

## Review Essay

### **Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach**

*by Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon*

Oxford: Blackwell, 1995. 271 pp.

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A welcome addition to Blackwell's Language in Society series is Scollon & Scollon's *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*, a volume that integrates elements of intercultural communication, applied sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis. This book makes use of two decades of research in the fields of discourse analysis, social psychology, organizational communication, and the ethnography of speaking to provide a practical guide to the main concepts and principal problems of intercultural communication. The conclusions the authors draw have also been field-tested in their own work teaching cross-cultural communication, sociolinguistics, and second language acquisition in institutional settings throughout the world.

*Intercultural Communication* has been written for two main audiences: East Asian speakers of English and their teachers, and professional communicators throughout the world who are interested in the variations found in human discourse systems. The examples provided are of most direct relevance to Chinese (Cantonese) speakers of English and their Western interlocutors, but a broader range is also covered, including such countries as Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. Although this work focuses on communication in professional and business contexts, it can also be used as a valuable resource in the classroom.

The Scollons have found in their many years of teaching intercultural communication skills in a variety of different countries that it is most important to pay attention to "higher levels of discourse analysis" (p. xii). In the preface they argue that in intercultural, intra-organizational communication, particularly between the West and the countries of East Asia, "most miscommunication does not arise through mispronunciations or through poor

uses of grammar.... The major sources of miscommunication in intercultural contexts lie in differences in patterns of discourse" (ibid.). The following chapters are largely an attempt to document and substantiate this thesis, while at the same time providing readers with an overview of discourse analysis as a broad and evolving field of study that can be effectively utilized in the analysis of intercultural communication problems today.

In addition to the preface, *Intercultural Communication* contains 11 chapters, a "research base" giving specific references used in writing the book, and an extended bibliography of other sources. Chapters 1-5 begin with an explanation of the term "discourse approach," and go on to explore in detail a number of important issues in intercultural communication in relation to studies in discourse analysis. Chapters 6 & 7 act as a bridge to the concluding chapters in examining the elements of discourse systems and the notion of culture. Chapters 8-11 then focus on a set of four interrelated discourse systems for analysis: corporate, professional, generational, and gender-based, respectively.

*Intercultural Communication* begins with the assumption that all human beings are simultaneously members of many different discourse systems based on occupation, work-group affiliation, sex, age, nationality, ethnicity, etc. As a result, virtually all communication takes place across lines which divide people into different groups or systems of discourse. Communication that takes place across these lines between different discourse groups can be defined as interdiscourse communication. The authors propose a framework for analysis of problems that arise in interdiscourse communication derived from the basic principles of discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis, as the Scollons note, is a field of study that has been "considerably extended in recent years" (p. 50). In fact, although it is widely acknowledged as dealing with units of language larger than the isolated sentence, the term has been used in very different ways by different scholars, creating a good deal of confusion that has yet to be resolved. A variety of disciplines feed into discourse analysis, including sociology, psychology, philosophy, stylistics, semiotics, anthropology, etc., and it shares a rather vague, undefined boundary with each. As Fairclough (1992, p. 3) states, "discourse is a difficult concept, largely because there are so many conflicting and overlapping definitions formulated from various theoretical and disciplinary standpoints." One of the more contentious issues existing in the field today, for example, is the difference between *discourse* and *text*. For some, there is an implication that the word "text" refers only to written language, and that discourse analysis of writing beyond the sentence level is therefore text analysis. The result is a distinction between "spoken discourse" and "written text." Others argue for a different set of distinctions between the two terms. Widdowson, for example, contends that texts can be in written or spoken form and "come in all shapes and sizes: they can correspond in extent with any linguistic unit: letter, sound, word, sentence, combination of sentences" (1995, p. 164). Discourse is a matter of "deriving meaning from text by referring to its contextual conditions, to the beliefs, attitudes, values which represent different versions of reality. The same text, therefore, can give rise to different discourses" (ibid., p. 168). Still

others view these terms as interchangeable, and expressions such as text linguistics, text analysis, text grammar, discourse analysis, and discourse linguistics of texts, are often treated synonymously (Connor, 1996, p. 11).

