

# Crosstalk and culture in Sino-American communication

LINDA W. L. YOUNG



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## The Ps and cues of Chinese inscrutability

### Introduction

The image of the inscrutable Chinese runs deep in Western imagination. The inscrutable Chinese, i.e., mysterious, unfathomable, inexplicable, is a powerful image because it represents the many aspects of Chinese culture which Westerners find unaccountable and difficult to understand. But in fact, as we shall see, inscrutability is often just another way of saying that the unstated, culturally defined expectations which Chinese and Westerners bring to their face-to-face interactions do not coincide.

One conspicuous element making up Western images of the inscrutable Chinese has been the way Chinese talk and respond in conversations. The distinctive features of Chinese speech have been commented upon many times by many people of different cultures in very different contexts. Particularly in Western writings, the Chinese approach to talk has been viewed with profound ambivalence. Many report, for example, that Chinese rely on suggestive or illustrative statements, are apt to clarify and explain by example and analogy, and do a great deal more beating around the bush than do Americans. Former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger's admiring account of his first encounter with the late Chinese leader Mao Zedong is typical: "The cumulative effect was that his key points were enveloped in so many tangential phrases that they communicated a meaning while evading a commitment. Mao's elliptical phrases were passing shadows on a wall; they reflected a reality but they did not encompass it. They indicated a direction without defining the route of march" (Kissinger 1979: 1059). Continuing, he writes: "Later on, as I comprehended better

the many-layered design of Mao's conversation, I understood that it was like the courtyards in the Forbidden City, each leading to a deeper recess distinguished from the others only by slight changes of proportion, with ultimate meaning residing in a totality that only long reflection could grasp" (1061). Another American has written less admiringly of his cross-cultural experience with Chinese while working at the Foreign Language Press in Beijing: "It took me a long while to learn the [Chinese] custom of starting with a little polite palaver, then sidling up to the problem and circumlocuting all around it, before actually identifying it and diffidently suggesting a solution. I still don't do it very well. I considered it pussy-footing, over-emphasizing the saving of face, a fear of coming to grips with conflict" (Shapiro 1979: 78).

The special characteristics of Chinese talk often appear as significant points of friction alongside other serious difficulties in trade and diplomatic negotiations. The literature is filled with references to this issue and references, moreover, which are consistent. Almost invariably, inaccurate assessments and images have led to distortion and misperception of the goals, intentions, and actions of each side, thus adding a discordant element or exacerbating a genuine conflict. Often, in technical and commercial exchanges, Chinese and Americans talk at cross-purposes, even in so simple a matter as thinking Chinese mean "yes" when in fact they mean "no." In a questionnaire survey conducted at the start of China's Open Door policy, American companies singled out a number of cultural factors that contributed to the success or failure of their negotiations with Chinese. They include, in descending order of significance: communication breakdowns (39.1%), business practices (36.3%), negotiation styles (34.7%), social customs (13.1%), cultural differences (12.4%), and ideological differences (12.3%) (Tung 1982, chapter 3). More detail about the communicative failures affecting Sino-American business relations appears in the following report on management characteristics in the People's Republic of China:

communications in the Chinese enterprises tend to be "vague" or "ambiguous"; implicit communications are generally adopted through "cues" and "indirection." Although implicit communications are more flexible, they are considered "ambiguous" from a Western point of view which emphasizes "clearness," "certainty," and "directness." Because of these

differences, misunderstandings and disputes often arise between Chinese enterprises and foreign companies. (Mun 1986: 319)

The distinctiveness of Chinese ways of speaking has also been viewed against the background of the ethnic experience and economic opportunities of Asians in America. In a number of writings on this issue, Chinese are often described as prone to an “antipathy towards articulation,” an “aversion for assertion,” and a “weakness in argumentation.” Furthermore, they have tended to cluster around occupations and career choices that require few verbal and persuasive skills.

