

Ron Scollon, Suzanne Wong Scollon,
and Rodney H. Jones



Intercultural Communication

A Discourse Approach

THIRD EDITION



 WILEY-BLACKWELL

Intercultural Communication

Language in Society

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 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This third edition first published 2012
© 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Inc

Edition History: Basil Blackwell Ltd (1e 1995); Blackwell Publishing Ltd (2e 2001)

Wiley-Blackwell is an imprint of John Wiley & Sons, formed by the merger of Wiley's global Scientific, Technical and Medical business with Blackwell Publishing.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

9780470656402 (paperback ISBN)

Scollon, Ronald, 1939–

Intercultural communication : a discourse approach / Ron Scollon, Suzanne Wong Scollon, and Rodney H. Jones. – 3rd ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-470-65640-2 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Intercultural communication.

I. Scollon, Suzanne B. K. II. Jones, Rodney H. III. Title.

P94.6.S36 2012

–dc23

2011023904

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is published in the following electronic formats: ePDFs 978-1-118-14968-3;
ePub 978-1-118-14969-0; Mobi 978-1-118-14970-6

Set in 10/12 pt Ehrhardt by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited

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Series Editor's Preface

A number of books in the Language in Society series have dealt with topics in the field of the ethnography of speaking, broadly defined. The present volume, now in its third updated and expanded edition, draws on theoretical advances that have been made in this field over the past three decades, but also makes a very valuable contribution based on important descriptive work, including the authors' own, in the field of cross-cultural communication. This new edition is, too, notable for its extended and very helpful discussion of the terms *cross-cultural communication*, *intercultural communication*, and *interdiscourse communication*. The book is perhaps most noticeable, however, for the extent to which it represents an essay in applied sociolinguistics. Although theoretically founded and descriptively rich, *Intercultural Communication* also examines what conclusions can be drawn from sociolinguistic research for the practice of professional communication, something which is now in this third edition greatly enhanced by the addition of the new chapter, "Doing 'Intercultural Communication'" – see for example the section on "Avoiding Miscommunication." The emphasis on practice makes the book a pioneering work which will continue to have an impact well beyond the fields of sociolinguistics and foreign-language teaching, as the amount of interest in, and enthusiasm for, the first two editions makes very clear. As in the earlier editions, the authors' final conclusions are sober and paradoxical, namely that expert professional communicators are those who have come to appreciate their lack of expertise. Readers of *Intercultural Communication* will nevertheless come to appreciate not only the amount of variation to be found between human discourse systems – as well as their similarities, as the authors point out – but also the amount of progress that has been made by sociolinguistic researchers such as the Scollons and Rodney Jones in describing and understanding such systems.

Peter Trudgill

Preface to the First Edition

This book is about professional communication between people who are members of different groups. When as westerners or Asians we do business together, when as men or women we work together in an office, or when as members of senior or junior generations we develop a product together we engage in what we call “interdiscourse communication.” That is to say, the discourse of westerners or of Asians, the discourse of men or women, the corporate discourse or the discourse of our professional organizations enfolds us within an envelope of language which gives us an identity and which makes it easier to communicate with those who are like us. By the same token, however, the discourses of our cultural groups, our corporate cultures, our professional specializations, or our gender or generation groups make it more difficult for us to interpret those who are members of different groups. We call these enveloping discourses “discourse systems.”

Interdiscourse communication is a term we use to include the entire range of communications across boundaries of groups or discourse systems from the most inclusive of those groups, cultural groups, to the communications which take place between men and women or between colleagues who have been born into different generations. In interdiscourse analysis we consider the ways in which discourses are created and interpreted when those discourses cross the boundaries of group membership. We also consider the ways in which we use communication to claim and to display our own complex and multiple identities as communicating professionals.

This is a book on intercultural professional communication in English between westerners and East Asians, especially Chinese; but it is more than that. This book is on organizational communication, especially where conflicts arise between identity in the corporate culture and in one’s professional specialization; but it is more than that. This book is about communication across the so-called generations gap; but it is more than that. This book is about miscommunications which occur between men and women; but it is more than that. This book is an interactive sociolinguistic framework for analyzing discourse which crosses the boundaries between these discourse systems. Because each professional communicator is simultaneously a member of a corporate, a professional, a generational, a gender, a cultural, and even other discourse systems, the focus of this book is on how those multiple memberships provide a framework within which all professional communication takes place.

