

Discourse and Tact

Bruce D. Davison

Discourse Conventions

When we listen to a stretch of discourse, we utilise two complementary sets of skills to decipher the total message. A native speaker possesses a detailed “mechanical” knowledge of the language; this includes its sound system and intonation, its grammar and lexicon, and an awareness of how coherent linguistic units are created and interpreted. In addition, the listener will have a range of “background” information which will help facilitate the overall process of effective listening; so he/she will have an awareness of the relevant cultural framework, contextual knowledge relating to the participants and their roles, the location and purpose of the interaction, together with an understanding of the routines and restrictions associated with that particular topic (discourse organisation).

Typically, an individual is simultaneously an active participant in a variety of different discourse systems within the language. He or she will, for example, have specific connections to family, to a career or professional group, to a school or university group, to a religious or political group, etc. As an operating member within each of these groups or “circles”, an individual will observe the appropriate discourse conventions, smoothly switching from one to another as he/she moves from one social milieu to the next. Factors such as formality, directness, routines of presentation, turn-taking, topic introduction, etc. are the variables

which are combined in different ways to produce this variety of discourse systems. So, for example, the way in which you interact with your sister will be very different from the way in which you interact with senior colleagues at work; the style, mood and manner of discourse will be clearly different.

Listener Interpretation Techniques

When people use language to communicate, there is always an element of ambiguity embedded in the discourse. No matter how precisely a speaker might control and construct his utterances, no matter how carefully he might select the words, it will nevertheless always be the case that a certain part of the overall message or meaning will depend on the interpretative techniques and receptive “stance” of the listener. Effective communication through a clear exchange of information is achieved by the *joint* exercise of linguistic and interpretative skills, with both participants utilising their knowledge and awareness of the rituals of discourse organisation as they apply to the nature and setting of a particular piece of communication. Having heard a string of words and sentences, it is the listener’s task to not only digest their dictionary meaning but also to evaluate which parts of the message are significant and which are not, where does the key information focus lie, which parts of the discourse are communicatively dynamic and which parts are “window dressing”. This level of interpretation, within the framework of discourse, is language-specific. Factors like the placing of emphasis, the rhetorical strategy for topic introduction, the scope for indirectness and politeness, all vary from one language (and one culture) to another. Of course, communication is easier if both participants share the same local knowledge and cultural/linguistic background; in such a case their inferences and interpretations will be based on common upbringing and experience. Hence, in theory,

communication between two family members should be less likely to go wrong or suffer from “misinterpretation”. When two people from different cultures, with different linguistic backgrounds, communicate, there is much less common ground and the nature and sophistication of their interpretative technique will become a central condition in the successful completion of their communication.

Rhetorical Strategies within Discourse

In an earlier paper (see note 1), we looked at some examples of culture-bound rhetorical strategies. Nash (1983) researched the speech act of “complaining” and found significant differences in approach when comparing the technique of a typical American with that of a typical Chinese. He went on to classify Americans as belonging to a *negative politeness* culture; i.e. the speaker’s freedom to transmit the essence of his complaint takes precedence over the “face” or self-esteem of the listener. On the other hand, he classified Chinese as belonging to a *positive politeness* culture within which the listener’s self-esteem is viewed as having priority. A group of Americans and Chinese were presented with a situation in which they were asked to complain to a visiting friend about his habit of returning late at night and disturbing everyone in the house. Here are examples of the American responses:

- “Uh ... any chance of your maybe keeping ... a little bit ... shorter hours during the week or something ... maybe just going out on the weekends.”
- “Um ... just a ... we - we’ve kinda ... um ... well ... we go to bed kinda early around here.”

- “We were wondering if ah ... if it would ... if you wouldn’t mind and if you could manage to come home a little bit earlier.”

It is clear from these examples that the speaker’s primary concern is to transmit the message. The “hedging” or hesitation may soften the edges of the interaction but basically the self-image of the listener is seen as having only secondary weight in the communication. The Chinese responses exhibit ‘positive politeness’ in the sense that concern for the self-esteem of the addressee appears to dominate the communication:

- “Don’t ... work so hard till midnight ... the next day you go out very early ... this way it’s too hard on you ... health is important.”
- “I’m afraid to say that you ... will be too tired.”
- “At night ah it might be inconvenient ... if something were to happen to you outside ... then it would really be a lot of trouble, in the middle of the night nobody would know.”

