

## Chapter 4: Communicating and Relating

*Eden Jacobowitz is a student at the University of Pennsylvania. His studies were interrupted by a noisy crowd of students, many black and female. He yelled out his window, "Shut up, you water buffalo." He is now charged with racial harassment under the university's Code of Conduct. The school offered to dismiss the charge if he would apologize, attend a racial sensitivity seminar, agree to dormitory probation, and accept a temporary mark on his record which would brand him as guilty. He was told the term "water buffalo" could be interpreted as racist because a water buffalo is a dark primitive animal that lives in Africa. That is questionable semantics, dubious zoology, and incorrect geography. Water buffalo live in Asia, not in Africa. This from the University of Pennsylvania. Mr. Jacobowitz is fighting back. The rest of us, however, are still in trouble. The language police are at work on the campuses of our better schools. The word cops are marching under the banner of political correctness. The culture of victimization is hunting for quarry. American English is in danger of losing its muscle and energy. That's what these bozos are doing to us. (Kors & Silvergate, 1999).*

This is a commentary by US news anchor John Chancellor on NBC news. A number of North American universities have explicit "speech codes" which seek to regulate what is perceived as harmful or hateful speech. These policies have been controversial, both in terms of the restrictions they place on individual freedom of speech and in how infractions are dealt with. Eden Jacobowitz defended his use of the term "water buffalo" as not intended to be a racial slur, but coming from Hebrew slang, *behema* (behemoth), used by Jews to refer to a loud, rowdy person.



*Free speech: Speaker in Hyde Park, London*

The charges against Jacobowitz were eventually dropped. The incident highlights the volatility of verbal exchanges and the opportunities for miscommunication and conflict, particularly between individuals from different ethnic or racial groups. In this unit we will be looking at language in the context of interpersonal and intergroup use. That will include gender-related communication patterns, as well as cultural and linguistic issues as they relate to friendships and romantic relationships. Conversational

exchanges will be discussed from the larger linguistic context of speech communities and communication styles.

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### Language and relationships

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Human beings are social animals. We live in community with others and tend to see ourselves through the relationships we have. These relationships vary significantly in terms of importance, permanence, and roles. We have long-lasting

relationships with family members and brief encounters with strangers; in between are friends, schoolmates, work colleagues, romantic partners, Facebook "friends", Twitter followers, and a host of other possible relationships. Cultures differ in how such relationships are established and how significant a role they play in an individual's life. Courtship practices and mate selection, for example, can be quite different. In the US, men and women "go on dates" and it's likely that many Americans assume this is a universal human concept. But in reality this practice – and the whole idea of "dating" as practiced in the US – may be foreign, even to close cultural neighbors, such as Western Europeans. Michael Agar reports on his experience in this regard (see sidebar). There is a set ritual around "dating" in the US, which is different from how Western European Europeans establish male-female relationships, where mixed gender group outings are preferred over one-on-one visits to a restaurant, movie, or club. In other cultures, dating might be seen as an even more foreign concept, in countries where arranged marriages are the norm, for example. The term is tied so closely to specific cultural patterns in the US context that finding a precise equivalent in languages other than American English is a challenge.



#### But what is a date?

Recently an Austrian friend of mine came to Washington to teach and study at Georgetown University. She could tack through English grammar with the best of them and had a better vocabulary than most of the native-born undergraduates in my lecture class. After a couple of months I met her for dinner and asked her how everything was going. "Fine," she said, and then, after a moment's hesitation, "But what is a 'date'?" She knew how to use the word in a sentence – "I'm going on a date"; "How about a date?" She wasn't confused because the word also means a number on a calendar or a sweet piece of fruit. But none of that explained what a "date" was. I started to answer, and the more I talked the more lost I became in how Americans see men and women, how they see relationships, intimacy - a host of connected assumptions that I'd never put into words before. And I was only trying to handle straight dates. It was quite different from her Austrian understanding of men and women and what they are to each other. For a while she looked at me as if I'd just stepped out of a flying saucer, until she finally decided I was serious.

Agar, 1994, p. 16

The kind of language we use in communicating can vary as much as the nature of our relationship. We speak quite differently with family members, than we do with work colleagues. The informal language used in text messaging is far removed from the formal **register** (language level/tone) we might use in writing a letter applying for a job. Sociolinguists study how we use language to accomplish tasks and to negotiate relationships. The kind of language used in making requests or expressing gratitude – what linguists call speech acts – can reveal quite a lot about the nature of our relationships. Using conditional forms (i.e., "Could you please...") softens a request in a context where politeness is called for to express

respect or to maintain social harmony. This tends to vary significantly across cultures. In some Asian cultures, for example, making extensive use of "please" and "thank you" within a family environment is seen as inappropriate, in that it creates distance and expresses a sense of obligation that is counter to an informal, caring human relationship (D'Souza, 1988). The role that language plays in social settings is complex. It not only conveys information, but it also serves to build and maintain relationships. It can also divide and antagonize, as in the example of the "water buffalo" incident.

We tend to think of communication as sending and receiving messages (Rogers & Steinfatt, 1999). Spoken messages, however, may not have the same degree of efficiency in transmission as written communications. A letter usually will have clearly understood content. In speaking, the message may not be received in the way we intend. There may be specific language issues which influence the reception of the message. These may be both on the speaker's end — talking too fast or too quietly, for example,— or on the listener's side — knowledge gaps in vocabulary or inattention, for instance. In speaking, we need to pay attention not only to the content of what we are saying, but also to how we are transmitting that content. That involves consideration of our mode of speaking, but also of the likely communicative abilities of our interlocutor. From that perspective, communicating effectively depends on our ability to establish a relationship with the other person:

Successful 'communication' is not judged solely in terms of the efficiency of information exchange. It is focused on establishing and maintaining relationships. In this sense, the efficacy of communication depends upon using language to demonstrate one's willingness to relate, which often involves the indirectness of politeness rather than the direct and 'efficient' choice of language full of information (Byram, 1997, p.3).

In other words, we need to take into account how our messages are likely to be received, based on the other person's communication style and on the conversation context.

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## Communication styles

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Social scientists and linguists have been studying for some time how individuals and groups interact through language, both within the same language and between languages. They have sought to discover how and why language uses vary. One of the pioneers in this area was Basil Bernstein, who found through his research that "within the same society there can be different social groups or social classes whose communicative practices differ in important ways" (Philipsen & Albrecht, 1997, p. 122). In the US, for example, there are distinct differences in speech patterns between African-Americans and European-Americans. Bernstein

(1964) described two essential patterns of speech, which he labeled **elaborated** and **restricted** codes. Elaborated code refers to contexts in which virtually all information is conveyed through the words spoken. Someone overhearing the conversation and not having any information about the interlocutor or the context would nevertheless be able to have a good understanding of the communication taking place. Restricted code, on the other hand, refers to conversations, if overheard, would not be understood because of a lack of background information and context.

These different modes of communication are often placed in relation to the distinction originally made by Edward Hall (1976) between **low-context** and **high-context** communications. In low-context messages, little (or "low") context is needed for comprehension because the essence of the communication is conveyed by the words used. That might at first blush seem to cover all human conversations. But in fact, there are interactions in which much of the message is conveyed by gestures (like bowing), body language (moving away from the speaker), or through the tone of voice (yelling). High-context messages refer to situations in which factors other than the actual words used may be vital to understanding. There can be conversations involving groups where silence is valued and in itself sends a message (in Native American cultures, for example) or where hierarchies dictate social behavior and interactions. While specific cultures are often identified as high or low context, it's more useful to apply such labels to individual speech in specific contexts.