To be sure, Chinese are no longer shut out of as many primary labor markets as before; in fact, they are widely represented in a variety of challenging professional and technological fields. Witness also the slew of articles in the popular press about the many academic and economic successes of newly arrived Chinese and other first or second generation Asian Americans. Nonetheless, communicating in a distinctively Chinese way continues to carry a hefty social price and subjects Chinese – and other Asians – to special varieties of rejection in America. For one thing, it presents them with a handicap in education. This happens no matter if they are recent immigrants: “These difficulties were so familiar to the staff at the University of California at Berkeley that Asians enrolled in ‘Subject A’ (remedial English) often received an ‘Oriental D’” (Kim 1978: 321); or if they are native born:

Not only recent immigrants but also native-born Asian Americans whose families have lived in America for two, three, or more generations still manifest limited communicative skills in higher education environments . . . The contrast between Asian Americans’ achievement in quantitative fields and their avoidance of and difficulties with fields that demand well developed verbal skills is stark among recent immigrants and still noticeable after several generations among the native born. (Hsia 1988: 164)

For another, it puts them at a disadvantage in the job sector:

The Asian American English “problem” is generally cited as the major stumbling block to occupational success, the reason why many Asian Americans are relegated to low-level clerical and technical work, in accounting and engineering, and in other occupations requiring little public contact, decision making, or supervisory duties . . . Numerous claims of discrimination against Asian Americans applying for promotion within the San Francisco City Civil Service System have been filed with

the city's Civil Service Commission. Many Asian Americans who passed their written test, all university graduates, were denied promotion primarily on the basis of the oral interview. (Kim 1978: 322)

Although among the best educated and most credentialed of Americans, Asians, native-born or newcomer, confront slower salary increases and limited career advances in government and academe. The situation is much the same in industry and corporate America: upward-bound Asian Americans often find themselves stalled in their climb to the executive suite. Hughes Aircraft Company's David Barclay, vice-president for workforce diversity, summarizes reasons perceived by Hughes' white senior executives and Asian American employees. They include "poor language and communicative skills, rigidity (particularly among women), inflexibility, authoritarian traits, lack of motivating and management skills and an overly reserved approach" (*Transpacific*, July/August 1992, p. 35).

The distinctiveness of Chinese cultural characteristics has also been recognized in other ways. For example, a revised version of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), which had been carried out nationwide in China in 1980 by the Chinese – and replicated with similar results in Hong Kong (Cheung 1985) – identified some character traits that contrasted with those of Americans. In particular, the Chinese are described as:

emotionally more reserved, introverted, fond of tranquility, overly considerate, socially overcautious, habituated to self-restraint, and so forth. These character traits are not only manifested in the test results but are also corroborated by the daily lives of Chinese people. Therefore, we believe that the two peaks on the profile types do not indicate that Chinese people are of a more depressive or more schizophrenic character than Americans. They are simply reflective of the differences between the national characters of the two peoples. (Song 1985: 53)

By contrast, in a study comparing American therapists and Chinese-American therapists on their perceptions of Chinese patients, American clinicians unfamiliar with Chinese cultural differences saw their Chinese patients as less socially poised with little interpersonal capacity, and, by inference, interpreted the differences as signs of "social introversion, withdrawal, and even depression" (Li-Repac 1980: 339).

Certainly, it is well known that Chinese and Americans hold

very different assumptions about how persons should present themselves in relation to one another. These differences, in turn, are rooted in the different cultural assumptions and social emphases underlying social relationships and self-presentation rituals in general and, further, call into play formal procedures of action and expression that some Americans will find at best remote and at worst alien. In particular, as part of their constant attention to deference and demeanor, Chinese concerns with maintaining one's own face is equally matched by their concern to publicly give – and leave – honor to the other's face (see Hu 1944). By and large, face-saving strategies figure rather prominently in Chinese ritual expression, and, moreover, are signalled in ways and occasions which Americans are not familiar with. In fact, the ways in which face-saving strategies are signalled, the occasions which call for their appearance, and the reasons why they must be expressed in the Chinese cultural tradition are critical sources of confusion for most Americans. For the most part:

