

use paralinguistic and prosodic features—for example, tone of voice, pitch, loudness, pacing, pauses—to establish cohesion, that is, to show the relationship between ideas (what is foreground, what is background? What is cause, what effect? What is given, what new?) and to show their attitude toward what they say (Are they earnest, joking, or sarcastic? Being friendly or rude? Implying “come closer” or “stay back”?)

These signals about how one means what one says, which Gumperz calls “contextualization cues,” are automatically processed. A speaker does not stop and think, “Now I am angry, should I raise my voice or lower it?” A listener doesn’t stop and think, “Now if he is raising his voice, does that mean he is angry?” Rather, people encode and decode automatically—“I’m angry,” or “He likes me”—without thinking about what tone of voice, loudness, pacing or pitch gives that impression. In the terms of Bateson (1972), these signals indicate a metamessage about how the message, or propositional content of the words spoken, is intended. In other words, how an utterance is said communicates metamesages about the relationship between interactants.

In intracultural communication, expectations about how paralinguistic features signal how an utterance is meant—that is, the interpretation of metamesages—is likely to be shared by speakers and hearers, so they are not noticed; they seem self-evident and “logical,” just as the word for a chair in one’s own language seems like the real word for chair, when in fact it is arbitrary and no more logical than the words *asiento*, *karekila*, or the word for chair in any other language.

In cross-cultural communication, however, expectations about how paralinguistic signals are used to indicate what is meant by what is said are not shared. Therefore, in asking what led to misunderstandings, one is forced to notice that a certain tone of voice or use of pitch or other paralinguistic or prosodic feature was intended to mean one thing and taken to mean another. For example, Gumperz (1982a) shows that when speakers of Indian English use increased volume to perform the conversational business-as-usual of getting the floor, it seems to speakers of British English that they are angry. A speaker of British English typically gets the floor by repeating an initial phrase until she or he has audience attention. When the speaker of British English responds in kind to what she or he has perceived as a flareup of temper on the part of the Indian, both interlocutors feel that the other unaccountably introduced the tone of anger into the interaction.

Research on communicative style (Lakoff, 1973, 1976), politeness phenomena (Brown & Levinson, 1978), what Goffman (1967) calls deference and demeanor, as well as indirect speech acts (Searle, 1975) have all

contributed to the realization that most communication is characterized by indirectness. While it may seem at first glance that people use words to say what they mean, a little thought and even less observation indicate that they usually do not come right out and say what they mean. Rather, they negotiate, hint at what they mean, try to get an idea of what the other person might think of what they might mean, and be ready to adjust or take back what they might have meant.

As the work of Lakoff demonstrates and explains, social requirements are too pressing for people to barrel ahead with their thoughts and ideas. Rather, there are two main benefits to indirectness. The first is rapport: It is better to be understood, to get what one wants, without saying what one means. Then the very fact of mutual understanding is proof of rapport, of sharing background and style. The second is defensive: In case one’s intentions are not received well, one can avoid outright disagreement by not having gone “on record” (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Cultures differ with regard to whether speakers would rather risk threatening rapport, and therefore appear distant, or risk threatening independence, and therefore appear imposing.

There are cultural differences with respect to how much and what type of indirectness is expected in particular settings. For example, as my own research (Tannen, 1981a) and that of others (for example, Goody, 1978) shows, there are cultural differences with respect to how likely a person is to interpret questions as requests for information, as opposed to interpreting them as indirect ways of communicating something else. Of course all people are capable of interpreting questions both ways. They rely on information about the context, the habits of the other person, and how something is said to decide whether a question or any other utterance is meant literally or not. But the inclination to look for hidden meaning can be more or less strong depending on whether one has come to expect people in this setting to hint or not, and how. My research (Tannen, 1981a) shows that misunderstandings commonly arise when one person asks a question intended as a request for information, for example, “John’s having a party. Do you want to go?” while the other interprets this as a hint, for example, “I want to go.”

In presenting a sample conversation beginning with this question, I found that Greeks in my study were more likely to interpret such a question as an indirect way of hinting one’s own preference than were Americans in my study. Furthermore, for Americans but not for Greeks, women were more likely than men to interpret the question as a hint. These findings may give some indication of the sources for the stereotype of Greeks and of women as being untrustworthy (you can’t believe what