High-context messages generally align with restricted speech codes in that a lot of verbiage is unnecessary and, in fact, what is not said may be as important as what is explicitly expressed. On the other hand, elaborated code is needed in low-context situations where little information is conveyed by nonverbal means. Restricted codes are most often associated with cultures labeled collectivistic, in which the status of the interactants dictates who says what to whom and how it is said. Restricted codes are also often found in "closed" communities such as the military or prison, but can also develop within any social group or individual who share social identifications, i.e. among spouses, coworkers, or fraternity brothers. People who spend a lot of time together in the same group inevitably develop shorthand ways of communicating. In some cases, such as in criminal gangs or religious cults, a specific verbal code may be developed to further group cohesion and exclude outsiders.

Interactions between conversants using opposing speech modes can lead to misunderstandings or conflict. Long pauses in a conversation may be normal and expected in some cultural contexts, but can be uncomfortable in others. A study by Stivers et al. (2009) compared ten languages in how long it took native speaker to respond to a yes/no question and found differences in the average gap before

answering. Jumping into a conversation in order to end awkward pauses may limit the other person's ability to speak or to initiate conversational topics. Different cultural traditions may have different expectations in terms of **turn-taking** or the acceptability of interrupting. In Mediterranean countries, for example, it's common to hear overlapping utterances; in Northern European countries, there's a greater likelihood that conversational turns end before someone else speaks. North American linguist Deborah Tannen (1984) points to regional differences in turn-taking between New Yorkers and Californians during a dinner conversation. The former speak fast with no pauses:

The result is that the East Coast speakers continually take the floor, the West Coast participants waiting in vain for a pause they deem long enough for them to start talking. Whereas the 'fast' speakers think that the others have nothing to say, the 'slow' ones feel that they are not given a chance to talk (Günther, 2007, p. 132).

The New Yorkers' turn-taking rules reflect their way of showing involvement in the conversation, while this is interpreted by the Californians as rudeness and a reluctance to let others speak.

Speech communities can also vary in how **direct** speakers are in expressing views. In some cultures, speakers may hide their real intent or personal opinion, by, for example, giving an ambiguous or misleading response to a request or to a yes-no question. This may occur out of feelings of respect, politeness, or wariness. This **indirect** verbal behavior is often associated with Asian cultures. The Japanese version of "yes" (*Hai* はい) does not necessarily mean "yes" in the sense of agreeing or accepting. It is used often to equivocate, to indicate to the speaker that you are listening, but not necessarily expressing an affirmation. Other cultures prefer an explicit and overt verbal style. Germans, for example, are often given as an example of a direct speaking style, with a reputation of being blunt and to the point. An awareness of different conversational styles can be helpful in avoiding conversational faux-pas and hurt feelings. Caution is needed, however, in applying universally to individuals generic speech patterns. Individual speakers may have developed their own habits and preferences which differ from those of others in that particular cultural group:

We must be cautious and not assume that everyone in a particular part of the world behaves in certain ways. For example, not all Japanese favour indirect styles of communication, just as not all Germans have a very direct style of communication. Not all Chinese business executives prefer a formal style of communication in meetings, just as not all American executives adopt an informal style in their meetings. The degree of directness and formality may vary among individuals (Jackson, 2014, p. 95).



It is also the case that in conversations with others individuals may well alter communication styles to adjust to conversation partners.

The conflicts in communication styles may derive from interactions among members of ethnic groups with different communication styles. In one study of an immigrant Korean shopkeeper and an African-American customer in Los Angeles, the clash of styles is evident (Bailey, 1997). In a conversation Bailey analyzes, the African-American customer uses a "high involvement style", featuring informal and emotional language, in an effort to establish a personal connection to the Korean shopkeeper. He uses swear words and volunteers personal information about himself. The shopkeeper, however, remains detached and impersonal, resulting in an unsatisfying conversation. This is not unusual in such encounters, as Bailey comments:



In the US there have been conflicts between Korean storekeepers and African-American customers

The seeming avoidance of involvement on the part of immigrant Koreans is frequently seen by African Americans as the disdain and arrogance of racism. The relative stress on interpersonal involvement among African Americans in service encounters is typically perceived by immigrant Korean retailers as a sign of selfishness, interpersonal imposition, or poor breeding (Bailey, 1997, p. 353).

Such clashes are not infrequent in service encounters and in business transactions in many parts of the world. Conflicts may be related to different communication styles and expected behaviors in given situations. The extent to which one engages



Small talk plays different roles across cultures

in **small talk** in such contexts, for example, varies significantly. Customers, such as in the example above, may engage in small talk as a way to establish a personal connection, but that may not be reciprocated.

In some contexts, such as at the workplace, small talk may involve a power negotiation. In conversations with subordinates, higher-ups in the company may decide to what extent engaging in small talk is acceptable or encouraged. Engaging in humor or telling jokes can be equally problematic across cultures. Humor depends on cultural context and knowledge, and relies

considerably on the linguistic ability of a listener. As a result, jokes often do not work when transferred from one culture or language to another. Here again social or economic hierarchies may come into play, with those higher up the socio-economic ladder enjoying the privilege of making jokes, which may be inappropriate for subordinates (Dwyer, 1991).

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## Communication Contexts

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Within the same society, there can be quite different speech patterns and verbal behaviors. In different situations and with different people, how we use language may vary considerably. How one speaks can also depend on one's gender. Gerry

Philipsen's landmark study on speaking "like a man," in "Teamsterville" (his code name for a blue-collar, low income neighborhood in Chicago) illustrates that (1975). He discovered in his research that there were clearly defined patterns of communication in the community (see sidebar). In his study, Philipsen describes the contexts in which high volumes of speech among men are expected, namely

when congregated on street corners or at local bars. On the other hand, a high quantity of speaking is considered inappropriate in situations in which there is a hierarchical or social distance between the speakers. These include relationships with a wife, child, boss, outsider, or men of different ethnicity. In some situations, Teamsterville men's verbal code calls for no speaking at all, but rather silence, nonverbal behavior, or even violent actions (in response to personal insults, for example). The study demonstrates the different verbal styles assigned to different contexts and contrasts the speech patterns in the Chicago blue-color neighborhood with others in the US:

In Teamsterville, talk is negatively valued in many of the very situations for which other American communities most highly prize speaking strategies. Speaking is a



### Talking like a man in Teamsterville

Teamsterville's cultural (i.e., shared, tacit) understandings about the value of speaking are sharply defined and susceptible of discovery, although they are not written down in native treatises on effective communication, nor can native informants necessarily verbalize them. One manifestation of cultural outlook is the local view of the appropriateness of speaking versus other actional strategies (such as silence, violence, or non-verbal threats) in male role enactment or self-presentation. Whether and how well a man performs in a manly way is a principal criterion in Teamsterville for judging whether his behavior is appropriate and proper to the social identity, "male." Manliness is a theme of much neighborhood talk about self and others and a Teamsterville man is aware that his social performances will be judged frequently as to their manliness. To know how to perform, or present oneself, "like a man" in Teamsterville as elsewhere is to be privy to implicit understandings shared by members of the speech community, i.e., it is to have access to the culture.

culturally prized resource for male role enactment by black Americans in urban ghettos; the black man who speaks as a strategy for dealing with outsiders or females is enacting the male role appropriately according to the standards of his speech community. The white collar man who can “talk things through” with his wife, child, or boss is using speech in culturally sanctioned ways. (p. 21)

This is a sampling of different speech communities just within the USA. Moving beyond the US borders, one can appreciate the immense diversity in speech behaviors worldwide, pointing to the rich opportunities for miscommunication.