Discourse analysis in professional communication is a new and rapidly developing field which integrates aspects of intercultural communication studies, applied interactional socio-

linguistics, and discourse analysis. We have written this book to meet the needs of students and teachers in courses in English for professional communication, English for special purposes, or other such courses where the central focus is on communication in professional or business contexts. The book is designed for either classroom use or self-study, since many of those who are involved in intercultural professional communication have already completed their courses of study and are actively engaged in their professional work.

We have two main audiences in mind: (1) professional communicators who are East Asian speakers of English, and their teachers in courses on professional communication, whether in Asia or elsewhere, and (2) professional communicators who are concerned with any communications which cross the lines of discourse systems. The book has been field-tested in Hong Kong and therefore tends to emphasize examples of most direct relevance to Chinese (Cantonese) speakers of English. Nevertheless, the research on which this book is based covers a much broader range of East Asian English communication including Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Singapore, Mainland China, North America, Great Britain, and Australia.

In over twenty years of research on intercultural intra-organizational communication in North America as well as in Taiwan and in Korea, we have seen that most miscommunication does not arise through mispronunciations or through poor uses of grammar, important as those aspects of language learning are. The major sources of miscommunication in intercultural contexts lie in differences in patterns of discourse. In our consulting work with major business, governmental, and educational organizations in North America and in Asia we have found that frequently intergroup miscommunication and even hostility arise when each group has failed to interpret the intentions of the other group as a result of misinterpreting its discourse conventions. In teaching a range of courses, from "cultural differences in institutional settings" to courses on discourse, sociolinguistics, and first and second language acquisition, we have found that careful attention to communication at this higher level of discourse analysis leads to an ability to return to original statements and to do the repair work that is needed to improve cross-group communication. In this book we have for the first time organized course topics from a range of diverse fields into a unified presentation specifically designed for the professional communicator.

Our research in Taiwan was supported by Providence University (Ching Yi Ta Hsueh), Shalu, Taiwan, and in Korea by the Sogang Institute for English as an International Language, Sogang University, Seoul, Korea. It received continued funding from the Alaska Humanities Forum, Anchorage, Alaska (a program of the National Endowment for the Humanities), and Lynn Canal Conservation, Haines, Alaska. We wish to thank these two universities as well as the two funding agencies for their support of our work. Of course, the ideas expressed in this book are not the responsibility of any of these agencies.

The principal foundation upon which we write is the ongoing discourse about discourse among our colleagues. We owe much of our general approach to discussions of intergroup discourse with John Gumperz. We wish to thank Deborah Tannen for critical reading and lively discussion of not only this manuscript but the many other papers upon which this book is based. We also thank Tim Boswood, Coordinator of the English for Professional Communication program at City Polytechnic of Hong Kong, for the pleasure of many thoughtful conversations about this material.

This book has been used in manuscript form as the textbook for several courses which we have taught at City Polytechnic of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Baptist College. Our students in those courses have provided many useful comments, raised important questions, and suggested further examples which have materially improved the clarity of this text. We

wish to thank them for their interest and for their astute observations. We are indebted to David Li Chor Shing for many suggestions which have clarified our statements regarding Chinese cultural matters as well as for improvements in style. We have benefited greatly too from discussions with him of the book's contents. Judy Ho Woon Yee and Vicki Yung Kit Yee have also given critical and helpful readings. As well, we thank Tom Scollon for his assistance in preparing the figures and Rachel Scollon for her editorial assistance. While we are deeply indebted to all of these people as well as to many others for their help in making our ideas clearer, we ourselves remain responsible for infelicities, eccentricities, and failures to get it right.

Preface to the Second Edition

Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach first appeared in 1995. We were pleased to see it come into print as we had used the substance of the book in manuscript form for two years before that with classes at the City University of Hong Kong (then Polytechnic) and at Hong Kong Baptist University (then College). We were confident that the book would find an audience in Asia and in North America, the UK, and Europe where readers had a concern with intercultural communication dealing with Chinese and other Asians. Where we have been pleasantly surprised in the five years since the book's first appearance is with the widespread appeal the book has had for readers quite outside this primary audience for which we had imagined it. We have now heard from readers and from teachers of intercultural communication in many parts of the world who have used the book to good effect and who have also sent us questions and comments which have been most helpful in shaping this revised edition. We wish, then, to begin by acknowledging these many correspondents for their help in focusing our attention on points which needed clarification and, in particular, in helping us to see how to shape the entirely new chapter 12 with which the book now ends.

