Do you mind...? —an intercultural view of difficult talk in the workplace

by Dr Jonathan Newton

Analysis

Our daily communication is imbued with culture. In a multitude of culturally specified (and largely invisible) ways, we use language to manage transactions and relationships. As we move between cultures or countries, we experience not only different languages but different ways of using language to get things done and to get on with other people.

Take the simple example of, say, buying bananas at a fruit store or market. In an Australasian context, the transaction typically ends with a ritualised expression of gratitude—‘ta’, ‘thanks’ or ‘thank you’. When living in China and learning Chinese, I took the same approach at the markets, only to be asked by my bemused Chinese friends why I was thanking the vendor when, after all, I had given her or him money for the goods. In such situations, they explained, the exchange of goods and money is sufficient to end the transaction and *Xie xie* is redundant. Knowing the correct linguistic forms is one thing; learning when, where, and with whom to use them is another.

Being skilful in cross-culturally appropriate ways to purchase bananas might not be highly valued. But shift the context to a multiculturally diverse workplace or to a migrant adjusting to work in a new country, and intercultural communication skills become critical. Very often, they determine the success of high-stakes encounters, such as job interviews and sensitive contract negotiations. Intercultural communication skills are no less important in daily workplace interactions in which people are constantly using language to manage ‘face’—to preserve their public self and that of others. To explain this point, let’s look at an apparently unremarkable example from a conversation recorded in a New Zealand white-collar workplace.

Example 1:

Kate is a manager in a government department. Brenda is her personal assistant. Kate would like Brenda to work late today.

Kate: ‘I know this is a bit last-minute Brenda, but do you think you could possibly stay later tonight? It’s just that I need to get the meeting agenda ready for tomorrow.’

Although this request may look unremarkable, Kate is skilfully and seemingly effortlessly managing potentially risky—or face-threatening—communication in which she has to ask Brenda to do something ‘above and beyond’ what would normally be expected of her.

Kate handles these risks by making language choices that minimise imposition and enhance solidarity in culturally determined ways. To understand these choices, we need to think of the simplest and barest way that Kate might have stated her message: ‘I need you to work late tonight’. A message stated in this way would threaten the collaborative and ostensibly egalitarian nature of the manager-staff relationship established by Kate and Brenda. Instead, Kate uses a number of strategies to soften the impact of her request. First, she begins by acknowledging and implicitly apologising for the potential imposition with: ‘I know this is a bit last-minute Brenda’. Next she presents the request indirectly as a question: ‘Do you think you could possibly stay later tonight?’ in which the real question—‘Could [you] possibly stay later?’—is embedded in a less direct question: ‘Do you think...?’ Finally, Kate follows up the question with an explanation: ‘It’s just that I need to get the meeting agenda ready for tomorrow’, which has the effect of emphasising Brenda’s right to make an informed response.

Kate’s choices reflect culturally determined ways of managing communication, which can pose a

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challenge in multiculturally diverse settings or for recent migrants joining the workforce. A recent migrant in a managerial position, for instance, may bring cultural assumptions about their status and right to make demands on staff. The manager may see little need to soften or mitigate a request to a lower-status staff member, and workplace relations suffer as a result.→

Kate's request in Example 1 is part of one of more than 2 500 interactions involving around 5 000 participants recorded from 21 work sites in a project conducted by the Victoria University of Wellington called the Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) <www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/lwp>. Since 1996, the LWP has been developing a large corpus of transcribed recordings of workplace talk from a range of blue- and white-collar workplaces, and this material has been used extensively for research purposes. Topics we have researched include meeting talk; negotiation and conflict resolution; mentoring; management style; and recreational features of workplace talk such as humour, small talk and storytelling.

Until recently, this huge resource has been relatively under-used for workplace language training. We saw an opportunity to address this gap when, in 2005, Victoria University of Wellington was contracted to provide language-focused training courses for skilled migrants who had been unable to find work in their chosen professions in New Zealand for at least two years. Professions represented by participants in the program include law; stock broking; finance and economics; teaching; academia; design; accountancy; and IT and telecommunications consultants. The course emphasises the skills necessary for obtaining employment, for example job interview skills, and provides a workplace placement. But we also wanted to provide training in workplace communication skills so that, once in employment, participants were better equipped to adapt to the workplace cultures in which they were likely to find themselves.

To address this goal, we developed materials that, because of our access to the LWP corpus, were rooted in real workplace language, making extensive

use of authentic interactions. The broad aim of the material is neatly encapsulated in Brian Tomlinson's discussion of cultural awareness in his article 'Seeing more between the lines' in *The Guardian Weekly*, *Learning English* June 21-27, 5:

...a gradually developing inner sense of the equality of cultures, an increased understanding of your own and other people's cultures, and a positive interest in how cultures both connect and differ. Such awareness can broaden the mind, increase tolerance and facilitate international communication.