### Speaking like a woman in Mexico

First thing I noticed in Mexico is the difference in the types of voice we use. In Japanese society, especially young women, use a relatively high pitch voice and tend to speak somehow ‘childish’. ‘Childish’ behaviour of a woman, not only the type of voice but also her behaviour itself, is considered as something ‘cute’ or ‘favourable’, and very widely accepted in our society. In Mexican society, however, they use a lower and deeper tone of voice than in Japan; it is required for both men and women to speak and act as ‘adult person’, in every setting of life and naturally in business setting. In Mexican society, to use a childish voice, as many Japanese women do, could be a disadvantage, not something ‘favourable’, and doing so it is possible that you will not be treated properly. After a couple of month[s] of y living in Mexico I noticed about this fact and started to try using a different kind of voice, deeper and softer one, so that I am treated as an adult person.

Hua, 2014, p. 224



Philipsen's study demonstrated how Teamsterville men adapted their communication style (amount of speech, emotional involvement, nonverbal behavior) to the context of the encounter (physical location, gender/age/ethnicity/social status of conversant). One is likely to be more aware of the necessity of making those kinds of adjustments if one is abroad. That may mean, of course, using a different language, but it could also mean, adjusting communicative habits. A Japanese woman who lived in Mexico for a number of years reported on

changes she found to be necessary in her communication style (see sidebar). The changes described here can be challenging, both linguistically and emotionally. Part of the difficulty is that in such cases there are no written norms to go by. One learns through experience, making mistakes and reflecting on outcomes of conversations. One of the benefits of such an approach is that one comes to learn about one's own communication style, as the Japanese woman in this case became conscious of her "childish" speaking voice. That kind of awareness is crucial to the ability to make adjustments in intercultural encounters, which will make communication more effective and satisfying for both sides.



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## Communication accommodation

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In accommodating our communication style to our conversation partner, we tend to make adjustments automatically and naturally, in an unconscious effort to make ourselves better understood. Our efforts are likely to be most successful if we have some awareness of both our own culturally-influenced approach to communication and of the nature of the **speech community** of the person with whom we are interacting. Indeed, social scientists have studied ways in which speech communities differ, and they also have investigated common strategies for overcoming those differences. One of the approaches that is widely known is the **communication accommodation theory**, developed by Howard Giles (1973; Street & Giles, 1982). It describes the ways in which people adjust their speech, vocal patterns, and gestures to accommodate others. Giles and his colleagues found that people use a variety of changes, including rate of speech in speaking, patterns of pausing, length of utterances, and the use of gestures, facial expressions and body language. It assumes that such accommodation varies in its degree of appropriateness.

The theory postulates two main accommodation processes, **convergence** – adapting to the extent possible the other's communicative behaviors – and **divergence** – in which the differences are acknowledged and maintained. A third option, maintenance, involves not making any adjustments at all. In most instances of cross-cultural communication, convergence is recommended, i.e., listening actively for how the other person is communicating and adjusting our language use and nonverbal behavior accordingly. Speaking with a non-native speaker, for example, might involve reducing the use of slang, avoiding regionalisms or country-specific references, slowing the rate of speech, articulating clearly, and/or simplifying vocabulary. Helpful as well is the use of affirming nonverbal gestures such as nodding and smiling. Convergent behaviors are normally positively received by the interlocutor, which tends to make conversations run more smoothly and generate positive feelings on both sides. This can reduce social distance and contribute to a sense of solidarity (Jackson, 2014). The process of learning a second language aids development of the awareness and the importance of communication accommodation, as one experiences oneself the difficulty in communicating with more proficient speakers of the target language.

There are situations in which divergence is appropriate, for example, when there is a significant gap in social status or power relationship. Speaking with one's physician, for example, might be a context in which convergence is unlikely. An interview situation might also be such a case. In intercultural situations, the degree of power distance in the culture represented by one's conversation partner may play a role as well. In cultures in which social hierarchies are acknowledged and

accepted, it is normal practice to engage in divergence, for example, using respectful language and nonverbal behavior with elders or socially highly-placed individuals

For the most part, people engage in convergence with good intentions, in order to facilitate communication across different communicative styles. However, it is possible to go too far in accommodating the other speaker, a process known as **overaccommodation** (Street & Giles, 1982). This might involve oversimplifying one's speech, exaggerating enunciation, or slowing excessively the rate of speech. One example is the kind of "baby talk" caregivers in nursing homes might use in talking with their elderly patients, sometimes labeled "elderspeak" (Kemper, 1994). Overaccommodation can be patronizing and demeaning and can detract from communicative effectiveness. There is also the phenomenon known as "intergroup overaccommodation", in which particular groups are treated based on general stereotypes, rather than members being treated as unique individuals (Gallois, Ogay & Giles, 2005). That might involve adjusting one's speech in environments based on assumptions that everyone living there – in a US inner-city or in a French *banlieu*, for instance – is socially and educationally inferior.

Another perspective on communication accommodation is offered by New Zealand sociolinguist Alan Bell, who emphasizes the free agency of conversation partners:

We do not always speak in consistently the same way. In fact we are shifting the way we speak constantly as we move from one situation to another. On different occasions we talk in different ways. These different ways of speaking carry different social meanings. They represent our ability to take up different social positions, and they affect how we are perceived by others (Bell, 2007, p. 95).

Bell's concept of **speech style** aligns with contemporary views on identity formation which emphasize the idea of "transportable identities," as we take on one of an array of social and linguistic subject positions according to the communication context (Van De Mierop & Clifton, 2012). At the same time, power and hierarchical relationships may limit the extent to which individuals can enact particular identity positions.

Accommodation will often be necessary for native speakers in conversation with non-native speakers. The extent of that accommodation depends on the context (type and purpose of conversation, location, respective social positions) as well as on the proficiency level of the speaker. In multilingual environments, or in a context in which non-native English speakers are conversing together in English, there may be different dynamics at work and subsequently different kinds of accommodations that occur. In such "lingua franca conversations", participants may will differ in their individual language proficiencies. Studies have shown that in

these situations, there is typically a strong cooperative element (Meierkord, 2000), as participants use a variety of nonverbal means (smiling, gesturing) and **paralinguistic** devices (laughing, pausing frequently) to smooth over possible verbal miscues. The nature of such conversations stresses communicative efficiency over linguistic accuracy (Ehrenreich, 2010). These kinds of exchanges occur more frequently today, particularly among non-native speakers of English. They also occur increasingly in online environments.

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## Uncertainty management

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When we encounter someone for the first time, we are likely to form opinions based on very little concrete information. In such situations, we tend to use what little knowledge we do have to place the person into a particular category, based on age, appearance, name, or other observable or known characteristics. Optimally, we approach the stranger with an open mind and an awareness that the stereotypes we have in our heads may not fit this particular individual. In any case, the paucity of information we have about the other person can lead to uncertainty on our part, possibly generating feelings of nervousness or anxiety, due to the unpredictability of the encounter. This is particularly the case when meeting someone from a different culture. Charles Bergen and Richard Calabrese (1975) developed an approach to communication called **uncertainty reduction theory**. Their fundamental assumption is that when strangers meet, our primary goal is to reduce uncertainty and increase predictability.



Anxiety is commonly associated with

According to this theory, uncertainty reduction can be both proactive and retroactive. Proactively, we can take measures such as deciding to adjust our speech based on the expectation that the person may not be a native speaker of our language. In that case, we may elect to use a language register accessible to non-native speakers. Retroactively, we can analyze an encounter to explain unexpected behavior, based on information gained through the conversation or from external sources. If, for example, the other person avoided eye contact, that might be a result of personal shyness, but it could also be cultural, an intended signal of respect or recognition of social standing. One might also consider the fact that those from high-context cultures tend to be more cautious in what they talk about with strangers. Those individuals accustomed to high-context communication might also feel uncomfortable in not having the kind of information important to that communicative style, namely the social, educational, or economic status of the other person, as well as the family background. In

contrast, if one is more used to low-context communication, it is more likely that one would have the tendency to ask a lot of questions to gain information, rather than focusing on nonverbal behavior or social identity.