This revised edition retains substantially the full text of the original edition. To this text we have added clarifications of points for which readers have asked for further elaboration. The first chapter now includes a section in which we set out our distinction between *cross-cultural communication* and *intercultural communication* or, as we prefer to call it in most cases, *interdiscourse communication*. There is another section which outlines the methodology of ethnography which is the practical basis of our research. In the full new final chapter, chapter 12, we return to this methodology and show how we and others have been able to use it and this book to do new research in intercultural communication and how this work has been used in conducting training and consultation programs.

Preface to the Third Edition

A lot has changed in the world since the first edition of *Intercultural Communication* was published in 1995. Dramatic advances in information technology, especially the growth of the World Wide Web, and the rapid globalization of the world's economy have in many ways brought people closer together, while at the same time, wars, terrorism, environmental devastation, and massive changes in the world economic order have resulted in greater political and social fragmentation. There have also been considerable advances in the fields of anthropology and linguistics, which lie at the heart of the work described in this book, particularly in fields dealing with things like gender, sexuality, and computer mediated communication. Finally, our own thinking and research has also evolved since the notion of *discourse systems* was proposed in this book more than fifteen years ago. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this evolution has been our development over the past decade of the theoretical framework of *mediated discourse analysis*, an approach to discourse which focuses less on broad constructs like "culture" and more on the everyday concrete actions through which culture is produced.

It would be impossible to account thoroughly for all of these changes without writing an entirely new book. What we have tried to do in this new edition is to strengthen the theoretical framework and make it more user friendly and relevant to the present day. The source of these revisions comes not just from our own continued research in the fields of intercultural communication and discourse analysis, but also from many years of experience using this book with our students, as well as the valuable feedback from many others who have made use of it in their teaching and research.

Although we have tried to preserve as much as possible of the original line of argument and most of the material from the original text, this edition does represent a substantial revision. The changes are of three types. First, we have tried to improve on the organization of the material, specifically by introducing the framework of *discourse systems* earlier and devoting a full chapter to each of the four components of this framework: face systems, ideology, forms of discourse, and socialization. Second, we have tried to make the book more useful for students by adding at the end of each chapter a section giving step-by-step advice on how to apply the concepts developed in that chapter to a research project on interdiscourse communication. We have also added at the end of each chapter a list of questions to guide classroom discussions and a list of references for further study. Finally, we have tried to develop the material from the first two editions by updating it to take into consideration

the social and technological changes that have more recently affected intercultural communication as well as new research by us and others. This includes especially the addition of new material in the chapter on Generational Discourse describing the generations currently entering the workforce and analyzing generational shifts in China, and the addition of new material in the chapter on Gender Discourse, giving a more balanced account of the debates around discourse and gender and adding a section on discourse and sexuality. Especially in the last two chapters we have attempted to problematize and refine the framework of *discourse systems* in line with our current thinking around mediated discourse analysis.

It is fitting that we finished this manuscript on the second anniversary of Ron Scollon's death. From the start we approached this project first and foremost as a tribute to Ron's life and work, and as much as possible we have tried to be true to the spirit if not the letter of Ron's thinking as it developed in the last years of his life. One of the advantages of collaborating with a dead man is that he cannot object to your editorial decisions. While we must give Ron full credit for the strength and flexibility of the argument that is at the core of this book, we take full responsibility for any omissions, distortions, or factual errors in this revision.

We must also take this opportunity to thank those who share with us Ron's intellectual legacy and have given us invaluable advice and support along the way, especially his students Najma Al Zidjaly, Cecilia Castillo-Ayometzi, Ingrid de Saint-Georges, Andy Jocuns, Jackie Jia Lou, Sigrid Norris, and many others. As always, while we are deeply indebted to these people, the responsibility for any inaccuracies or infidelities in this work is ours alone.

