

CULTURALLY SPEAKING: CULTURE, COMMUNICATION AND POLITENESS THEORY

H. Spencer-Oatey (ed.)

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This book is an update of some of the studies presented in Spencer-Oatey's *Culturally Speaking: Managing Rapport Through Talk Across Culture* (2000), in which the relationship between language and culture is explored from different perspectives. The editor's goal is to introduce readers to a broad range of pragmatic phenomena involving such matters as (im)politeness, pragmatic transfer, identity or face, among others. All these are analysed by focusing on the management of interpersonal relations, which the editor denominates 'rapport management' in a preliminary chapter (p. 3).

According to the editor, three aspects are the focal points of this book (p. 1):

- People's use of language can influence interpersonal rapport.
- People may try to 'manage' their relationships with others.
- Different cultures may have different conventions as to what is appropriate behaviour in a given context.

The volume is organized into 16 chapters, that are divided into 5 different parts: "Basic Concepts", "Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Empirical Studies", "Processes in Intercultural Interaction", "Intercultural Pragmatics: Empirical Studies" and "Methodology". Given the length of the volume and the variety of articles contained in it, an introduction at the beginning of each section of the book has wisely been provided to help the reader synthesize the information contained in

them. Furthermore, each chapter is followed by a list of “Key points”, “Discussion questions” and “Suggestions for further reading” which are really useful.

The first two chapters and the last one are written by the editor, as are the introductions to each of the five sections in which the book is divided. He is also the author of three more chapters. The other contributions by different researchers report findings regarding pragmatic matters in different contexts.

In the first section, Spencer-Oatey (“Face, (Im)Politeness and Rapport”, pp. 11-47) explores conceptual issues on social pragmatics, proposing a framework that starts from Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) taxonomy of strategies, but extending to a theory of rapport management that accounts not only for face needs but also for sociality rights and obligations and the management of interactional goals. Žegarac continues the attempt at theoretical synthesis in “Culture and Communication” (pp. 48-70), focusing this time on cognitive instead of social pragmatics. The author tries to establish a link between culture and language use, following Sperber and Wilson’s (1995) theory.

The second section of the volume concentrates on empirical studies showing cross-cultural differences. Tanaka, Spencer-Oatey and Cray in “Apologies in Japanese and English” (pp. 73-94), compare the response of Japanese, British and Canadian college students on a production questionnaire eliciting apologies. According to the authors, “This study illustrates how there can be cross-cultural similarities and differences in people’s assessments of ‘apology situations’, such as in terms of how annoying the offence is, how responsible people feel for the offence and how important they feel it is to placate the other person. It is important, therefore, to explore such contextual assessments in any cross-cultural study of language use.” (p. 87)

Spencer-Oatey, Ng and Dong (“British and Chinese Reactions to Compliment Responses”, pp. 95-117) similarly contrast the evaluative judgements of different types of compliments responses by British, Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong respondents, concluding that different factors affect people’s evaluations of these responses such as modesty, avoidance of disagreement and self-presentation. Finally, Pavlidou (“Interactional Work in Greek and German Telephone Conversations”, pp. 118-135) examines authentic conversations to show that Greeks prefer more phatic talk in openings and longer closings in telephone conversations than Germans do.

Intercultural interaction is the topic of the third section, with three chapters. Firstly, Žegarac and Pennington (“Pragmatic Transfer”, pp. 141-163) citing preceding studies and following Relevance Theory, consider that pragmatic transfer is a case of general knowledge transfer rather than of linguistic transfer and explain how this affects intercultural encounters. Secondly, in “Communication Accommodation Theory” (pp. 164-186), Ylänné provides a complete overview of this theory and

its implications for intercultural communication. Then, Fougère investigates the impact that life in a different culture can have on people's sense of identity in "Adaptation and Identity" (pp. 187-204). The author indicates that "Intercultural contexts provide new occasions for individual sensemaking, in that cultural identities become salient when confronted with other cultural identities. Intercultural contact can affect people's sense of belonging, it can lead them to question who they are and to start learning about themselves, and it can thereby result in development and change." (p. 201)

Turning to the section of empirical studies of intercultural interaction, in "Negotiating Rapport in German-Chinese Conversation" (pp. 207-226), Günthner's analysis of an authentic conversation between German and Chinese students in Germany shows they use different strategies to signal disagreement, resulting in mutual misunderstanding. Along similar lines, Miller ("Negative Assessments in Japanese-American Workplace Interaction", pp. 227-240) captures pragmatic features deriving from how Japanese and American members of staff of Japanese companies who work together in the same offices may fail to recognize each other's strategies for disagreeing politely: "Carrying out refusals, denials and other negative conversational actions often result in misunderstandings in interethnic interaction" (p. 239).

In "Impression Management in 'Intercultural' German Job Interviews" (pp. 241-273), Birkner and Kern use conversation analysis to continue the focus on disagreements. They show how East Germans' and West Germans' perceptions on self-presentations cause them to react differently to potential employers' challenging questions, which may affect the interviewers' assessments. Finally, an authentic post-sales visit to a British company by Chinese Business people is analysed by Spencer-Oatey and Xing in "Issues of Face in a Chinese Business Visit to Britain" (pp. 258-273). In this intercultural analysis, they deal with different issues, ranging from corporate entertainment budgets to an elaboration of the notion of "face".

The last section on research methodology, which is relevant to all previous parts of the book, has three chapters which discuss different research procedures. Kasper considers the advantages and disadvantages of the variety of data collecting methods used in pragmatics research ("Data Collection in Pragmatics Research", pp. 279-303.) The author highlights two points: data collection methods have to be decided in relation to the research proposed, and the researcher's own ontological and epistemological position will have an influence on what is researched and how.

In "Recording and Analysing Talk across Cultures" (pp. 304-321), Marra considers that the cultural element of cross-cultural and intercultural research brings in

challenges and complexities not only for data collection but also for interpretation. Spencer-Oatey (“Projects”, pp. 322-325) closes this section by suggesting some intercultural and cross-cultural pragmatics issues that could be researched, and posing questions to think about in carrying out such projects .

It is also worth mentioning the glossary of terms (pp. 326-337) that can be found at the end of the book, which is a great help for a full understanding of some of the topics discussed, and the bibliographical references (pp. 338-362), which are abundant and updated.

Overall, this book is a significant contribution to the study of pragmatics designed for upper-level undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as researchers. The various studies presented offer an in-depth look at the relationship between language and culture that could be of great help to all pragmatists.

Works cited

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