The Chinese examples exhibit a much less direct approach to making the complaint and there is greater onus on the speaker’s powers of interpretation.

Another significant rhetorical option is the speaker’s structuring of his discourse in terms of where to place the information focus and how to highlight it. Typically, for example, an American or European will present the topic or main focus of the overall discourse at the beginning of the interaction, with support arguments or secondary points of information following (deductive pattern). However, the typical Asian rhetorical strategy is to “soften” or delay introduction of the topic or main conclusion, pre-

senting first a kind of “listener-friendly” preparation for the emergence of the key point of information (inductive pattern). In the inductive pattern, the speaker can outline his/her arguments, testing their acceptability to the listener, gauging support, perhaps even moderating in some way his/her final conclusion. Meanwhile, the deductive model favoured in the west is “front-loaded”, on the understanding that the supporting arguments or secondary information will be more relevant and more easily digested if they occur within the framework of a previously introduced main topic or information focus. It almost seems, in simple terms, that the deductive rhetorical strategy is a perfect match for western style, logical, detached presentation of information, somewhat in a contextual vacuum. Conversely, the inductive rhetorical strategy is better suited to an unrushed approach where the sensitivities and “face” of the listener are deferred to in terms of *a preparing of the ground* for the eventual introduction of the topic or main conclusion; the “punch-line” is, as it were, delayed until the timing and mood are right for it.

Let us look at an illustration of this basic difference in discourse structure as applied to rhetorical strategy. There follows an example of a typical deductive pattern presentation, where the conclusion or focus is introduced at the beginning and the support arguments follow; the style is direct and businesslike:

“I’m sorry but I can’t go along with your proposal. Let me tell you why. In the first place, the timing is wrong. We should consolidate our present operations before launching into new expenditure. In addition, it would be very difficult to adequately staff and finance new outlets in the current economic environment. I can sympathise with your enthusiasm for expansion but, in my opinion, this is the wrong time for such an ambitious scheme.”

An inductive pattern version of this communication follows; here

there is much greater deference to the protecting of the listener's self-image and the "veiled" rejection is left until the end:

"Subarashii goteianda to omoimasu. Naiyo o haikenshite mo, kono atarashii kikaku ga rieki o umidasu koto wa ooini kitai dekiso desu shi, jig yokakudai ni tsuite wa taihen kyomeisuru tokoro dewa arimasu ga. Tada, sore o itsu jikko ni utsusuka to iukoto ga shinkikaku o seikosaseru pointo ni naroka to omou no desu ga, iroirona goiken o ukagatte mite wa ikagadesho ka. Tatoeba, genzai no wagasha no keieijokyo no nagare no naka de, genzonsuru jigyo no kiban o motto katamete kara tsugi no kikaku o donyuu shitara doka to iu goiken mo aru kamo shiremasenshi, mata, keizaijotai no men de atarashii kikaku ni hitsuyona jinzai no kakuho dearu toka, moromoro no keihi e no zaiseitooshi ga dekiru no ka to iu ten de, fuanzairyo mo aru kamo shiremasen. Kono atarashii kikaku ni tsuite wa kongo mo hikitsuzuki kentoshite ikimasho."

【This is an excellent proposal. Further study of the plan's details will surely make a contribution to its expected success. The idea of expansion is attractive but to ensure success we need to consider the best timing. Maybe it would be useful to solicit various opinions from other colleagues. For example, with our present operating conditions, some people might say it is more important to consolidate our base programs before moving on to a new project. Also, in terms of the current economic environment, there may be some concerns about the availability of the necessary financing and suitable staff. Let us all continue to consider this proposal in a positive manner.】

In a *symmetrical deference* politeness system all participants in the interaction favour inductive rhetorical strategies; speakers avoid direct introduction of their own topics, preferring

to let their position or opinion arise inevitably from the discourse. Often the discourse consists of indirect comments or hints which lay the foundation for eventual “negotiated” conclusions. These conclusions may never be openly stated in some cases, when the closeness of the participants and their common knowledge preclude the need for a confirmation of something which has already become *obvious* through the course of the interaction.