*Rodney H. Jones, Hong Kong
Suzanne Wong Scollon, Seattle
July, 2011*

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What Is a Discourse Approach?

Ho Man is a university student in Hong Kong majoring in English for Professional Communication. Late in the evenings after she has finished her schoolwork she likes to catch up with her friends on Facebook. Her grandmother, who has no idea what Facebook is, sometimes scolds Ho Man for staying up so late and spending so much time “playing” on her computer. One of Ho Man’s best friends is Steven, a university student in Southern California who is majoring in environmental science. They met on an online fan forum devoted to a Japanese anime called Vampire Hunter D, and when they write on each other’s Facebook walls much of what they post has to do with this anime. This is not, however, their only topic of conversation. Sometimes they use the chat function on Facebook to talk about more private things like their families, their boyfriends (Steven is gay), and even religion. Ho Man is still mystified by the fact that her friend in America is a Buddhist. Ho Man is a Christian and has been since she entered university two years ago. She goes to church every Sunday and belongs to a Bible study group on campus. As far as she is concerned, people should be able to believe in any religion they want. On the other hand, she still has trouble understanding why her friend, who is the same age that she is, believes in the same religion that her grandmother does.

The short anecdote above is an illustration of “intercultural communication,” that is, it is an example of communication between an American from California and a Chinese living in Hong Kong. The fact that Ho Man is Chinese and Steven is American, however, seems to be, if not the least significant, perhaps the least interesting aspect of this situation. In any case, it does not seem to interfere at all with their ability to communicate.

There are also other ways Ho Man and her friend Steven are different. Ho Man is female and Steven is male. Ho Man is heterosexual and Steven is homosexual. Ho Man is an English major and Steven is a science major. Similarly, none of these differences seems to result in any serious “miscommunication.” In fact, their difference in sexuality actually gives them a common topic to talk about: boys.

One difference that does cause some confusion, at least for Ho Man, is the fact that she is a Christian and her American friend is a Buddhist. What is interesting about this is that

it is the opposite of what one might expect. It is, however, not particularly surprising. Over 80 percent of university students in Hong Kong identify themselves as Christians, and Buddhism has been one of the fastest growing religions in California since the late 1960s. Even though Ho Man considers this strange, it still is not the source of any serious miscommunication between the two of them.

Maybe one reason they do manage to communicate so well is that, for all their differences, they also have a lot of things in common. They are both the same age. They are both university students. They are both members of the Facebook “community” and feel comfortable with computer-mediated communication in general. And they are both fans of a particular animated story, the source of which, ironically, is a culture to which neither of them belongs. And they both speak English. In fact, Ho Man seems to have much more in common with her gay American friend than she does with her own grandmother, who is also Chinese. At the same time, Steven has something in common with Ho Man’s grandmother that she doesn’t: they are both Buddhists.

This example is meant to illustrate the fact that intercultural communication is often more complicated than we might think, especially in today’s “wired,” globalized world.

Usually when we think of intercultural communication, we think of people from two different countries such as China and the United States communicating with each other and proceed to search for problems in their communication as a result of their different nationalities.

But “North American culture” and “Chinese culture” are not the only two cultures that we are dealing with in this situation. We are also dealing with Japanese culture, gay culture, university student culture, Hong Kong Christian culture and North American Buddhist culture, gender cultures and generational cultures, the cultures of various internet websites and of the affinity groups that develop around particular products of popular culture.

There is nothing at all unusual about this situation. In fact, all situations involve communication between people who, rather than belonging to only one culture, belong to a whole lot of different cultures at the same time. Some of these cultures they share with the people they are talking to, and some of them they do not. And some of these cultural differences and similarities will affect the way they communicate, and some of them will be totally irrelevant.

The real question, then, is not whether any given moment of communication is an instance of “intercultural communication.” All communication is to some degree intercultural, whether it occurs between Ho Man and her Facebook friend, Ho Man and her boyfriend, or Ho Man and her grandmother. The real question is, *what good does it do to see a given moment of communication as a moment of intercultural communication?* What kinds of things can we accomplish by looking at it this way? What kinds of problems can we avoid or solve?