As we move between cultures or countries, we experience not only different languages but different ways of using language to get things done and to get on with other people. (photo: Boromir Aragorn, stock.xchng)

As we saw in Example 1 above, authentic interactions reveal important socio-pragmatic dimensions of workplace communication. By socio-pragmatic, we mean features of talk that reflect and are shaped by social factors such as the level of imposition, the social distance between speakers, and speakers' rights and obligations in a given context. These are rarely highlighted in the artificial interactions typical of commercially published

materials for intercultural-communication training. An analysis of the complexities and subtleties of authentic workplace interaction suggests that teaching materials need to move beyond formulaic phrases and artificially constructed text-book dialogues that bear little relation to genuine workplace talk.

The materials focus on one of the more problematic areas of intercultural communication: face-threatening speech acts. Let me be quick to say that this 'threat' is not the behaviour of some red-faced bully. Instead, it is the

latent threat to confront when whatever one says has the potential to undermine either one's own face or that of another. Some of the more obvious face-threatening acts include requests, instructions, refusals, complaints, opinions, disagreements and apologies. Cultures develop ritualised scripts for carrying out these acts—scripts that reflect cultural assumptions about how face is to be managed, about politeness, appropriateness, formality and a host of other social variables. Managing face requires competence at using strategic and linguistic resources to express indirectness, to hedge an issue, or to boost or soften the force of a speech act; these are all strategies that cause difficulty in intercultural communication and are difficult to learn in a new cultural context. In the following examples we see people in the workplace skilfully using these strategies.

In the first example (Example 2 below), Hera chooses a noticeably indirect way to make her request, (i.e. a face-threatening speech act) using the phrase: 'I wondered if you wouldn't mind...' Migrants who have participated in our courses often find bi-clausal requests such as 'I wondered if you wouldn't mind' amusing for their indirectness and for the number of words required to say 'Could you...?' And yet one of the mistakes migrants often make in their

requests is to assume that by using the word 'please' they appropriately soften the instruction, as in: 'Could you please spend some of that time contacting people'. The problem here is that rather than softening the force of the instruction, 'please' could be interpreted as strengthening it, depending on intonation and tone of voice.

Example 2:

Hera is a manager in a government department, and Ana is her new, temporary executive assistant.

Hera: Okay, um, now we're about to start with the, um...development session this afternoon. We've got an outside speaker...

Ana: Okay.

Hera: ...which means that you'll be ... out here by yourself and I wondered if you wouldn't mind spending some of that time contacting ...while no-one else is around...contacting the people for their interviews.

The 'I was wondering...' strategy comes up again in Example 3, as does the very common strategy of beginning a request with a question such as 'Can I just have a quick word?' Both serve to facilitate the difficult task of asking the boss for a day off.

Example 3:

Tom enters Greg's office to request a day's leave. Greg is Tom's boss.

Tom: Can I just have a quick word?

Greg: Yeah sure, have a seat.

Tom: [sitting down] Great weather, eh?

Greg: mm...

Tom: Yeah, been a good week. Did you get away skiing at the weekend?

Greg: Yeah, we did. Now, how can I help you?

Tom: I was just wondering if I could take Friday off and make it a long weekend?

Greg: mm... I don't see any problem with that ... you will have finished that report by then, won't you?

These examples reveal a number of principles about the relationship between language and social meaning:

- Talk is **functionally complex**; an utterance performs more than one function at the same time, and one form often has many layers of meaning (e.g. informative, relational, and attitudinal).

- **Expressing** degrees of politeness involves selecting contextually appropriate discourse strategies.
- Likewise, **interpreting** polite and impolite behaviour involves taking account of appropriateness in context.
- Language provides a range of strategies and devices for **boosting** and **softening** the strength of an utterance.
- Language provides **direct** and **indirect** ways of expressing meaning.

Such principles provide valuable signposts for migrants in our program as they navigate their way through workplace interactions in a new cultural setting. To draw attention to these principles, we designed a variety of tasks involving analysis of interactions, role-plays, discussion topics, reflection on experience, and performance of various workplace communications by email and letter, with the tutor as respondent. Below are some sample tasks from a module on complaints, based on the following scenario.→

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Context

The workplace: A ministry of the New Zealand Government

The people:

- Sara (53) is the manager of a team within this ministry.
- Ripeka (48) is communications manager for the ministry.
- Ella (42), Simon (37), and Marisse (34) are all report writers who work in the team.
- The team have worked together for about one year.

Sara is holding a weekly meeting with her team. She has noticed an increasing number of writing errors in documents produced by the team. These documents include letters sent to the public, as well as reports posted on the ministry website and sent to government officials.