While it is true to say that the deductive pattern is widely favoured the west and the inductive pattern holds sway in countries like Japan and China, there are nevertheless cases where the patterns can be reversed. So, for example, an American wishing to borrow money from a friend, will often try to establish the right mood by explaining his/her problems in advance of revealing the main focus of the interaction, namely asking for a loan. Similarly, young Japanese within their own circle of friends, will often introduce a topic directly, without any preparation or special deference to the listener :

【*Konya eiga ni ikitai n dakedo.*】

“I feel like going to the cinema tonight”

An awareness of culture-based differences in rhetorical strategy is certainly an invaluable part of the overall mastery of a foreign language. Without such an awareness of discourse conventions, the nature and style of the communication are likely to remain at a relatively unsophisticated level. Each language has its own well-trodden pathways through the culture-framed maze of its discourse, *unmarked* gateways to effective communication in the target language. If you are not aware of the mainstream discourse routes of a particular language, then the potential for miscommunication is dramatically increased.

Politeness and Face

Face or public self-image has been divided into two related aspects: negative face and positive face (see Brown, Levinson 1987). Negative face refers to the individual's claim to independence and freedom of expression while positive face refers to the individual's projected self-image, the positive way in which he/she wishes to be valued or approved of by other participants.

Maintaining or enhancing the face of all participants in a communicative exchange is a prerequisite for a smooth and successful completion of the interaction. Here are some examples of "face threatening acts", acts which have the potential to upset or damage the negative face of the listener, typically by impeding his/her freedom of response, e.g.:

- a. orders, threats, direct suggestions
- b. promises, placing debts or duties on the listener
- c. expressions of anger, envy, distrust

Basically, these acts show a collective pattern of a speaker who intimidates or pressurises the listener, a speaker who threatens to block the full independence and equality of the listener within the context of the speech event.

Examples of acts which threaten the positive face of the listener betray a common pattern of the speaker being inconsiderate, self-centred, or even aggressive in terms of his/her approach to the listener:

- a. expressions of disapproval, contempt; complaints, accusations.
- b. raising of topics which are taboo or embarrassing to the listener
- c. interrupting the delivery of the listener

These assaults on the positive face of the listener show a lack of

respect and consideration for the status and contribution of the listener; the speaker, in effect, has no interest in helping the listener to maintain or project his/her self-image.

Some of these face threatening acts overlap in the sense that they attack both negative and positive face, e.g. complaints, interruptions, threats.

Tact

In many speech events, the speaker is confronted with a balancing act: within the process of transferring the message, what weight should be given to the clarity and efficiency of the information transfer and what weight should be given to maintaining or enhancing the face of the listener? In simpler language, how *tactfully* should the message be transmitted?

So, for example, the speaker may opt to transmit his/her information as directly and unambiguously as possible, e.g. "Open the window." Typically, such direct communication will only work smoothly if the speaker has much higher status or power than the listener or if speaker and listener are so familiar or intimate that there is no need to mitigate the "speed" of the message transfer with layers of politeness; no offence will be taken and no face lost in such circumstances.

Conversely, the speaker may opt to "soften" the transfer of his/her message by paying homage to the self-image of the listener. For example, the speaker may employ a positive (or solidarity) politeness strategy of building up the importance of the listener's contribution as a friend or as a member of a social in-group, e.g.:

— "I've always valued your advice very highly, so it would be

useful if you could give me your reaction to this latest idea of mine.”

- “You’ve always had better judgement than the rest of us, so your help would be very welcome.”

The speaker may also employ a strategy of negative (or deference) politeness, where he attempts to protect the independence of the listener, not wishing to impose on or interfere with the listener’s freedom of response, e.g.:

- “Now, I know this choice is entirely up to you, but ...”
- “I realise this is a purely personal decision and I wouldn’t want to influence you in any way, but ...”

