Intercultural discourse in busines and technology : introduction

Introduction

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Intercultural discourse has been a field of study of increasing interest for the last five years. What makes it so attractive? How does this collection of papers relate to other recent publications on related topics? This introduction answers these questions from the perspective of the struggle between linguistic theory and the international practice of business and technology. What is a sound description of intercultural discourse and when is it appropriate to apply the results of research and theory? After a brief account of the appropriate content and methodology of such discourse analyses, we present our criteria for the selection of the papers in this collection, explain their order of presentation, and briefly summarize their focus and scope. Finally we outline the future of such analyses from the perspective of communication research.

The title of this issue is *Intercultural discourse in business and technology*. By *intercultural* we mean between cultures, reserving the terms *cross-cultural* for a comparison of two or more cultures, and *monocultural* for interaction within one culture. Culture is defined operationally as the specific psychosocial orientation (Hofstede, 1991) of a group of people, be it a business, a nation or other grouping (for further clarification see the paper by Ulijn and Li in this volume). Cultures included here range from those of groups within one nation (e.g., Japanese, Chinese and Spanish cultures within the US) to those of national groups (e.g., Dutch, French, English, German, Italian, Finnish and Chinese). Discourse as defined here can be either written or oral. The first two papers (Touchstone et al. and Connor et al.) focus on the written text, with some attention paid to the reader of the text. The remaining five papers deal with oral interactions such as requests (van der Wijst), conflict mediating conversations (Maleville), meetings (Bargiela and Harris) and negotiations (Fant and Grindsted and Ulijn and Li). All papers involve business contexts (banks, a university, and insurance and technology-based companies); one involves technology and business: Ulijn and Li's

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paper about Finnish paper mill technology and Dutch textile printing equipment for the Chinese market.

What is the state of the art of an intercultural theory of written and oral discourse? Both cultural theory and linguistic theory examine data from two perspectives: some theorists stress universals while practitioners, such as business managers or practice-oriented researchers, consider cultural and linguistic diversity as important factors for any theory or research (Wierzbicka, 1991; Murray, 1992).

Does culture affect discourse in a business context? While a large body of linguistic theory and research on the relationships between culture and discourse exists, much of the work in the business context has not focussed on the *linguistic* features of discourse. Recent international management textbooks range from texts that completely ignore cultural factors (Daniels and Radebaugh, 1995), to those that pay considerable attention to them (Deresky, 1994), to texts focussing on such factors (Usunier, 1993), but no textbook relates intercultural management to language or discourse. Some communication theorists, such as Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1990), rarely mention concrete examples of a cultural effect on discourse. On the other hand, journals such as the *IEEE Professional Communication Transactions* (Dennett, 1990; Markel, 1994) and *Multilingua* (Pauwels, 1994) have featured special issues with discourse-based studies in intercultural professional and workplace settings with some attention to theory.

Despite the paucity of sound theory-based research in a business context which brings culture, language, discourse and communication together, Ulijn and Strother (1995) concluded from a survey of more than fifty studies about native and foreign-language reading and writing, that culture has an effect on written discourse, but not particularly in a business context. Moreover, there is a growing interest in the analysis of professional discourse (Wagner, 1994). Some studies are descriptive, whereas others are prescriptive (See Holmes, 1992).

Although cultural theory is used in discourse analysis, how can such theory lead to testable hypotheses? In line with de Groot's (1972) life cycle of scientific research, this issue of *Text* brings together seven descriptive linguistic studies which may allow hypothesis formation in intercultural discourse theory. Two of the studies test implications of Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory—one in a cross-cultural context (van der Wijst), one in an intercultural context (Ulijn and Li).

What is a sound description of intercultural discourse? Linguistic descriptions can be comprehensive and highly detailed. But, are such details useful for improved communication in international business? How reliable are the linguistic descriptions of intercultural discourse?

Often there is only one analyst, who brings his or her own cultural view to the analysis. Even when such bias is accounted for by using teams of researchers, there remains the question of which linguistic theory or methodological approach is used. To ensure the reliability of any findings, interrater and intermethod reliability should be conducted to determine whether the intercultural or cross-cultural effect is a result of a particular analyst or method.

Another question is the one of validity: 'Does the analytical tool chosen actually measure what it is supposed to measure?' Several researchers have proposed methods or tests to ensure such validity. Potter and Wetherel (1987), for example, include validation as one of their ten stages (see Ulijn and Li, this volume, for details). Poortinga and Hendriks (1989) and Hendriks (1991) propose a comprehensive research methodology that includes pre- and post-discourse questionnaires completed by participants and large numbers of observations by experts in both linguistic analysis and the business or technical content of the discourse (cf. Tannen, 1984 and others who have used such techniques in non-business contexts). While the goal of intercultural studies must be to produce valid and reliable data, the field is sufficiently new to benefit from less rigorous research that, like qualitative research, helps researchers identify questions and issues.

The papers in this issue reflect the methodological dilemmas just discussed. They display a variety of approaches, from psycholinguistic experimentation (van der Wijst), to an analysis of moves in meetings (Bargiela and Harris), to interpretation of values (Maleville; Fant and Grinsted), as well as more classic linguistic analyses (Connor et al.)