The Problem with Culture

But wait a minute, you may say. While it seems normal to talk about “North American culture” and “Chinese culture” and even “gay culture” and “Christian culture,” can we also talk about the “culture” of university students (even when they go to university in different countries), the “culture” of English majors or environmental science majors, the “culture”

of fans of a particular Japanese anime, or Facebook “culture”? One problem is that the term “culture” may not be particularly well suited to talk about all of the different groups that we belong to which may affect the way we think, behave, and interact with others. In other words, “culture” may not be a particularly useful word to use when talking about “inter-cultural communication.”

The biggest problem with the word culture is that nobody seems to know exactly what it means, or rather, that it means very different things to different people. Some people speak of culture as if it is a thing that you have, like courage or intelligence, and that some people have more of it and some people less. Others talk about culture as something that people live inside of like a country or a region or a building – they speak, for example, of people leaving their cultures and going to live in other people’s cultures. Some consider culture something people think, a set of beliefs or values or mental patterns that people in a particular group share. Still others regard culture more like a set of rules that people follow, rather like the rules of a game, which they can either conform to or break, and others think of it as a set of largely unconscious habits that govern people’s behavior without them fully realizing it. There are those who think that culture is something that is rather grand, something one finds in the halls of museums and between the covers of old books, while there are others who believe that true culture is to be found in the everyday lives of everyday people. There are those who cherish culture as the thing that holds us together, and others who deride it as the thing that drives us apart.

All of these views of culture are useful in some way, in that they help to illuminate a different aspect of human behavior by leading us to ask certain very productive questions. Seeing culture as a set of rules, for example, leads us to ask how people learn these rules and how they display competence in them to other members of their culture. Seeing culture as a set of traditions leads us to ask why some aspects of behavior survive to be passed on to later generations and some do not. Seeing culture as a particular way of thinking forces us to consider how the human mind is shaped and the relationship between individual cognition and collective cognition. Each definition of culture can lead us down a different pathway, and all of these pathways are potentially fruitful.

It is best, then, to think of culture not as one thing or another, not as a *thing* at all, but rather as a *heuristic*. A *heuristic* is a “tool for thinking.” The word comes from the Greek word meaning “to find” or “to discover.” It is rumored that when the Greek mathematician Archimedes realized, after getting into a bath and watching the water overflow, that he could use this method to measure the volume of objects, he ran naked through the streets of Syracuse shouting, “*Heureka!*” (rather than, as is commonly recalled, “Eureka”), meaning “I have found it!” Each of these different views of culture has the potential to lead us to a different kind of “Heureka.” At the same time, none of them alone can be considered definitive or complete. The way we will be approaching the problem of culture and the phenomenon of intercultural communication in this book will draw insights from many of these different views of culture, as well as from the ideas of people who never used the word culture at all. At the same time, we will, we hope, come up with ways of helping you to use these various ideas about culture without being “taken in” by them, without falling into the trap of thinking that any particular construction of “culture” is actually something “real.”

Perhaps the best definition of culture we can settle on for now, though we will be revisiting and revising the concept throughout this book, is that culture is “a way of dividing people up into groups according to some feature of these people which helps us to understand something about them and how they are different from or similar to other people.”

While this definition seems rather innocuous, it really points to what is probably the trickiest aspect of this notion of “culture,” and that is, when you are dividing people up, where do you draw the line? You might, for example, want to use geographical boundaries to divide people up, to speak, for example, of French, Brazilians, British, Chinese, or Americans. Putting all the people in China, however, into one category might mask the fact that people in the northern part of China eat different food, celebrate different festivals, and speak a different language than people in the southern part, or that older people living in China, who may have been alive during the time of Mao Zedong, tend to have very different ideas about life than their grandchildren who are growing up in a rapidly expanding consumer economy. It might also mask the many similarities people living in China might have with people living in France, Brazil, the United Kingdom or the United States. This problem gets even worse when we make our categories bigger, when we start talking, for example, of Easterners and Westerners, Latinos and Northerners, Middle Easterners, and Europeans. Even when we try to narrow our categories, however, to speak perhaps of New Yorkers or Parisians, the same kinds of problems arise. Do the Wall Street banker and the taxi driver who drives him to his office really belong to the same culture? In some ways they do, and in some ways they don’t.

