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

Intercultural Communication

A Discourse Approach

THIRD EDITION

WILEY-BLACKWELL

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Intercultural Communication

A DISCOURSE APPROACH

THIRD EDITION

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

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

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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

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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 sociolinguistics, 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 though 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

1

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 “intercultural 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