After reading the scenario, participants are provided with the following information and task:

Here is one way that Sara could raise the problem:

'Look, I'm very unhappy with the quality of your writing. It's full of mistakes and I'm really embarrassed by it. It gives us all a bad name. You need to do something about it or else there might be consequences.'

- a. What might be wrong with this approach? Find at least three possible problems with this example.

Next, the participants role-play the communication between Sara and her team, focusing on achieving team agreement on ways to solve this problem. After the role-play, the groups discuss the communication strategies and phrases/words they used to manage this potentially difficult conversation. They are then provided with the following list of ways in which complaints could be softened and are asked to compare these to the strategies they used.

Ways to soften complaints:

1. Begin with an introductory comment or a question such as: 'Would you mind if we talked about ...'
2. Present the complaint as a question or a request, not a demand.
3. Avoid 'blaming' language.
4. Use polite forms (e.g. 'Would you mind ...').
5. Use phrases and words that soften the complaint.
6. Offer solutions.
7. Use humour.

Participates then listen to and/or read the original interaction (Example 4 below) and discuss ways that it differs from their role-played interactions. This comparison is critical for raising awareness of culturally different ways of communicating in face-threatening situations.

Example 4

Sara '...which leads me onto one other item that I haven't got on the, um, agenda ah, is it alright if I...?'

Ripeka 'Yep, sure'.

Sara '... and that's the, um, issue of writing [deep breath]. Um, when, um, whenever you, er, we're drafting, well, I've noticed a couple of mistakes creeping into our work. That's stuff that, that even that I've looked at. I notice it because the letters go through—all the letters that go out of the ministry go through what's called the "day file". They also go through, er, each manager as well as our own staff. Sometimes, suddenly, as I'm re-reading, I spot a spelling mistake that I didn't see the first time or a grammatical mistake.'

Simon/Ella/Ripeka

'... mm, yeah'

Sara 'I really ask for all of you to make sure that you take it to one other person at least to, um, to look at before you, before you post it. Even when you send it to me to look at, it must also be checked by others. Of course, when you're doing a big chunk of work then that's normal for us t- -we always do that checking. Even with just simple letters, make sure that they're looked at. It's so easy to overlook just a simple mistake, and the less mistakes we send out the better.'

Ella 'I'm doing that, eh.' [laughs]

Simon 'Yeah...'

The next step is particularly important in intercultural training. It requires participants to make explicit comparisons between their own cultural background and that presented in the examples provided. In this way, they are encouraged to be mindful of their culture of origin, aware of 'the possibility of difference' (Corbett, *An*

Intercultural Approach to English Language Teaching) and prepared for what Byram & Flemming describe as the 'decentring from one's own taken-for-granted world' in their book, *Language Learning In Intercultural Perspective: Approaches Through Drama and Ethnography*.

Imagine a similar problem in your culture of origin.

- a. What aspects of the situation would be similar/different (e.g. the power relationships, the way staff meetings are run)?
- b. What aspects of the communication would be similar/different?
- c. What general principles about effective communication in a New Zealand white-collar workplace could you suggest from your analysis of this interaction?

Finally, they are set the task of rephrasing the communication in an email and a telephone conversation:

- a. Imagine that this communication takes place via email. Write Sara's initial email to the team. How might a team member reply?
- b. Write what Sara would say to a team member if she telephoned him/her about his matter.
- c. What changes, if any, have you made to the communication compared with the face-to-face version?

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The LWP research indicates that the socio-linguistic and socio-pragmatic demands of integrating into a new workplace are often very daunting. Learning ways of interacting that are appropriate and normal in a workplace is an important aspect of fitting-in and becoming an integrated member of the workplace as a community of practice. Socio-pragmatic competence is an often under-estimated aspect of workplace success. Even those born and brought up in an English-speaking speech community may find the process of learning how to do things appropriately with words at work very challenging. Fitting into the workplace involves learning the socio-linguistic and socio-pragmatic rules of expression that are particular to the specific community of practice one is joining. Managing workplace discourse, knowing how to make a complaint appropriately, how to make a joke, how to disagree without causing offence, and how to refuse effectively—these

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PACIFIC SOLUTION ALIVE AND WELL?

In the crisis that hit the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) last year it was generally assumed that the Pacific solution was dead and that asylum seekers and their children would no longer be interned in Nauru, Manus or Christmas Island. A major concession was the closing of Woomera. But quietly, and on a reduced budget, a reception centre was being built on Christmas Island, and Nauru continued as a client-state totally dependent on Australian funds. Manus was eventually mothballed after hosting a single resident at considerable expense. No further boatloads came to Australia, largely because of effective cooperation with Indonesian forces and the return of many refugees to Iraq and Afghanistan after the American occupation. Therefore, both supporters and opponents of the Pacific solution could be satisfied, as were most of its subjects, who were quietly allowed into Australia as 'genuine refugees' on temporary protection visas.