This is the fundamental problem with all *heuristics*, that while they illuminate or help us to focus on some things, they can distort other things or hide them from our view altogether. Later in this book we will discuss how this aspect of dividing people into groups can lead to two particular kinds of problems: one we call “lumping,” thinking that all of the people who belong to one “culture” are the same, and the other we call “binarism,” thinking people are different just because they belong to different “cultures.”

There are other problems as well with studying intercultural communication, one of which many of us who specialize in this field have experienced: You pick a situation to study as an intercultural situation and then you find that nothing at all seems to have gone wrong. The social interaction proceeds smoothly and you come to feel that there is, after all, nothing to the idea that intercultural communication causes problems of communication. Alternatively, you pick a situation to study and things *do* go wrong, but it is very hard to argue that the problems arise out of cultural differences rather than other more basic differences such as that the participants have different goals. For example, even when a Japanese businessperson fails to sell his product to an Indonesian customer, the reasons are likely to have to do with product quality or suitability, with the pricing or delivery structure, or perhaps with the even more basic problem that the customer did not really seek to buy the product in the first place, and the differences between “being Japanese and “being Indonesian” have nothing to do with it.

Even more fundamental than this problem is the problem of bias in the research. How does a researcher isolate a situation to study as “intercultural communication” in the first place? If you start by picking a conversation between an “American” and a “Chinese,” you have started by presupposing that “Americans” and “Chinese” will be different from each other, that this difference will be significant, and that this difference is the most important and defining aspect of that social situation. In most cases, none of these can be assumed to be true and yet if the researcher begins by making this assumption and goes through the long, painstaking work of careful analysis, human nature is likely to lead this researcher to *find* significant differences and to attribute those differences to his or her a priori categories “American” and “Chinese” whether they really fit or not.

Culture is a verb

While throughout this book we will be trying to avoid committing ourselves to one definition of culture or another, mostly by trying to steer clear of the term culture as much as possible, if you were to force us to admit what we really think culture is, chances are we would say something like “culture is a verb.” This rather provocative statement is actually the title of an article by an anthropologist named Brian Street who is particularly interested in the idea of literacy. What he means by literacy, however, is a bit different from what most people mean by it. Rather than just the ability to read and write, Street would define literacy as something like the communicative practices that people engage in to show that they are particular kinds of people or belong to particular groups. Thus the ability to sing or shop or dress in certain ways or operate certain kinds of machines, along with the ability to read and write certain kinds of texts, would all be seen as kinds of literacy. The most important thing, though, is that these “abilities” are not just a matter of individual learning or intelligence, but a matter of living together with other people and interacting with them in certain ways.

What we mean when we say “culture is a verb” is that culture is not something that you think or possess or live inside of. It is something that you *do*. And the way that you do it might be different at different times and in different circumstances. The way Ho Man “does” “Chinese culture,” for example, is likely to be very different when she is talking to her grandmother and when she is posting comments on her friend’s Facebook wall, which brings us back to Street’s idea of literacy – talking to grandmothers and writing on Facebook walls involve very different sets of knowledge and abilities.

To say “culture is a verb” has some important implications for the study of intercultural communication. It means that if we want to understand intercultural communication we should not focus so much on the people and try to figure out something about them based on the “culture” they belong to. Rather we should focus on what they are *doing* and try to understand what kinds of tools they have at their disposal to do it. Most cross-cultural research takes as its unit of analysis cultural systems of meaning or behaving or thinking, and these systems are also important in our approach. But they are only important in so far as they affect how people do things with other people. Thus, our unit of analysis will not be just systems of culture by themselves nor just the individual person by herself or himself, but rather “people doing things” using these systems of culture.

In order to do anything, we need to use certain tools. To convey ideas to another person, for example, we need language or some other system of communication. To cook a meal, we need certain kinds of pots and pans and other implements. To a large extent the kinds of ideas we can convey and the way we can convey them depend on the kinds of communication systems we have available to us. Similarly, the kinds of meals that we can cook depend on the equipment that we have in our kitchen. Not everybody has the same tools available to them, and even when they do, not everybody uses them in exactly the same way. These tools come from the different groups that we belong to – families, communities, institutions like schools and workplaces – and when we use them we are not only getting a certain job done in a certain way, we are also showing that we are members, to one degree or another, of the social groups that provided us with these tools. At the risk of overusing the word “culture,” we will be calling these tools “cultural tools.” They include physical things like forks and chopsticks, articles of clothing, and technologies like mobile telephones,

but also more abstract things like languages, certain kinds of texts, conventional ways of treating people, social institutions and structures, and even concepts like “freedom” and “justice.”