In addition to these unresolved issues, there are fundamental differences between British and American schools of discourse analysis. The British work, which has been greatly influenced by pragmatics and Halliday's functional approach to language, principally follows "structural-linguistic criteria, on the basis of the isolation of units, and sets of rules defining well-formed sequences of discourse" (McCarthy, 1991, p. 6). American discourse analysis, on the other hand, is "dominated by work within the ethnomethodological tradition (see, for example, Gumperz & Hymes), ...which examines types of speech event such as storytelling, greeting rituals, and verbal duels in different cultural and social settings" (ibid.). This is often labeled *conversation analysis*. Here, the emphasis is not on building structural models of discourse as in the British model, but on the close observation of individuals as they interact within authentic social settings. The American work has produced a large number of descriptions of discourse types and insights into social constraints on conversational patterns (e.g., turn-taking, politeness strategies, face-saving phenomena, etc.), and overlaps in some ways with British work in pragmatics (ibid.).

Clearly discourse is "a contentious area of enquiry, ...a diverse, not to say, diffuse concept" (Widdowson, 1995, p. 157), leading one critic to suggest that "[about] the only thing that Discourse Analysis has yet delivered is an ever more elaborate meta-language for referring to [larger units of language]" (O'Neill, 1989, p. 7). The Scollons make little reference to these or any other controversies surrounding discourse analysis, nor to the two major schools of thought that give it direction. Their work, however, falls clearly within an American frame of reference, one which stresses conversation analysis and the interactive sociolinguistics associated with Gumperz (1982).

In addition to an introduction of the concept of discourse as a field of study and a proposed framework for the analysis of interdiscourse communication, Chapter 1 of *Intercultural Communication* presents two approaches for improving communication between members of different discourse systems: increasing shared knowledge (i.e., knowing as much as possible about those with whom one is communicating) and dealing with miscommunication (the *only* thing, according to the authors, that is certain in interdiscourse communication). The primary examples used throughout the book involve East Asian speakers of English and their Western, native English-speaking counterparts.

Chapters 2 & 3 expand on the notion of increasing shared knowledge by focusing on the scenes and events in which our communicative activities take place, and on our identities as participants within these speech events. Chapter 2 begins with the assumption that we are able to interpret the meanings of other speakers because we know the rules by which contexts are constructed; i.e., a grammar of context. In this chapter the main components of a grammar of context are examined in detail, including scene, key, participants, message form, sequence, co-occurrence patterns, and manifestation.

Chapter 3 then examines how our identities as participants in speech events are developed and maintained from the standpoint of communicative style (or register). Of key importance here is the notion of *face*, “the negotiated public image, mutually granted each other by participants in a communicative event” (p. 35). The study of communicative style in relation to face, which is also known as politeness theory, is based on two types of strategies used by participants in speech events: involvement face strategies and independence face strategies. In addition, the study of politeness (face) systems must also take into account three essential factors: power (P), distance (D), and the weight of the imposition (W). On the basis of the first two of these factors, three main types of politeness system can be posited: deference (-P, +D), solidarity (-P, -D), and hierarchical (+P, +/-D). The analysis of face in relation to politeness systems can usually tell us what kind of miscommunication will arise in interdiscourse communication. As a general rule, the authors state, “when two participants differ in their assessment of face strategies, it will tend to be perceived as difference in power” (p. 48).

A more detailed analysis of miscommunication is carried out in Chapter 4 by examining the processes used by participants in speech events to interpret meanings. The preceding two chapters examined how to interpret a speaker’s meaning through an understanding of the context. Both knowledge of the scene and of the relationships and identities of the participants can be thought of as external factors. This chapter now turns to the more internal problem of knowing what pieces go together to form a continuous whole, as well as how to interpret the meaning of this whole. This is the study of discourse analysis. A number of basic concepts “from different schools of discourse analysis” (p. 50) are introduced to provide a framework for understanding these problems, including cohesive devices, schemata or scripts, prosodic patterning, and conversational inference (or metacommunication).