Another researcher, William Gudykunst, developed this approach further through what he called **anxiety/uncertainty management** (1988). This theory incorporates the concept of mindfulness. **Mindfulness** refers to the extent to which we are conscious of our attitudes, behavior, and judgments. Rather than relying on automatic responses in terms of categorization and stereotyping, mindful behavior explicitly addresses the unique experience of an encounter and makes adjustments as appropriate. Gudykunst points out that to be mindful, people must recognize that strangers may have quite different perspectives and communicative approaches. We can't assume that our messages will necessarily be interpreted as we mean them to be. Instead, one needs to negotiate meaning with strangers, adjusting our perspective and language to what is needed for effective communication. If we maintain rigid and inflexible categorizations, our uncertainty and anxiety will increase and communication will break down.

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## Sources of miscommunication

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Misunderstandings in conversations can derive from a wide variety of sources and situations. In cross-cultural encounters, having a fundamental knowledge of the language is a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective communication. Learning vocabulary and grammar, as well as gaining proficiency in oral and written communication provide the basic tools for communicating. But what needs to accompany these essential building blocks is knowledge and skills in the ways in which language is used in cultural contexts in real-life situations. This is true even of speakers of the same language who speak different language varieties. Language **pragmatics** highlights the social contexts in which members of a community use language for specific communicative purposes. How one appropriately makes requests, issues invitations, or extends personal complements can vary significantly. There are large number of approaches for exploring what speakers "do" with words, what actions ensue, and how listeners respond. One of the challenges in this area is that, in contrast to linguistic fields such as syntax, phonology, or semantics, there are no hard-and-fast rules in the cultural dimensions of language use. Learning pragmatics happens through observation and participation. Children are socialized into appropriate language use, which becomes in large part a matter of implicit or unconscious knowledge, an awareness of a set of unwritten rules for a given community.

One of the issues that that can arise in intercultural communication is what is known as **pragmatic transfer**. Since pragmatic language use is deeply ingrained

in individual behavior, speech acts and other manifestations of culture in language are regularly transferred by speakers from their native language into a second language. If we are used to seeing particular languages and/or behaviors in a given

situation, our natural expectation is to see that repeated, even in different locales. That might involve something as routine as an offer of coffee after a meal, which, as in the example in the sidebar, might not have the expected significance. In this example of the offer of coffee, the difficulty does not lie in the linguistic meaning

of the words, but rather with the cultural significance of the offer in the particular context of having a meal at a friend's home. The example points to the reasons for being aware of this kind of pragmatic transfer, as it can lead to awkwardness and miscommunication.

**Pragmatic failure** often derives from errors which can be traced to the input of one's native language on the use of a second language. We may not be aware of the pragmatic or emotional value that roughly equivalent expressions carry in another language. Native speakers of Russian, for example, may use the expression "of course" in English in pragmatically inappropriate ways as, as in the following exchange between a native English speaker (A) and a native Russian speaker (B):

A: Is it a good restaurant?

B: Of course [Gloss (for Russian speaker): Yes, (indeed) it is. For English listener: what a stupid question!]

Thomas, 1983, p. 102

#### An offer of coffee: what does it really mean?

In some cultures an offer of coffee after a meal is generally recognized as a polite way to indicate to the guests that they ought to leave soon if they do not wish to outstay their welcome. In other cultures, an offer of coffee on a similar occasion is just an act of the host's kindness (or even an invitation to the guests to stay a little bit longer than they had intended). If interactants from different cultural backgrounds are unaware of the differences in their respective mental sets, misunderstandings are likely to occur. Misunderstandings of this sort involve the carryover of culture-specific knowledge from a situation of intra-cultural communication to a situation of intercultural communication.

Žegarac & Pennington, 2000, p. 169





The Russian word *konesco* (конечно) has the same dictionary definition as English "of course" and is used, as in English, to indicate agreement or acceptance. However, in particular contexts, the English phrase refers to something being obvious. The use of the phrase in the context above could be perceived as peremptory or possibly even insulting, which was certainly not the intent of the speaker.

#### Swearing in English

I very rarely swear in Finnish but 'oh shit' or 'fuck' can easily escape my mouth even in quite trivial occasions - they just do not feel that serious to my (or my hearers') ears, even though I know they would sound quite horrible to a native speaker (milder English swear words like 'damn' for example do not even sound like swear words to me). If I would happen to hit myself with a hammer the words coming out of my mouth would definitely be in Finnish.

Dewaele, 2004, p. 213

An instance where caution is mandated is in the use of swearwords. These have a strong emotional value, which for non-native speakers may not transfer (see sidebar). Recent research on multilingualism (Paulenko, 2005; Dewaele, 2010) has shown that in many instances, multilingual speakers may make language choices and engage in code-switching based on the emotional

import that expressions carry in a particular language.

In this area, as in all matters pertaining to cultural values and behaviors, care is needed to avoid overgeneralization. While there may be identifiable patterns of social behavior related to language within a community, that does not necessarily mean that a given behavior will be replicated by each member of the community. It is helpful to think of situations in which pragmatic transfer and the other cultural-linguistic awkwardness occurs as **rich points** of intercultural encounters, namely situations in which we do not initially understand the source of confusion or conflict (Agar, 1994). Such rich points can be explored for learning about social expectations and typical behaviors, but also for understanding individual perspectives and deviations. Rather than automatically characterizing incidents as culturally stereotypical, cultural anthropologists encourage the use of **thick description** of incidents, that is, going beyond the surface manifestations to discover deeper meanings and values and fleshing out the full cultural and personal contexts of what occurred (Bennett, 1998). The example often given is the significance of a wink:

The same physical act of someone "rapidly raising and lowering their right eyelid" could be a nervous twitch, a deliberate wink to attract attention or communicate with someone, or an imitation or mockery of someone else with a nervous twitch or winking. It all depends on the context, the aims of person the performing the action, and how these were understood by others (Knowles, 2011).

A "thin description" would record only the physical act and thereby not be very informative. The idea is to look further than the stock, stereotypical interpretation and try to discover the true meaning of observed phenomena.

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### Culturally embedded language use

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One of the tools for working out the cultural undercurrents present in verbal exchanges is **conversation analysis**. Scholars in this area look at real speech as recorded in audio and video, which is then transcribed. Examining transcribed conversations reveals how different actual speech is from the model dialogues supplied in language textbooks. Real-life language use is typically a complex set of stops and starts, not the orderly, logical back-and-forth exchange of information one might assume. Sets of transcribed conversations, such as represented in the British National Corpus and other language **corpora** (organized and analyzed collections of texts), have shown that real language use is "often messy and untidy and embedded deeply in cultural understanding of various kinds" (Carter, 1998, p. 48). Carter (1998) provides the example of a brief exchange in a fish and chips shop in Great Britain:

[In a fish and chip shop]

A: Can I have chips, beans, and a sausage?

B: Chips, beans, and a sausage.

A: Yeah.

B: Wrapped up?

A: Open, please (p. 48, taken from the British National Corpus)

Carter points to the cultural significance here of the word "open" in the last line, used in opposition to "wrapped up"; it "carries a specific cultural meaning of food being served in paper so that it can be eaten immediately, even perhaps while walking home" (p. 48). The exchange is short and to the point; it is transactional in nature, i.e. related to getting something concrete accomplished through language, namely buying dinner. Full sentences are not used, but rather abbreviated forms, called ellipsis or **elliptical constructions**. The evidence provided in language corpora show this to be very common in everyday conversations. Carter points out that this kind of barebones exchange is appropriate in this particular context as "anything more interactive and interpersonal would be out of place because there are normally long queues of hungry customers in the shop" (p. 49). However, in other service encounters — and in many everyday conversations — it is likely that interpersonal elements will play a significant role, moving beyond transactional language through the addition of personal and affective language.