Chinese people still appear to whites as being exaggeratedly humble and deferent, and as oblique or devious in their business and other communications and interactions. They are too much given to face-saving devices, in order to avoid embarrassment or discomfort either to those they are speaking to, or to themselves. In general, they are more concerned about shame (*being seen* to be wrong) than about guilt (*feeling* that one is wrong). Because they have different ways of expressing emotions from whites, they still seem to us inscrutable and reserved. (Vernon 1982: 16)

On the Chinese side, we find the basic cultural differences expressed as a result of their very specific vulnerabilities in American life:

The Chinese tend to be withdrawn and non-aggressive. They consider it to be in bad taste to be “forward” or assertive. Except among friends, they tend to be reticent and constrained . . . They hesitate to speak up or even to ask questions. This is not altogether due to language difficulty. Much of it comes from the habit of refraining from aggressive speech or action. Chinese courtesy puts a premium on reservedness and deference, or avoiding to be the first to speak or act. Such a characteristic becomes a handicap in an open and competitive society in which an individual tends to gain by taking the initiative in personal relations and bold action to assert his rights. (Chen 1976: 46)

That Chinese experience a particularly intense frustration when the appropriateness and relevance of Chinese conventions decrease is apparent in the emotionally tinged recollections of the Hong Kong-reared, movie director Wayne Wang (of *Chan is Missing* and *Dim Sum* fame):

After his graduation from a Jesuit school, Wang's parents sent him to California. At Foothill College in Los Altos, a white, upper-middle-class suburban community college, Wang was one of ten Chinese students, all foreign students. "I really wanted to become a part of that whole scene so badly. I did everything I could to blend in, to be All-American. And it was very painful!

Chinese are always more reserved, more polite, never say no to anything. Americans are not like that. They are very direct, very aggressive, very assertive. I didn't know how to respond, how to become a part of it." ("Datebook" section, *Sunday San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle*, July 4, 1982, p. 22)

Wang's plight gains greater clarity when we attend to the following description of communicative behavior in Taiwan:

Formosans are reluctant to state what they think they deserve for their efforts or services, they talk as if forced by circumstances to express themselves, they are hesitant in voicing opinions, they apologize before giving speeches in front of others, they underplay emotions of joy or sadness, and, when receiving an invitation, will frequently say "no" first out of politeness, allowing the offerer to insist or force them into acceptance. (Schneider 1985: 277)

As one example of Chinese politeness and face-saving strategies, consider the following rejection letter to a British author by a journal published in the People's Republic of China:

We have read your manuscript with boundless delight. If we were to publish your paper it would be impossible for us to publish any work of a lower standard. And as it is unthinkable that, in the next thousand years we shall see its equal, we are, to our regret, compelled to return your divine composition, and beg you a thousand times to overlook our short sight and timidity. (Sociologists for Women in Society [SWS] Network, 1982)

As another example, consider the scrupulous care in traditional China to modify direct address such as "I" or "you" and substitute instead third person reference such as "humble person" to refer to oneself and "gentleman" or "sir" to refer to the addressee;

as in Japan, a speaker customarily raises the addressee and correspondingly lowers him (or her) self in polite discourse when both are of equal standing. This is part of the knack Chinese – and other Asians – develop for making people feel important. Chester Holcombe (1895: 262), an interpreter and Acting Minister for the United States in China, describes one such encounter. The words may be dated but the spirit persists:

What is your honorable cognomen?  
 The trifling name of your little brother is Wang.  
 What is your exalted longevity?  
 Very small. Only a miserable seventy years.  
 Where is your noble mansion?  
 The mud hovel in which I hide is in such or such a place.  
 How many precious parcels (sons) have you?  
 Only so many stupid little pigs.