In Chapter 5 the issue of miscommunication is applied to a specific context in an examination of the use of deductive and inductive strategies for introducing topics among western English speakers and East Asian speakers of English. Although “*both* inductive and deductive patterns are used in both Asian and western communication, ...there is a strong preference for the inductive pattern in Asia and for the deductive pattern in the west” (p. 83). These preferences are related to certain cultural expectations about the notion of face and differences in the cultural structuring of situations and participant roles, which in turn give rise to the selection of differing rhetorical strategies. The authors suggest that virtually all relationships in Asia are hierarchical in nature and that this orientation finds its roots in ancient Confucian codes of conduct which “lay down quite clearly a set of appropriate behaviors in interpersonal communication, [corresponding] quite closely with Asian communicative practice in the twentieth century” (p. 82). Analogous sources in the western tradition are not presented, although more recent developments in western rhetoric are examined in the following chapter. Chapter 5 concludes with a brief and largely inadequate look at face relationships in written discourse.

Moving from a technically narrow definition of discourse as exemplified by the study of grammatical and other relationships between sentences (Chapter 4), to a broader definition of the term related to the functional uses of language in social contexts (Chapters 1-3 & Chapter 5), in Chapters 6-11 discourse is viewed in its broadest sense as the study of whole systems of communication. Chapters 6 & 7 introduce this perspective by turning to the relationship between discourse systems and culture, and by proposing a conceptual framework for the analysis of discourse systems based on the detailed examination of four main factors: ideology, face systems, forms of discourse, and socialization.

Chapter 6, as an examination of discourse ideology, is largely an essay in political philosophy. English rhetoric, the authors state, expresses a philosophy of communication in which all information should be conveyed as clearly, briefly, directly, and sincerely as possible (the C-B-S pattern found in many textbooks on rhetoric and style), and this form of communication is widely seen as the norm in professional communication of all kinds. The C-B-S style is not a system of discourse itself, but it "represents the style of the preferred forms of discourse within a larger system which [is called] the Utilitarian discourse system" (p. 99). Utilitarianism, as espoused in the writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, has its origins in the Enlightenment, which saw the principles of empirical science begin to replace the authority of the Christian church in European thinking. The predominant ideology underlying the Utilitarian discourse system is one of individualism and egalitarianism; its preferred forms include deductive rhetorical patterns and politeness strategies of involvement. The authors state that this discourse system is characterized by six principal factors: It is anti-rhetorical, positivist-empirical, deductive, individualistic, egalitarian, and public (institutionally sanctioned). The essay or research paper are its prototypical forms in academic circles, while the business letter exemplifies Utilitarian principles in the business world. In the last two hundred years, the Utilitarian discourse system has risen to "near total dominance in our thinking about effective communication" (*ibid.*), "has come to the position of the central and dominating discourse system throughout the western world" (p. 114), and is now widely believed to be the key to success in our international political and economic systems (p. 120). However, as the authors suggest, "in spite of its merits in commerce and international affairs, [it] represents a particular ideology and as such needs to be carefully analyzed" (p. 121). Furthermore, many other systems and sub-systems of discourse exist, ones which cross ethnic, generational, gender, corporate, and professional lines. Successful intercultural communication depends on "learning to move with both pragmatic effectiveness and cultural sensitivity across such lines" (*ibid.*).

Chapter 7 then sets out to explore those aspects of culture (in its anthropological sense) which are most significant in understanding discourse systems and intercultural communication from the standpoint of ideology, face systems, forms of discourse, and socialization. The term ideology in this chapter is equated with history and worldview, and the American emphasis on rapid change and progress is contrasted here with the strong consciousness of cultural roots prevalent in Asia. In an examination of differing face systems,

the concepts of self, kinship, and ingroup–outgroup relationships in China and the West are described. The following section, *forms of discourse*, covers a wide range of topics, ranging from the functions of language to non-verbal communication (i.e., kinesics, proxemics, and the concept of time). Socialization is then discussed from the standpoint of education, enculturation, and acculturation, as well as theories of the person and of learning. The chapter concludes with an examination of stereotyping, both negative and positive, and the effects it can have on intercultural communication.