Conversation analysis has also revealed that there tend to be repeating underlying patterns, namely certain combinations of turn taking or question and response. They have also identified **adjacency pairs** (also called "framing pairs") that generally occur together, such as compliment – response, invitation – acceptance, greeting – greeting. In English, the greeting "How are you" is normally followed by the formulaic "Fine, thanks", while a conversation ending is signaled by a pair of utterances, such as "I've got to go" and "OK, see you later". While there are likely to be many variations in terms of the specific language used, the pattern of supplying an answering response to the initiation of an adjacency pair is a social norm. Not doing so may cause awkwardness in the conversation or can even be considered rude. British philosopher of language Paul Grice (1975) identified such conversational practices as part of what he termed the "cooperative principle", that is, that in social practice individuals engage in speech which is cooperative and characterized by conventional usage.

While the patterns are typical across many languages, the specifics of such speech can be quite different. The field of cross-cultural pragmatics studies how that works out in practice across cultures and languages. The culturally embedded nature of language points to the importance in learning a second language of developing skills and knowledge that go beyond purely linguistic competence, i.e. grammar and vocabulary. **Pragmalinguistic competence** is needed, the ability to use language in culturally appropriate ways in particular contexts, such as in speech acts like requests and apologies (Grice, 1975). Also needed is **sociopragmatic competence**, knowing what is appropriate in a particular speech community. That might include issues such as politeness and respect for social conventions such as taboo topics (Gilmore, 2011).

A speech act such as a compliment may be received in a very different manner, depending on the cultural tradition or **cultural schema**, i.e., the expected language and behavior based on experience (Nishida, 1999). The cultural schema or cultural model (Quinn & Holland, 1987) provide guides to behavior in particular contexts. The conversation below between an Iranian student and an Australian teacher illustrates a mismatch in cultural schemas.

Lecturer: I heard you've won a prestigious award. Congratulations! This is fantastic.

Student: Thanks so much. I haven't done anything. It is the result of your effort and your knowledge. I owe it all to you.

Lecturer: Oh, No!!! Don't be ridiculous. It's all your work.

Sharifian, 2005, pp. 337-338

The professor sees the situation as an example of individual merit but according to the researcher, the Iranian student draws on the Persian tradition of *shekasteh-nafsi*, which "motivates the speakers to downplay their talents, skills, achievements, etc .... and also encourages the speakers to reassign the compliment to the giver of the compliment, a family member, a friend, or another associate" (Sharifian, 2005, p. 337). Giving and receiving compliments is an interaction which can unfold differently across cultures. It's not uncommon in non-Western cultures, for compliments to be deflected, rather than accepted.

Social situations which normally call forth normalized behavior using stock language practices are sometimes referred to as **cultural scripts** (Yule, 2008). One learns these "scripts" — ways of acting and speaking — through observation and experience. Jackson (2014) gives the example of the expected cultural script for visiting a public bath in Japan (see sidebar). One learns cultural scripts and norms associated with certain contexts through enculturation and socialization. This is a gradual process in ones own cultural upbringing is largely unconscious. While cultural scripts offer important insights into local practices, they should not be interpreted as prescriptive:

#### Visiting a bath house in Japan

In Tokyo, for example, a visit to a public bath house (sentō) might start with the payment of an entrance fee to the attendant, followed by disrobing in a change room that is reserved for members of one's sex. Then, one may sit on a stool near faucets where one washes oneself. It is only after one is thoroughly clean that one steps into the communal bath (same sex), which is usually quite hot. One may chat with other bathers or simply relax in silence. After soaking, one gets out of the water, rinses, dries off, gets dressed and heads home. Embedded in this schema are notions of what is proper in this context. For individuals who are new to the sentō and not used to public nudity, this may be a shocking event! A trip to a public bath house in other parts of the world (e.g. Finland, Germany, Hungary, South Korea, Turkey) would not be the same experience due, in part, to different 'event sequences' or procedures that stem from variations in etiquette (norms of politeness) and attitudes towards such aspects as sex, nudity, cleanliness and communication

Jackson (2014), p. 59

A cultural script is not intended as a description of actual behaviour, but as a depiction of shared assumptions about how people think about social interaction. Individuals may or may not follow the cultural guidelines; they may follow them in some situations but not in others; they may defy, subvert or play with them in various ways; but even those who reject or defy culturally endorsed modes of thinking and modes of action are nonetheless aware of them (Goddard, 2004, pp. 7-8).

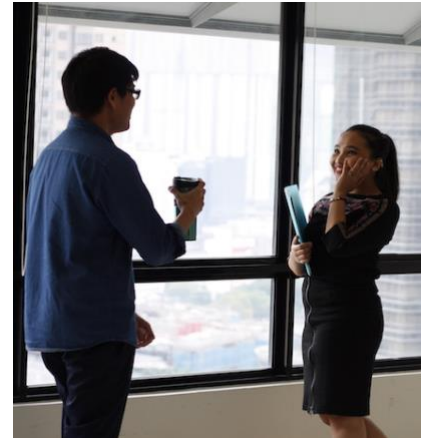
One may be aware of expected behaviors, or language used, but for personal, philosophical, political or religious reasons not act according to norms and expectations. Whether that is associated with any social sanctions will depend on the particular context (Mosby, 2009).

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## Gender and communication

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If, as the Teamsterville study demonstrated, there are speech habits identifiable for men in particular social and economic milieux, there are also patterns of communication often identified with women. It's frequently claimed that women, at least in the US, use language in a more deferential and self-effacing manner than is typically the case for male speech. The use of rising intonation at the end of sentences (not just questions) and adding "tag questions" (using "...don't you think?" or similar phrases) point in this direction. One of the phenomena frequently examined in recent years is the use of "vocal fry" by young women in the US, sometimes associated with the Kardashian clan (a family famous in the US for being in a reality TV show). This refers to the habit of pronouncing particular words or phrases, especially at the end of a sentence, in a kind of deep, guttural voice that's often described as "creaky". Distinctive speaking habits of women are often seen as symptomatic of women's awareness of their subordinate status in a male-dominated culture. Speech habits such as vocal fry, an overly deferential tone, or "valley speak" (Californian social dialect featuring exaggerated rising intonation), all associated with women, are often seen as holding women back professionally, as they are regarded as inappropriate in a formal business environment, where the tone and language codes are set by men.



Do men and women talk differently?

In fact, there are a variety of perspectives on the question of the distinctiveness of language use between men and women. According to Deborah Tannen (1990), "male-female conversation is cross-cultural communication" (p. 42). In her view, there are clear differences between how men and women speak, namely that women tend to use language to build rapport and men to report information. Because men and women use language differently, Tannen suggests they are speaking different dialects, or what she calls "genderlects".

For most women, the language of conversation is primarily a language of rapport: a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships. Emphasis is placed on displaying similarities and matching experiences...For most men, talk is primarily a means to preserve independence and negotiate and maintain status in a hierarchical social order. This is done by exhibiting knowledge and skill, and by holding center stage through verbal performance such as story-telling, joking, or imparting information (1990, p. 16).



This theory assumes that men and women subconsciously communicate in different ways, without being aware of how we differ. It suggests that both communication styles should be respected and that being mindful of the difference can make us more tolerant and understanding in conversations between genders.

Other scholars in this area emphasize how women's speech tends to be undervalued, due to a power structure favoring men. Deborah Cameron, for example, addresses this issue of why it is popularly assumed that women talk more than men (see sidebar).