In compiling this collection of papers, we endeavored to ensure that papers were original, interdisciplinary, had a clear theoretical basis and methodology, involved systematic linguistic or cultural analysis, and had implications for the field of international business and technology. Additionally, we sought a balance among cultures, languages, oral and written language, linguistic and cultural analysis, and psychological verification by experimental testing. Even so, the papers are not representative of every variable in the field. We begin with papers that study written texts and move to oral language. Similarly, we move from Western to non-Western cultures.

Kaplan, Touchstone, and Hagstrom, using a standard discourse analytic approach, compare US banking documents written in English with equivalents written in Japanese, Chinese and Spanish. The three researchers also used bilingual translators for the three languages. This study shows that, because of problems in translation, the banks do not provide equal information to their non-English-speaking clientele.

Connor, Davis, and De Rycker, employing a contrastive rhetoric approach, examine correctness, clarity, and meaning components of US and Flemish job application cover letters. They identify specific cultural differences across these dimensions. The letters were written as part of a simulation and so no claims can be made about the validity of their findings for authentic letters. However, the possible cross-cultural variation does indicate a fruitful avenue for future studies.

Van der Wijst, using an experimental method and the politeness frameworks of Brown and Levinson (1987) and Leech (1983), had Dutch and French subjects rank different formulations of the same request in order of politeness, and in order of conventionality. His results support Brown and Levinson's claim of universalism; however, he did find some cultural difference concerning conventionality. This research then raises the question of what accounts for differences in intercultural communication between Dutch and French speakers. Clearly, to answer this question, studies of intercultural encounters need to be conducted and finer methodological tools need to be formulated.

Maleville, taking a micro-analytical approach within an ideological framework (including Hofstede's [1980, 1991] values), examines fragments from three conversations—one in English, one in French, and one in Dutch—all on the same topic. She focusses primarily on denials of unstated assertions, showing how these discourse practices reflect the workplace ideologies of the cultures represented. Although a small data set, this research confirms previous studies.

Bargiela and Harris, using the Birmingham School approach, analyze multiparty meetings, both formal and informal, in two multinational companies—one British, one Italian. They develop a generic model of meetings, consisting of moves, exchanges, and phases, but note that the structure of British and Italian meetings differ considerably within this framework. Because their analysis is exploratory and their data set small, they call for further research to 'explore the feasibility of robust cross-cultural and intercultural generic models'.

Fant and Grinsted, working with data from three simulated negotiations with interlocutors from Mexico, Denmark and Sweden, compared these intercultural encounters with monocultural negotiations. They examined the general structure of negotiation, features of argumentation and nonverbal signals for cultural values and stereotyping. They find that, when faced with value mismatch, interlocutors use one of three strategies (assertiveness, accommodation, avoidance). Of particular interest is their finding that verbal strategies may not coincide with nonverbal ones. This latter finding indicates that discourse alone may not tell the whole story in intercultural communication and that therefore, researchers need to look at both verbal and nonverbal aspects of discourse.

Ulijn and Li, using Brown and Levinson's (1987) notion of politeness and Hofstede's (1991) cultural values, examine silence and interrupting behaviors in multiparty Chinese–Finnish and Dutch–Chinese interactions. They found that Chinese interrupted more. But, because of the use of English as a lingua franca, the sociopsychological reasons for such interrupting behavior need to be examined.

What can we conclude as a result of these findings? Certainly they do not all lead automatically to application. The international world of business and technology needs a comprehensive theory of intercultural communication that can allow for the above range of approaches, but that can still be falsifiable. A cross-cultural and intercultural study of oral and written discourse for different languages and cultures would be essential for the development of such a theory. Detailed theoretical descriptions *pur sang* as *l'art pour l'art* or applied research without theoretical implications should be avoided. We would encourage hypothesis formulation and testing research, research that begins with both an interdisciplinary intercultural theory and method of analysis for oral, written, and nonverbal interaction.

A possible way out of the theory/practice dilemma would be to formulate problem statements from specific areas such as writing, editing, translating and negotiating, where interactants are from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Such a problem-solving approach would allow the construction of culture-sensitive international training programs for business and technology. But, we are still left with the dilemma of what theory and methodology to use. Most approaches derive from theories. For example, the Birmingham School approach developed from systemic linguistics, a functional theory of linguistics. Stiles' (1981) taxonomy of verbal response modes, on the other hand, derives from psychotherapy. The integrative model of levels of analysis of miscommunication of Coupland et al. (1994) or the non-native speaker miscommunication model of Grundy (1994) might provide a different lens for examining intercultural discourse in real-life situations. However, while miscommunications can be very revealing, we need a theory that is robust enough to account for both successful and unsuccessful communication.

No matter which current theories or methods are employed, it is difficult to manipulate the multiplicity of variables in natural communication such that we can validly and reliably test relevant factors. Despite this problem, we should be able to increase the ecological validity of intercultural discourse studies by paying closer attention to the different variables and constantly comparing the reliability and validity of the tools we use. In this way we may begin to find answers to the question of the effect culture has on discourse in business and technology, answers that are generalizable and have practical implications.

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