The final chapters of the book draw detailed portraits of the four discourse systems to which most people belong, two voluntary (corporate and professional) and two involuntary (generational and gender-based). The analytical framework for this study utilizes the conceptual model for the elements of a discourse system outlined in Chapters 6 & 7. The authors argue that all individuals are simultaneously members of multiple, cross-cutting discourse systems, and that certain specific problems arise as a result: conflicting ideologies, fragmentation of socialization and experience, dilemmas in choosing the most appropriate form of discourse, and multiple faces. As a simultaneous member of multiple discourse systems, a successful communicator must, therefore, “constantly tune and adjust his or her sense of identity and membership so that the goals of [all] systems of membership are at least *minimally satisfied*” (p. 204). The Scollons contend that the problems which arise from multiple, cross-cutting membership in conflicting discourse systems are insoluble, and that “in professional communication we virtually always work under conditions of stress which arise from such role pluralism” (p. 251). They further remind those involved in intercultural communication that “it is well worth remembering that it is quite unlikely that one will ever become a member of the other culture, however much one might learn about that culture or come to appreciate it” (p. 252). As a result, they conclude, the most effective professional communicators are, paradoxically, individuals who understand the commonalities and differences that exist in interdiscourse communication, but who are also aware of their own lack of knowledge and expertise.

*Intercultural Communication* is a dense, informative, and ambitious body of work, containing a wealth of detail and anecdotal evidence drawn from the authors’ wide-ranging experience in the field. It is not, however, an easy read. The book targets the entire spectrum of discourse studies over the last twenty years, from the early emphasis on grammatical and other forms used to mark cohesive relationships between sentences, to the inclusion of larger units of social context related to the functional uses of language, to the study of whole systems of communication within cultures and societies. These topics, however, are not presented in sequence, but rather as interweaving threads in a broad, multi-faceted approach to the issue of intercultural communication. Moreover, despite the considerable breadth of this work, there are surprising omissions, one of the most important of which is the lack of any substantial reference to research in text linguistics or contrastive rhetoric (see Connor, 1996). The authors argue, for example, that the essay and research paper are the prototypical forms of the Utilitarian discourse system in the academic world.

More details regarding these and other written forms of discourse clearly could have advanced this thesis. An examination of English and East Asian languages from the standpoint of contrastive rhetoric would also have been a welcome addition to *Intercultural Communication*.

Of equal importance are certain imbalances and seemingly biased perspectives which are apparent throughout the book. Asian patterns of discourse, for example, are presented in terms of their traditional origins, dating back to the writings of Confucius. One might erroneously assume in reading this work, however, that the discourse patterns associated with English begin and end with the political and economic philosophies of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, so inadequately are the sources of western rhetoric treated. Although the Utilitarians may well have played an important role in the shaping of these patterns, most scholars would agree that the origins of English rhetoric date back to the Hellenic world of the fifth century B.C., and were subsequently modified by Roman, Medieval European, and later Western thinkers of the empiricist tradition (see, for example, Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 189–190). In this regard, the authors are perhaps confusing “consciousness of history” with history itself.

The broad scope of this book, particularly with regard to the cultures that have been targeted for analysis, is another point of concern. While the Scollons admit that the examples selected are of most direct relevance to Chinese speakers of English, they maintain that a wider range has also been covered, including Japan, Korea, Great Britain, North America, etc. Readers with a specific interest in Japan will nonetheless be disappointed with the infrequent and largely superficial examples offered, while Korea seems to have been included almost as an afterthought. Nor, from the western point of view, is there any attempt to make the important distinction between British and American historical perspectives and worldviews.

*Intercultural Communication* is, nevertheless, a creative and well-crafted work, providing readers with an original and sophisticated framework for analyzing discourse systems, as well as an informative, albeit disordered, overview of the field of discourse studies. In examining “how discourse is shaped by relations of power and ideologies, and the constructive effects discourse has upon social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and belief” (Widdowson, 1995, p. 158), *Intercultural Communication* is above all an essay in critical discourse analysis. Critical approaches to discourse analysis not only attempt to *describe* discourse, but also to *interpret* it as social practice, equating social and linguistic theory with socio-political and ideological commitment. Because of this ideological commitment, critical discourse analysis privileges particular interpretations, and this, according to Widdowson (*ibid.*, p. 169), undermines its validity as a vehicle for analysis. In this sense, there is rarely a suggestion that alternative perspectives are possible: the interpretation offered is presented as being uniquely validated by the textual facts. Clearly, *Intercultural Communication* falls within these parameters.

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(Received Sep. 30, 1997)