The islands off Australia's coast remained excised—not part of the migration zone. Anyone landing on them was no longer entitled to be treated as arriving in Australia, requiring us to implement our international obligation to asylum seekers under the 1951 UN Convention and the 1967 Protocol, to both of which we subscribed. But then a small and well-organised group of 42 arrived on the Australian mainland from Indonesian Papua. (Most refugees from Papua go to Papua New Guinea, from where they are normally returned to Indonesia.) But the mainland has yet to be 'excised', though John Howard made a passing remark suggesting that it had (is this a joke?). Cooperation painfully built with the Indonesians could obviously not be called on in this case. DIMA quite correctly awarded the newcomers temporary protection as asylum seekers, which it was legally obliged to do.

This was a scenario that many had been expecting and even fearing for years. As in some other parts of Indonesia (and previously in East Timor), there is a secessionist movement in Papua, which Indonesia does its best to suppress. The acceptance into Australia, however briefly, of supporters of this movement moved the issue from an immigration to a foreign-policy arena. It threatened to disturb the painstaking creation of friendly relations with Indonesia, which was just getting over the loss of East Timor. As a centre of Islamist agitation, through Jemaah Islamiyah, it was urgent that the Indonesian government be kept on side.

This was attempted by simply moving right away from the recent reforms and back to an even broader version of the Pacific solution. Under this, all asylum

seekers arriving without a visa (namely by sea rather than air) would be placed outside the mainland—even if they had actually reached it. They would then be processed with a view to sending them elsewhere. As only New Zealand had accepted a significant number of asylum seekers in the recent past, this was rather optimistic. It did not mollify the Indonesians, who noted that the previous Pacific solution had mainly been applied to Muslims while temporary acceptance had been granted to the Papuans who were Christians (as were most of the East Timorese refugees in the past). The UN High Commissioner for Refugees was rather disturbed by all this. Christmas Islanders were not excited about the development of a large detention centre. The main beneficiaries, again, will probably be the Nauruans.

SOLOMON ISLANDS RIOTS

While on the subject of the Pacific Islands, another crisis was developing in the Solomons. It is not generally known that many of the small number of Solomon Islanders who settled in Australia are Chinese. Those Chinese remaining in the Solomons were the main target for the April rioters. The riots were sparked by the resentment against Chinese businesses, which is widespread throughout South-East Asia and the Pacific. But they were also directed against the influence of Taiwan, which the Solomons recognise as an independent Chinese state—another example of the overlap between immigration and foreign policy. It may be that, as with many Fiji Indians and Papua New Guinea and East Timor Chinese, Australia will become a target for the migration of many Chinese from the Solomons. Hopefully, this will be managed sensibly for once. It would be to Australia's advantage, and to the eventual detriment of the Solomons, if this happens. But it leaves unanswered the longer-term question of whether Australia, like New Zealand, will develop an overall policy towards Pacific Island migration ■

The views expressed here are my own and not those of FECCA.

are examples of areas that can present pitfalls for people from cultures with different norms from those of their co-workers.

With these challenging goals in mind, authentic materials are valuable resources for assisting migrants to become more informed, sensitive, flexible, and strategically equipped communicators in their second language. Such materials can be instrumental in encouraging critical awareness of the assumptions and values that lie beneath utterances and behaviour, and in developing the ability to assess situations and recognise multiple interpretations. Most importantly for intercultural communication training purposes, such materials can help alert recent migrants to likely areas of cultural difference, therefore enabling them to better negotiate the distance between their own and the target culture. The process of integrating this knowledge into actual use is often a very long one.

In sum, our work on authentic materials provides evidence that the expensive and complex business of collecting and analysing authentic workplace interaction has worthwhile practical outcomes for those engaged in preparing people for the communicative demands of the workplace.

Finally, I should note that I have only presented one side of the two-way process that produces successful communication in multicultural workplaces. On the other side, members of majority cultures/language groups equally need to develop mindfulness of their culture of origin, awareness of the possibility of difference, and deconstruction of their taken-for-granted world(s) ■

Note:

I am a member of the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project (LWP). All references to 'we' and 'us' refer to fellow team members. I would like to thank in particular Nicky Riddiford for her insightful work on the materials and the teaching program, which form the basis of the discussion in this article, and to Meredith Mara and Janet Holmes for valuable suggestions on an earlier draft. LWP transcribers made the material available for analysis. Finally, I thank those who allowed their workplace interactions to be recorded. This research was supported by a Victoria University Research Fund Grant.

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