There is a clear correlation between the level of indirectness and the degree of politeness. Indirect forms are typically more “tactful” or polite because they possess less threat or force and they give the listener a greater option to say no. Here are examples which progressively are less direct and correspondingly more polite:

- Lend me 20 dollars
- Can you lend me 20 dollars?
- Would you be able to lend me 20 dollars?
- I wonder if you would mind lending me 20 dollars?
- I know this is very rude of me, but I was wondering if it might be possible for you to lend me 20 dollars?

Of course, in Japan there is usually a culturally-mandated attempt to maintain smooth social harmony and to avoid conflict in all types of interaction. This means that the occurrence of tact is inevitably much more frequent in the everyday use of the Japanese language than it is, for example, in the everyday use of En-

glish. Indeed, one of the biggest adjustments for Japanese learners of English is the acquisition of a direct expression approach to communication; becoming comfortable with open self-expression and direct question/answer, for example, is a key indicator of fluency in the target language.

Conversely, a Westener, attempting to learn Japanese, is faced with a continuing process of controlling self-expression and of developing an indirect, "tactful" approach to everyday communication, an approach in which the self-image of the listener(s) is a priority factor.

Conventionalised Indirectness

In Japan, the widespread use of tactfully indirect rhetorical strategies is not limited to everyday personal communication; it is also favoured in many forms of public announcement and media presentation. It is interesting, for example, to look at a few samples of this style, as illustrated in the N.H.K. evening news broadcast (all of the following items were collected during February, 2000).

This news program is broadcast in a bilingual format so it is easy to compare the Japanese and English versions. In many cases the English translation comes across as extremely vague and/or lacking in detailed information:

ITEM 1.

Background: The Minister of Education, Mr. Nakasone, is making a statement about the failure of two Japanese space rockets. These failures have cost billions of Yen and, to some extent, have put the whole Japanese space program in jeopardy.

Japanese Original: “Nakasone Monbudaijin wa sakigoro no shippai wa kokumin o shitsubosasete to nobemashita. Soshite, sono koto o shinken ni uketomete iru tomo nobemashita.

English Version : “Mr. Nakasone said that the recent failures had disappointed the people. He said that he was taking the the matter seriously.”

ITEM 2.

Background: A group of cartoon (“anime”) voice actors has started a 100 million yen legal action against a company which, they claim, has neglected to pay commissions on video versions of T.V. cartoon programs.

Japanese Original: “Kesshite futona shutsuenryo o moratte, sarani futona okane o haratte kure to itteru n ja naindesu. Sukunakuto mo puro to shite kichin to shigoto ga dekiru kankyo zukurio shitai to iu no ga, soshite, ii sakuhin o tsukuri tsuzuketai to iu no ga wareware koe no shigoto to shite, seiya to iwarete shigotoshite iru ningentachi no kihontekina kangae kata nan desu.”

English Version: “Voice actor, Mr. Nozawa, said that they were not just demanding unjust additional payments. He said they were only asking for an environment where voice ac-

tors can work as professionals and continue giving good performances.”

ITEM 3.

Background: The Japan Olympic Committee has had an extraordinary board meeting to discuss criticism leveled at the J.O.C. by one of its own members, Mr. Kikuchi. In a magazine article, Mr. Kikuchi has accused several members of the J.O.C. of exploiting the Olympic movement for their own financial benefit.

Japanese Original: “Konkai no Kikuchi-shi no koi wa JOC no meiyo to shinrai o kizutsuketa to shite yakuin ga fusawashikunai koi o shita toki ni wa kainin dekiru to suru naibu kitei ni motozuite tohyo o okonai, tohyo ni kuwawaranakatta
Kikuchi-shi o nozoku shussekishita riji zenin ga sanseisuru katachi de Kikuchi-shi no kainin o ketsugi shimashita.
Kikuchi-shi no kainin wa raigetsu tsuitachi no hyogi iinkai de no giketsu o hete seishiki ni kimarimasu ga
JOC no riji ga ninki tochu ni kaininsareru no wa hajimete no koto ni narimasu.

English Version: “The meeting concluded that Mr. Kikuchi’s act damaged the J.O.C.’s reputation and the public’s trust in the organisation. A vote was taken. With the

exception of Mr. Kikuchi, who abstained, all the board members voted for Mr. Kikuchi's dismissal. This was based on an in-house rule which stipulates that a board member can be dismissed for an inappropriate act."