In the traditional Chinese cultural context, harmony and cooperation had been key symbols in a communally oriented, heavily populated, agrarian-based society where, for much of its recorded history, social proprieties and familial obligations ranked high. The constant stress on harmony and expressions of appropriate conduct in family and society is reflected in the fact that considerable portions of the 10,000 volumes of the Qing dynasty encyclopedia had been directed to aspects of *li*, glossed variously as ‘rites,’ ‘propriety,’ ‘decorum,’ or ‘manners.’ Generally speaking, *li* was a body of norms, conventions, and mores which influenced all secular and sacred aspects of social living in traditional China. According to historian Richard Smith:

Testimony to the enduring value of *li* in traditional China may be found in the venerated classic texts *I-li (Etiquette and Ritual)*, *Chou-li (Rites of Chou)*, and *Li-chi (Record of Ritual)*, which together exerted a profound influence on the Chinese elite from the Han period through the Ch’ing. These three works alone provided hundreds of general principles and guidelines, as well as literally thousands of specific prescriptions, for proper conduct in Chinese society. For hundreds of years the Chinese commonly referred to China as “the land of ritual and right behavior” (*li-i chih pang*), equating the values of *li* (禮) and *i* (義) with civilization itself. (1983: 6)

But what is little understood about harmony in Chinese terms is the fact that it has been consistently paired with diversity since

ancient times. Human diversity is accepted as a basic condition of social life, and the point of harmony is to minimize the conflict that comes along with diversity. Indeed, the greater the diversity, the greater the harmony sought and generated. Harmony, in fact, is a recognition of diversity in unity; diversity is respected or tolerated so long as actions are aimed toward the broader good. Participating in *li* or ritual action is the means by which harmony is articulated, and Confucius is the person most often credited with envisioning *li*'s potential as a dignifying and integrating force in human relations.

That *li* is enshrouded by a sense of sacredness is due partly to the fact that it involved religious rites by China's ancient rulers and specialists and grew to encompass all forms of conduct and development that foster interpersonal relations. Significantly, the character *li* (禮) originally meant 'sacrifice' and is made up of two parts: the left part of the character means 'a stand to display offerings to the spirits' and later evolved to mean 'to show' or 'to display,' whereas the right part of the character means 'sacrificial vessel.' Together, they portray the sense of ceremony and forms of restraint guiding civilized conduct; one "sacrifices" for the moment by putting others before one's self in the interest of pursuing a larger (or later) good, and one "shows" this through forms of deference. Understood this way, observing *li* is a profoundly communal act and one that brings order and demonstrates cohesion in a society that has traditionally respected the ceremonies and conventions of rank and relation.

In addition to courtesy and deference, Chinese put great store on what ethnographer Olga Lang has described as their "moderation displayed . . . in interpreting all rules of behavior" (1946: 53). These range widely across a complex of communication forms from styles of dress and modes of talk, to the movements of facial and body parts, and is further reflected in the development of a complex of social institutions where balance and moderation became key operating themes. Whereas any casual observer of the Chinese in their natural, intimate social contexts can see immediately that Chinese enjoy talking and talking boisterously and with great mirth, nonetheless, in both the old and new Chinese milieus, formal Chinese public manners emphasize modesty, restraint, and cooperation. Conversely, Chinese frown on aggres-

sive displays; they actively discourage expressions of open competition, overt conflict, and direct confrontation, despite the violence and abuse cutting across all levels of Chinese life (see Lipman and Harrell 1990).

In general, Chinese learn ways of communicating and relating that contrast with American experiences. For one thing, each person is firmly embedded in a network of (largely kin and usually enduring) bonds. From early on, children are taught to feel a connection to others and to constantly nurture and subtly communicate these bonds in face-to-face engagements; they learn to look to and include others in their communications and decisions. In particular, they are expected to develop a capacity to attune their selves and actions with others and to develop acuity in discovering or anticipating the other's wants or moods. Furthermore, they are taught the advantages of cooperation and humility and shown the limits of self-indulgent behavior. In short, children are expected to develop the ability to get along well and smoothly with others; sometimes, parents take harsh physical action to drive the point home. These abilities are expected to sustain them and continue with them into adult life.