**'Many women, many words; many geese, many turds'**

If it does not reflect reality, why is the folk-belief that women talk more than men so persistent? The feminist Dale Spender once suggested an explanation: she said that people overestimate how much women talk because they think that, ideally, women would not talk at all. While that may be rather sweeping, it is true that belief in female loquacity is generally combined with disapproval of it. The statement 'women talk more than men' tends to imply the judgment 'women talk too much'. (As one old proverb charmingly puts it: 'Many women, many words; many geese, many turds'.) The folk-belief that women talk more than men persists because it provides a justification for an ingrained social prejudice.

Cameron, 2007, Do women really talk more than men section, para. 7

Another perspective is offered by "standpoint theory" which takes into consideration the power position of men in conversational interactions. Advocates of this view maintain that the standpoint of marginalized communities provides the perspective that should be used in analyzing communication, rather than what is conventionally used,

namely the perspective of privileged white males. In this view, marginalized people, including women, see the world differently. The difference between men and women is seen as largely the result of cultural expectations and the treatment each group receives from the other. This is in line with the muted group theory discussed in chapter two, with the idea being that women are a muted group, since language used in the public sphere does not reflect well their experience.

These theories on gender-related communication deal for the most part with Western societies. The social position of women varies significantly across cultures. In many cultures, women's lower social position results in significantly fewer opportunities for expressing views or having opinions taken seriously. That is accompanied often by fewer educational or career opportunities, and in some cases, less choice in mate selection. Equally varied from culture to culture are attitudes towards homosexuality. In the US, gay marriage has become socially acceptable, but not in many parts of the world. An awareness of the existence of different views and expectations in male-female relationships and identities can be important in intercultural encounters.

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## Communication in personal relationships

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We started this chapter stating that as social animals humans tend to build many different relationships. How we communicate in those relationships can vary a good deal, from intimate, familiar talk with friends and family to formal, arm's-length conversations with strangers. The language that we use depends as well on the context and purpose of the encounter. Since cultures vary in the nature of relationships, communication within those relationships differs as well.

Some cultures have traditions of welcoming strangers, while others view outsiders with suspicion. Religious beliefs as well as personal attitudes may play important role. In some cases, outsiders become accepted members of communities only after long periods of time and scrutiny. US Americans tend to be open and receptive to strangers, often divulging personal information much more so than in other cultures. One international student in the US observed:

One thing that was very different from what I was used to in Iceland was that people, even people that I didn't know at all, were telling me their whole life stories, or so it felt like. Even some women at the checkout line at the supermarket were talking about how many times they had been married or divorced or about the money they had, which, in my culture, we are not used to just telling anyone about (Martin & Nakayama, 2010, p. 394).

That openness and candor may not extend to all strangers; depending on the country of origin, the reception in the US may well be much more circumspect. In most cultures appropriate topics for conversations with strangers do not include personal histories or family relationships. In traditional cultures in the Arab world, for example, asking about a man's wife is taboo. In many cultures, religion and politics are subjects to avoid.

If relationships continue over time, some develop into friendships. Studies have shown, not surprisingly, that what draws people together is less demographic similarities of race, age, or class, but rather commonality of interests and values (Hammer, 1986). That seems to be accentuated in online relationships, in which we tend to construct "communities of practice" around those with similar interests, whether that be particular kinds of music, hobbies such as gardening, or political convictions. In those online communities, we care less — and are likely unaware of — factors such as race or ethnicity. Some lament the fact that online relationships, along with our growing obsession with connecting continuously with those communities, has weakened our face-to-face relationships (Turkle's *Alone Together*, 2011). In the US, this has been noted for some time, with the growth of social media, combining with other social and economic developments, to disengage many from their local communities. The book *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000) provides a metaphor for that loss of community in the US. Whether we lament or

celebrate the rise of online communities, they seem unlikely to lose their importance anytime soon.

For many of us today, we are likely to have separate groups of online friends/communities and face-to-face relationships. As we do in all relationships, the respective degree of importance of each is likely to change over time. As individual personal relationships become closer, we are likely to engage in **self-disclosure** of private information, whether that be in person or online. The more we reveal about ourselves, the closer we are likely to grow to one another. The **social penetration theory** (Altman and Taylor, 1973) proposes that, as relationships develop, interpersonal communication moves from shallow, superficial topics to more personal and intimate subjects. In the process of forming deeper relationships, issues of diversity become less important. To what extent self-disclosure occurs depends on the individual as much as it does on cultural backgrounds.

How friendship is understood varies as well. US Americans tend to have many "friends," but that relationship is not as intimate or strong as that term connotes in many other cultures. In Germany, for example, one tends to have few friends (*Freunde*) but many acquaintances (*Bekannte*). It would not be unusual in Germany for someone we have known for years to continue to be a *Bekannter*, not a *Freund*. Becoming a *Freund* might mean switching to the familiar you (*du*) and addressing each other by first names. Traditionally there is even a short ceremony (*Brüderschaftstrinken*), involving having a drink together.



Switching over to friendship in Germany

In many cultures, such as Germany, friends are those with whom we have a special emotional relationship. Collier (1996) investigated what friendship means for different groups within the US. She found that for Hispanics and African-Americans, it took considerably longer to develop a real friendship than was the case for European-Americans. She also found differences in what the groups considered to be important in friendships: "Latinos emphasized relational support, Asian Americans emphasized a caring, positive exchange of ideas, African Americans emphasized respect and acceptance and Anglo [European] Americans emphasized recognizing the needs of individuals" (p. 315). In Asian countries, friendships tend to take longer to develop and to be more long-lasting than in the US (Carrier, 1999). They also tend to involve obligations on one another.

In China, the concept of *guanxi* (关系) often plays an important role in friendships and in personal relationships (Yeung & Tung, 1996). *Guanxi* refers to

the informal network of social connections built on shared identity such as kinship, place of origin, or profession. The system is particularly important in China for getting things done, such as access to the right school or neighborhood, or finding a good job. It's built on a non-reciprocal obligation system – someone always owes something to someone else (a favor, a connection). According to Jane Yum (1988), this kind of unequal balance helps maintain interpersonal connections in relationships. This is in contrast to the Western concept, common in the US, of short term and symmetrical reciprocity in relationships. From this perspective, if I owe something to someone (a favor, money), I am not comfortable until that debt is repaid, so that we are "even". In that way, each of us maintains the same independence in the relationship. This is in line with Collier's finding (1996) showing that white Americans' emphasis in friendships is on maintenance of individual needs.

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## Romancing across cultures

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Some intimate friendships develop into something more, namely romantic relationships. How that develops varies. Some scholars suggest that there is a natural human tendency to find mates who are similar to us in some way. The **similarity-attraction hypothesis** (Byrne, 1971) explains that we are likely to seek partners within our in-groups. If we share beliefs and values, that provides **cognitive consistency**, coalescing around common views and experiences (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Deeply-held religious, political, or philosophical beliefs may come into play. In intercultural relationships, there may be a different dynamic at work. It may be the case that what we find attractive may be the differences, not the similarities. Standards of beauty tend to be largely cultural, defined often by images in media and advertising. In mainstream US culture, for example, the standard for

### They're so exotic

I think they're so exotic. Really, what concerns me about the girl is the eyes, and Asian women have beautiful eyes, the form and the shape of them. It's a plus for me. I had another Asian girl friend before. And I like their skin color, tannish, not just white, white, white. A girl with color. It's just different; it's more sexual, its not just like plain Jane.