All tools have histories, which means that any particular person is not free to use them in an arbitrary way, but must use them within some range of restricted or shared meanings. And so these tools bring with them to any action a pre-established set of limitations. At the same time, these tools are also altered through their use and thus no use of any cultural tool is absolutely determinant of the social action that it can be used to perform. Put another way, all cultural tools bring into social action a set of contradictions and complications, which are the sources of both limitations and of ambiguity, novelty, and creation.

Since, as we noted before, all of us belong to lots of different cultures at once, we also have lots of different cultural tools available to us to take actions, which we borrow strategically when we are interacting with different people in different situations. Because when we borrow a certain tool we are in some way identifying with the social group from which the tool comes, our decision to use a particular cultural tool (or not use it) may be determined not just by what we want to do, but also by who we want to *be*, the group that we want to claim membership in at any given moment.

Many people in Hong Kong, for example, have access to the tool of English for communication, which they use quite comfortably with one another when they are at school or in the office. It is considered strange, however, to use it in daily conversation. This contrasts sharply with Singapore and India where, since the people around you may be native speakers of a variety of different languages, English is used as a convenient *lingua franca*. Since most Hong Kongers also speak Cantonese, English is not necessary for communication in the same way. At the same time, using English carries with it certain kinds of social meanings based partly on the groups of people that use it such as teachers and other authority figures as well as non-Cantonese speaking “foreigners,” and so by appropriating English into casual conversation with another Cantonese speaker, one might be claiming a certain affiliation with those groups of people, or one might be thought by the people to whom one is talking to be claiming such an affiliation, to be “showing off,” or, at the very least, to be acting unduly formal. This brings us to another point about which we will have a great deal to say later in this book, the fact that when we appropriate and use particular cultural tools, we are not just claiming that we are particular kinds of people. We are also making claims about other people and the kinds of groups they belong to.

This is not to say we are always conscious of how and why we act in particular ways or appropriate particular cultural tools into those actions. Most of the time we are not consciously aware of the processes that go into appropriating and using cultural tools. We just do what “comes naturally” in the course of social interactions. In fact, when we do become conscious of these processes, it is often because we perceive something to have gone wrong, and when other people point out the processes to us we sometimes feel rather self-conscious. If we have worked hard at learning how to say, “Please take me to Beijing University” so that when we arrive at the airport we can board a taxi and get to our destination without trouble, we are pleased if the taxi driver just takes us there, but if he should launch into some commentary about how we have pronounced it, even if it is entirely complimentary, we may feel that the focus has shifted ground unpleasantly. British and North Americans who have lived in China for some time are equally put off when people quite enthusiastically say, “Oh you know how to use chopsticks!” That is, it is in the nature of much social practice for it to be and to remain out of conscious awareness.

Most of what we know and do, we know and do without knowing how. We have just “picked up” how to walk like our parents, how to talk like them, how to *be* a certain sort of person within a certain type of group. Of course, children growing up in the same family or the same community, members of the same social class, members of the same gender groups and generations and so forth, will have very similar experiences and so similar sets of cultural tools available to them and similar ways of using them.

Cultural tools evolve in social groups and change over time as they are passed down from generation to generation. They also might be taken up by other social groups and adapted to fit their needs. English, for example, is a tool that has changed considerably over the years. The way it was used by writers in the eighteenth century was rather different than the way it is being used by the authors of this book. Furthermore, although it originated in the British Isles, it has, for various reasons, spread all over the world and, as it has been taken up by new groups of speakers, it has been altered and adapted to fit the particular circumstances of its use. And so the English spoken in India is rather different from that spoken in Australia.