ITEM 4.

- Background: One of the high schools invited to the Koshien baseball tournament is later removed from the event because a member of the team had been caught driving a car without a license; the whole team suffers a collective punishment because of the actions of one member.
- Japanese Original: "Kono kotogakko no kocho wa gakko gawa wa kono jiken nitsuite fukaku kangaeru to doji ni shinken ni uketomete iru to nobemashita.
- English Version: "The School Principal said that the school was taking the matter seriously while reflecting on the incident."

ITEM 5.

- Background: In 1996, at Hirosaki University, Professor Suda injected rat hormone into 13 graduate students in order to research how it would react with other hormones

in the body. He failed to obtain approval from the university ethics committee and failed to get the "informed consent" of the students.

Japanese Original: "Furokoruchin o toyosareta hotondo no daigakuinsei wa ichiji kao ga akaku nattari ketsuatsu ga teikasuru nado no shojo ga deta to iu koto desu. Hirosaki Daigaku Igakubu no chosa ni taishi Suda-kyoju wa, kyoseiteki ni okonatta jintai jikken nado dewa nai ga, tekisetsuna tetsuzuki o kaita ten ya, jubunna setsumei ga nasarete inakatta bubun ga aru to omou to shakumeishite iru to iu koto desu."

English Version: "Informed sources say that after the substance was injected, most of the students developed symptoms such as a drop in blood pressure and flushed faces. Professor Suda is reported to have admitted that the chemical tests were conducted without the proper procedures or explanation, but he said that the students were not forced to undergo the tests."

Presentations in the original Japanese, which are stylistically typical and which fully match the listener's expectations, become, in the English version, "frozen" and simplistic, often failing to yield adequate information or reaction. The translation from Japanese into English apparently cannot always bridge the cultural divide which dictates the manner and the extent of information transfer.

The relatively indirect and deferential style of the Japanese version sometimes appears to be too bland and ambiguous in the English translation, lacking in detail and in essential conclusions or reactions.

Conclusion

This paper has only scratched the surface of what is becoming an increasingly central issue in linguistics and language learning. Every language has its own *unmarked* discourse routes, standard rhetorical strategies for presenting information or opinion. The “natural” structuring of the discourse in terms of topic introduction, location of emphasis, directness, formality, turn-taking, etc. is all part of a native speaker’s repertoire. One of the most significant aspects of discourse structure is the way in which the speaker is expected to *balance* efficient message transfer with listener face protection; it is clear that, in normal circumstances, certain languages (e.g. Japanese, Chinese) give priority to maintaining or enhancing the self-image of the other participant(s) while other languages (e.g. English) typically place more emphasis on efficient, unambiguous message transfer. Fluency in a foreign language is clearly not simply a matter of vocabulary, grammar, intonation, etc. It also involves the acquisition of a comprehensive discourse awareness in the target language, with full knowledge of its routine rhetorical strategies.

Notes

1. “Discourse and Language Learning” (1997) *Studies in Language No.20*, Kanagawa University. 115-133.

Bibliography

- Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1987) *Politeness* (Cambridge).
- Cook, G. (1989) *Discourse* (Oxford).
- Hatch, E. (1992) *Discourse and Language Education* (Cambridge).
- Hudson, R. (1980) *Sociolinguistics* (Cambridge).
- Jaworski, A. (1999) *The Discourse Reader* (Routledge).
- Leech, G. (1983) *Principles of Pragmatics* (Longman).
- Levinson, S. (1983) *Pragmatics* (Cambridge).
- McCarthy, M. (1991) *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers* (Cambridge).
- Melville, M. (1980) *Towards the Creative Teaching of English* (Allen, Unwin).
- Nash, T. (1983) *American and Chinese Politeness Strategies* (Univ. of Hawaii).
- Riley, P. (1985) *Discourse and Learning* (Longman).
- Schaefer, F. (1982) *Discourse and Syntax of Complaints* (U.C.L.A.).
- Scollon, R. (1995) *Intercultural Communication* (Blackwell).
- Searle, J. (1969) *Speech Acts* (Cambridge).