"Talking About Race," 2000, p. 59



female beauty tilts towards white women with blonde hair. One study showed that 90% of models in US magazines are white (Frith, Shaw & Cheung, 2005). At the same time, Asian and Asian-American women are often portrayed in the US as ideal mates. On the one hand, they are shown in Orientalist style as exotic and sexually available (see sidebar). On the other hand, they are seen as submissive and obedient (Uchida, 1998). This is how Asian women are characterized in the mail-order bride business which has experienced a boom in the Internet age. The following advertisement from such a site illustrates this imaging:

Why choose a Filipina? Women from the Philippines are noted for their beauty, grace, charm and loyalty. With their sweet nature and shy smiles, Filipina ladies possess an inner beauty that most men find irresistible. Filipina women are by their nature family-orientated, resourceful and devoted (Piller, 2011, p. 123)

In an ironic twist, Asian women often protect themselves from the sun, so as to have a paler complexion or, more radically, have eye surgery so as to look more Western (Frederick et al., 2016).

To what extent romantic love plays a determining role in the choice of a mate can vary. In many parts of the world, love and passion may play a much diminished role compared to socio-economic status, kinship/group membership, or religious beliefs. In China, for example, it is normal for couples to wait until regular jobs have been secured, as well as until appropriate housing becomes available (Hamon & Ingoldsby, 2003). In India, although the caste system is officially no longer in place, many Indians, particularly in rural areas, marry only within their own caste (Uberoi, 1994). The bride wanted section from the Sunday Times of India (May 15, 2016) highlights the importance of caste in finding a mate. However, also listed as categories in the "Times Soulmate" section are professions, religion, and language. There's also a category of "caste no bar". [Shaadi.com](http://Shaadi.com) is a



**WANTED BRIDES**

**BY CASTE**

**AGARWAL-BISA**

**SM4** Aggarwal Boy 26.183/58" BE wkg Engg MNC B'lore, 15L PA. Edu UP family. Early marriage. # 09473566465, 9711725532. Send BHP: drakncl@gmail.com

**BRAHMIN**

**M4** Gr. Br. H'some Boy 28/65" MBA & SC Mgmt from USA, wkg in USA. Seeks Edu. Br. girl. Em: maunag55@gmail.com. Write Box.No DEL X231916R Times of India, New Delhi-110103

**V** fair h'som 26/61" Raj Br Dr homopath affluent practice rep'd Drs f'mly own mtisplty hsp'tls Agra seeks tall, b'ful clturd girl frn status Br f'mly E: mangalprn94@gmail.com

**BE / MBA (MD)** 35yr, 58 Fair Pnjb Brah N.Vg. 18L CPSU Mumbai. Seek PQM, nr30yr wkg girl BHP: 8879140407 deep63nisha@gmail.com

**SM4** Fair H'some boy 28/5'10 B.Tech IIT MBA IIM Sr. Mng'r mnc 50lpa Fthr Indst'list own b'nglw cast no bar. 8962662911 Email: gjammb@gmail.com

**SM4** 32/5'6", BE, S/W Engr, MNC, 13 LPA, H'Some Prefers Slim, Fair, B'ful Girl, All Up'r Caste Acptd. E: rbhargava123@yahoo.com, Mo: 09961407036

**KKB** fair smart 35/5'10" well settled Entrepreneur in Australia, Ranchi based family. 09833378374 / 09931511965 EM: rama.fxb@gmail.com

**JAIN**

**JAIN** Shwetambar Boy 27/5'6"

**SRIVASTAVA** Mglk 24-11-86, 11:40pm Lko 5'7" MBA 16Lpa Ggn. Seeking prof.qlfd wkg girl NCR pref'd. girishksri@gmail.com, M: 9450018618, 9935175266

**EDU** B'ful girl 4 V. H'som, Wel Stld. Engineer 39/167/30 LPA (luks young'r), nvr marid, status f'mly. Up'cast NB. NO DOWRY. talash246@gmail.com

**SRIV.** H'some boy 34/5'9" MBA, wrkg in GOI, Group-B, seeks B'ful well Q'lf'd wrkg/non wrkg girl. Pref'd Bhr/ Jha Cont-09430022611, 07739264638

**B'FUL** M4 fair 5'7" NM 80 B.Tech BHU MBA XLRI MFE Berkeley wkg US 125K. Mob: 7388492060. Caste No bar. Em: sagar556346@gmail.com

**SRI** smart boy 86/5'9" M.Tech wkg as Sr Mng'r, B'lore 30LPA, seeks b'ful wkg BE girl only. Father Indus't. #9199989151 rajeevbrp@gmail.com

**SM** for Sriv well placed in Press Trust of India 37/6" Gora. H'some 14 LPA. No drink/smoke. M: 9621211885, E: sdnfine@gmail.com

**MATHUR** 28/5'7"/9 LPA h'some A.M. boy wkg in Leading MNC B'lore seeks b'ful fair prof qlfd match. E: charat kumarmthr@gmail.com

**KHATRI**

**6'1"**, fit, handsome, Punjabi guy, AVP position MNC bank in Pune, pkg 26L. m17malhotra@gmail.com, jeevansathi: ZZAV8763

**YADAV**

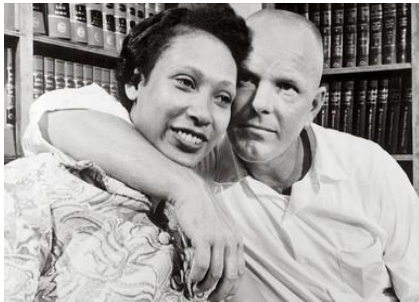
**YADAV** (Attrit), wheatish 40/5'6" MBA/PGDCA, Comp wrkg Lko seeks b'ful, edu girl, cast no bar, wrkg/eastern prfrd, BHP, 09415104980, skjauhrilko@gmail.com



popular web site for finding an Indian mate and provides interesting insights into the process.

In many cultures, it is common to use a trusted intermediary to help find an appropriate mate (Ahuvia & Adelman, 1992). Parents or other relatives may play a role in arranging matches. Many in Western countries are likely to recoil at the idea of an arranged marriage. However, studies have shown that in fact love in arranged marriage tends to increase over time, but decreases in love matches (Gupta & Singh, 1982). Given the high percentage of divorces among free choice matches, one might question whether that form of mate selection is in fact optimal. On the other hand, arranged marriages may be problematic as well, particularly if one or other of the partners has no say in the match. The forced marriages of underage girls is unfortunately still a reality in some parts of the world (Ouattara, Sen & Thomson, 1998).

Until 1967 in the United States, marrying someone from a different racial group was illegal. In that year, laws outlawing that practice were declared void through the landmark case of *Loving vs. State of Virginia*. Today in the US, according to the Pew Foundation (Passel, Wang & Taylor, 2010), about one in seven



Mildred & Richard Loving

new marriages in the US is interracial or interethnic. That does not mean that such unions are universally accepted, nor does their frequency indicate that they are inevitably successful. In fact, interracial marriages may be stressful, in part due to differences in value orientations or in group habits/traditions. One of the frequent sources of conflict can be one's family or friends, who may disapprove of the match. Foeman & Nance (2002) have shown that in many successful interracial or interethnic marriages the partners create a kind of **third culture**, blending together in a new hybrid their respective cultures.

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### Technically speaking: Communicating and relating online

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In today's world the Internet is used extensively to build and maintain relationships. Social media such as Facebook play a central role in the lives of many people across the globe. Language use in electronic media varies with the medium, from very informal, abbreviated language in text messages to more grammatically correct and spellchecked writing in contributing to blogs or fanfiction sites. Linguists have pointed out that text messaging, considering its brevity and informality, is actually closer to spoken language in its essential characteristics (Choudhury et al, 2007).