Finally, cultural tools that originate in a particular social group tend to have some relationship with other tools that also originate in the same group. Cultural tools come in “sets,” and they reinforce and complement other tools. A carpenter has a toolkit, which includes a hammer, a saw, a screwdriver, and other tools that allow her to do things with wood, because working with wood is something she does all day long. One would not expect to find other tools like a cake mixer or a shovel in her toolkit. This is not to say that she does not have access to these tools or know how to use them. When she is not on the job, she may enjoy baking cakes or tending to her backyard garden. The point is, when she is *being* a carpenter, she is likely to draw from her carpenter’s toolkit, and when she is *being* a baker or home gardener, she is likely to draw from different toolkits. We will be calling the “cultural toolkits” which we draw upon to communicate with one another and enact different social identities *discourse systems*.

Discourse

We have chosen to call this book *Intercultural Communication: a discourse approach*, and so we should at the outset explain what we mean by that. The word “discourse” is almost as dangerous as the word “culture” – that is, it means very different things to different people. Perhaps the most common meaning of discourse is language above the level of the sentence. And so, while someone who analyzes the way words are put together to form sentences might be called a grammarian, a person who studies the way sentences are put together to form texts would be called a “discourse analyst.” Discourse analysts study all kinds of texts including letters, newspaper articles, conversations, jokes, meetings, interviews, emails, and television programs. To some extent, this book will draw upon this definition of discourse. Our basic interest will be in face-to-face conversation within speech events such as meetings, conversations, or interviews, but we will also concern ourselves with written communication of various kinds as well as with computer mediated communication, which can involve complex mixtures of writing, speaking, pictures, and video.

At the same time, discourse analysis has undergone many changes over the past thirty years, most of which have resulted in researchers taking a much broader view of what

discourse itself really is. While our primary analyses are based on what happens in specific social interactions, our long-range goal is to address what the French philosopher Michel Foucault has referred to as “orders of discourse” and the American discourse analyst James Paul Gee has called “Discourses with a capital ‘D’.” Foucault and others have given a variety of names to these broad discourses such as when we speak of “the discourse of entertainment,” “the discourse of medicine,” “the discourse of law,” or “business discourse.” Here the meaning intended is the broad range of everything which can be said or talked about or symbolized within a particular, recognizable domain. Our own term for this is *discourse system*, which we will further explain in the following chapters.

For now, we will simply say that a discourse system is a “cultural toolkit” consisting of four main kinds of things: ideas and beliefs about the world, conventional ways of treating other people, ways of communicating using various kinds of texts, media, and “languages,” and methods of learning how to use these other tools.

Discourse systems

On Sundays Rodney Jones likes to go to the beach on the island where he lives to practice yoga with his friends. When he does this, he is participating in a particular discourse system, which we might call the Yoga discourse system. This discourse system has associated with it a complex set of ideas and beliefs about the physical and spiritual world, which can be traced back to the writings of the ancient Indian sage Patanjali and which are intimately connected to Hinduism. Although Rodney has read parts of the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali somewhere along the line, he does not by any means fully understand the complicated system of physiology, psychology, and cosmology behind the physical positions he performs. Neither is he a Hindu. However, by performing yoga positions he is in some way *embodying* this system of beliefs and concepts, whether he understands them or not.

Part of this discourse system has to do with the way people treat one another while they are attending the yoga class. It is customary, for example, to show people respect by putting one’s palms together and saying *namaste*. How one treats the teacher is especially important. One might address the teacher (who, in this case, is also not a Hindu) with particular respect, and the teacher is given the right not just to tell students what to do, but even to move about manipulating the bodies of his or her students.

Rodney may also communicate in a rather different way when he is with this group of weekend yogis. He may, for example, use Sanskrit terms like *sirsasana* and *padmasana* to describe certain positions, although his knowledge of the Sanskrit language is limited to these few words. He might also use English terms (which often refer to poses using the names of animals), and when he does he might find himself uttering sentences which, outside of this group, would sound rather odd if not totally incomprehensible, sentences like “Let’s do a dog,” or “She does a nice cow.”

Finally, the method of learning in this particular discourse system is rather unique, involving following along as the teacher performs certain physical actions. Students do not take notes or engage in debates as they sometimes do in university lectures. There is also not much room for creativity or individual expression as one might find in a drawing class.

One reason for going through this example is to illustrate the four main components of what we are calling discourse systems. Any group that has particular ways of thinking, treating other people, communicating and learning can be said to be participating in a particular