10.4

Experiment with conversational space. Without getting yourself into a threatening situation, try standing a little closer or a little farther away than you normally do when talking to someone, and note how the other person responds as well as how you yourself respond.

Exercise 10.5

Experiment with pacing, pausing, and turn-taking. If you are in a conversation in which you're doing more than your share of talking, try counting to seven before you begin speaking and see whether the other person begins to speak. If you are finding it hard to get a word in edgewise, push yourself to begin speaking before it feels comfortable and see whether the other person stops and cedes you the floor.

Exercise 10.6

The New York Times, January 26, 2005 (p. A17) reported a controversy involving the president of Harvard University, Lawrence Summers. According to the article, many Harvard professors felt that the president had 'created a reservoir of ill will with what they say is a pattern of humiliating faculty members in meetings, shutting down debate, and dominating discussions.' In an interview, President Summers said that 'his propensity to debate and challenge sometimes leaves people thinking I'm resistant to their ideas when I am really trying to engage with their ideas.'

Being in mind the experience of the American student studying in Germany, discuss how ways of using language discussed in this chapter might be playing a role in this controversy.

Suggestions for further reading

Agar, Michael 1994, *Language shock: understanding the culture of conversation*, New York: Morrow. This book is a highly readable and nuanced presentation of the concept of languaculture. Agar draws on his own research and experiences in India, Greece, Austria, and Mexico, as well as in the United States with junkies and long-distance truckers.

Fasold, Ralph W. 1990, *The sociolinguistics of language*, Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell. This introductory textbook covers numerous topics that pertain to how language works in cultural context.

Tannen, Deborah 1986, *That's not what I meant: How conversational style makes or breaks relationships*, New York: Ballantine. This short book lays out the elements of language that make up conversational style.

and how they work in everyday interactions. It also shows how conversations can go awry when there are differences in speakers' habits and assumptions regarding use of these linguistic features.

Tannen, Deborah 2001, *I only say this because I love you: talking to your parents, partner, sibs and kids when you're all adults*, New York: Ballantine. This book examines how the linguistic phenomena discussed in this chapter affect conversations that take place among adult family members and consequently their relationships.

Kiesling, Scott F. and Bratt Paulston, Christina, (eds.) 2005, *Intercultural discourse and communication: the essential readings*, Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell. This volume brings together many key essays that address various aspects of the relationship between language and culture.