Second-language learners can use online communication to develop language skills. Communicating with native speakers online provides opportunities for developing writing/reading skills and building vocabulary, but also for enhancing cultural knowledge. In such exchanges, there's an opportunity as well to view one's own culture from the perspective of those outside. This can be an eye-opening, and sometimes disturbing experience, but one that can lead us to reflect on our own cultural values and begin to question received wisdom. Studies of using collaborative projects for language learning reveal some of the issues that may arise due to cultural differences in language use and communicative conventions. A project involving French and US students, for example, saw conflicts arise due to the US students favoring of online exchanges to build relationships through small talk, and the French students' preference for serious discussion of the topics at hand. There were also differences in what mode or genre of writing the two groups used in communicating:

The French write in perfectly correct English, but without the social legitimation nor the trustworthiness of fellow native speakers of English. What happens is not a case of linguistic misunderstanding but a clash of cultural frames caused by the different resonances of the two languages for each group of speakers and their different understanding of appropriate genres. The French academic discourse expressed through the English language is perceived by the Americans not as having the ring of scientific truth, but as being unduly aggressive by displaying 'nationalist reactions'. The American ingratiating personal discourse expressed through the French language is not perceived by the French as enhancing the trustworthiness of their authors, but as lacking scientific rigour (Kramsch & Thorne, 2002, pp. 94-5).

The French students used a form of discourse that aspires to be objective and scientific, while the US students struck a highly personal and sometimes emotional tone in their writing. Such conflicts in online exchanges are not uncommon and can arise through different perspectives on particular topics but also, as here, through clashes in rhetorical styles. Conflict can sometimes be uncomfortable for the participants, but how problems arise can also provide a valuable learning experience, provided the participants talk out the difficulties and approach the conversations with an open mind and tolerance for both differences of opinion and differences in communication styles.

This interaction highlights the process of language socialization that can take place in online environments. The experience of the French learners provides an example of "legitimate peripheral participation" (Scollon, et al., 2012), namely how newcomers participate in online communities is initially peripheral i.e. more in an observer role, but legitimate, i.e. acceptable. If they remain in the community, they become socialized into the ins and outs of the community norms and processes. On the other hand, it's possible that novices will resist socialization, in particular if that conflicts with existing norms or beliefs. One way to resist or negotiate one's identity in a community is through language. Language learners tend to do this with language play (Cook, 2000). The sidebar provides an example, in which the teacher was trying to have students provide examples of collocations using the Chinese equivalent of to long for, to look forward to, 期待 (*qīdài*).

Translation is something rarely used as a teaching tool, at least in instructed language learning in the United States, despite the insights it provides into deeper understanding of the target language and culture. Comparing results from Google Translate with other machine

translators (or doing reverse look-ups based on the given translations) can provide surprising and informative results. Reading or translating samples from the great variety of user forums on the Web provides both interesting cultural insights as well as valuable linguistic learning. Sources might include YouTube comments, Amazon reviews, blog commentaries, or newspaper forums. A reader's post to an article in the French daily *Le Parisien* provides an interesting example. It's a comment about a news story concerning a four-year-old named Jihad (born on September 11th) who is sent to preschool wearing a shirt reading *Je suis une bombe* (literally meaning "I am a bomb" but colloquially in French, "I am fantastic"). The story itself is rich in cultural contexts: Muslims in France, French restrictions on traditional Muslim dress in public spheres, the French tradition of secularism (*laïcité*), freedom of speech as a universal value, the role of dress in cultural identity, among others. The letter offers even richer content:

Je m'appelle Jihad, j'ai fait des études et je n'ai aucun problème dans ma vie. Jihad n'est pas un prénom né le 11 septembre, vous êtes au courant? Il est donné depuis des millénaires. Le mot jihad à la base veut dire lutte contre ses péchés. (*Le Parisien*, Dec. 1, 2012)

#### Longing for Jennifer to moon-bathe with him

Context: a Mandarin class of 13-year-olds in Newcastle. T: female teacher in her forties. B: a boy.  
T: 贿绌贿更题诚疗溜溜 贿绌题廖绌廖廖 贿溜廖题  
题更奉 贿溜题更奉娇

What can you say with qidai (longing for)? Longing for a united motherland; longing for family reunion; longing for peace and friendship.

B: xxx (name of another boy in the class) 题溜更溜  
贿题绌题题题

xxx is longing for Jennifer to moon-bathe with him.

(All laugh)

(Li and Zhu, in press)

[My name is Jihad, I'm a university graduate and have never had any problems [with my name]. Jihad is not a name created by September 11th, did you know that? It's been used for millennia. The word jihad means to fight to overcome one's inadequacies. ]

The use of such forums designed for native speakers can be challenging for language learners, but they can be, as here, rich in colloquial language and in cultural content.

One of the sources for miscommunication online is the fact that communication and emails, blog post, or other written messaging formats exclude the expressive elements that come from gestures, body language, or tone of voice. Despite preparatory work, telecollaboration projects can result in misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and even reinforcement of negative stereotypes. The problems may arise from insufficient language skills, lack of knowledge of the other culture, or individual insensitivity. It's also the case that online speech lacks the paralinguistic and nonverbal clues that can be vital to understanding speakers' real intent. There are conventions in online writing to compensate— punctuation (!), emoticons (sad face), netspeak (lol) or typing in all caps (I'M SHOUTING)—but they pale in comparison to the variety and power of human nonverbal communication.

One of the realities of online communication today is that many people may be communicating in a second language, not their mother tongue. In theory, computer-mediated communication (CMC) offers a "level playing field," in which everyone is seen and treated equally. It offers, for example, the opportunity for shy individuals to have their voices heard in a way that is unlikely in face-to-face conversation. Turn-taking is predictable and therefore less stressful, at least in written exchanges. In practice, CMC is not as neutral as it may seem. Pasfield-Neofitou points out (2013) that online exchange is affected by a number of factors, including language ability, social relationships, and computer dexterity/typing ability. If the software program or computer interface is unfamiliar or difficult to learn, that may put the novice user at a distinct disadvantage compared to more experienced users, something which can have a significant impact on communicative effectiveness.

Non-native speakers may prefer CMC over face-to-face encounters in that it provides an environment which allows for reflection and a slower pace of exchange. In spoken discourse, issues of accent such as pronunciation and intonation sometimes are problematic. Informal and grammatically incorrect language is generally more acceptable in online communication. On the other hand, non-native speakers may face communication issues in CMC related to cultural and pragmatic issues. They may not use, for example, the appropriate forms of address or language register. A study by Stroińska & Cecchetto (2013) provides an example of

university students in Canada who are non-native English speakers. They often used unacceptable language in email exchanges with professors, not abiding by the expectations of politeness in written communication, namely use of polite forms of address, standard English, and respectful forms of request. Often, the foreign students used no formal greeting in their emails and made requests that were too direct. The authors of the study point out that learning appropriate language behavior for written communication can be important later in professional settings.

### From theory to practice...

In efforts to avoid culture or gender bias, some of the strategies include the following:

- *Be a mindful listener, particularly when communicating with non-native speakers.* That includes listening actively and watching for nonverbal cues to assist in judging understanding and appropriateness. It's important to keep in mind possible different conventions regarding the role of silence or rules for turn-taking. In some cultures, interrupting is normal and expected; in others it's expected that one defer to elders or other members of the community.

- *Adjust your speech (rate and register) as appropriate.* This includes being able to rephrase in simpler terms and avoiding potentially culturally sensitive areas. Safe topics are typically food and music; problematic are often politics and religion. At the same time, one should be aware of the dangers of over-accommodating. Sensitivity is desirable; patronizing is not.

- *Discover your own speech mode.* Through encounters with others, both face-to-face and online, you can experience a wide variety of language use and verbal styles. This can provide insights into your own use of language. It's important to reflect on the extent to which you use typical male or female **subject positions** when speaking, or to what extent you are intentional in modifying your language register when encountering a non-native speaker.

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