At the same time, children also develop a sensitivity to risk and ridicule; they resist attracting attention to themselves or their actions and refrain from imposing on or burdening others. They learn to feel a sense of restraint, that is, to hold back from hurting others or revealing too much of themselves that would allow others to hurt them. They also learn to feel a sense of shame and to avoid blame or damage to face. And, as part of the dominant cultural theme of indirection, children are taught to work around obstacles and issues rather than to take the initiative and confront them. Although the literature on Chinese socialization practices remains sparse, there seems to be some evidence that children learn similar strategies for the conduct of talk at home and at all levels of education as well.

In addition, most Chinese adults have a sense of power balance or imbalance in daily life because of their childhood experiences in power relationships. A series of Thematic Apperception Tests (TAT) and indepth interviews with a number of Chinese men raised in late imperial China leads political scientist Richard Solomon to observe that parental authority is traditionally rein-

forced by the prerogative to initiate talk and to give opinions and orders:

The giving of opinions, like the giving of food, is an activity where adults, certain adults, have precedence and take initiative. Children are made to feel that they are incompetent to develop their own opinions, that they “don’t understand,” and lack sufficient experience in society and hence should rely for guidance on the adults who do have the proper understanding and experience. The communication pattern which the growing Chinese child learns is thus nonreciprocal. Parents are the ones with the authority to give, whether the giving concerns food, opinions, or orders; there is no “giving back” on the child’s part; he has to learn to “take in” what is given to him in proper fashion. (Solomon 1971: 49)

Moreover, Chinese have been consistently exposed to messages in various forms that view individual expression, individual recognition, and individual fulfillment to be of secondary importance. As an example of this phenomenon, one investigator reports that academic materials and teaching methods in Taiwan regularly direct the student away from independent action:

This morals training is at times highly specific with stories in reading texts consciously constructed to elucidate moral rules. For instance, in an elementary level text book used on Taiwan there is a story of a small goose who flies away from the rest of the flock (*Kuo-li Pien I Kuan* 1964). Twice the small goose does this and twice other members of the flock fly after him to attempt to persuade the small goose to return. The third time that the small goose departs, however, a hawk spies and seizes him. The admonitions given by other members of the flock to the small goose during this story contain injunctions such as, “such wild flying is not permitted,” “you must follow the rules of the group,” “being with the group is most important,” and, of course, the tragic ending is designed to provide confirmation that departing from group rules and norms is highly undesirable and dangerous. However, stories such as this one are not simply childhood parables. When the official in charge of compiling these textbook tales was queried concerning the story of the small goose, he replied that this parable had been deliberately chosen since the formation that geese fly in is roughly the same as the Chinese character for people [*ren* 人]. In class, therefore, the teacher could use this character as a simple device to bring the story of the small goose into a human context and thus impress upon the children the importance of proper group behavior. (Wilson 1981: 123–124)

Geese flying in formation, just like minnows darting, are frequently invoked as an image of spontaneous, communal harmony.

Socializing children to be responsive to others and to participate with others towards a common goal is captured in the following matter-of-fact response by a mainland Chinese preschool teacher to anthropologist David Wu's query about the practice of herding youngsters in groups to the communal restroom, an open trench: "(A)s a matter of routine, it's good for children to learn to regulate their bodies and attune their rhythms to those of their classmates" (in Tobin, Wu, and Davidson 1989: 105).

By and large, Chinese children are systematically yet subtly steered towards cooperative behavior, whether in play: "One recent American visitor to a Chinese nursery school reports noticing that the blocks seemed awfully heavy for the small children. 'Exactly!' beamed the teachers. 'That fosters mutual help'" (Dollar 1985: 130); or engaged in classroom language learning:

Language teaching . . . is centered on encouraging children to express that which is socially shared rather than, as in the United States, on that which is individual and personal. Preschool teachers . . . use the techniques of choral recitation and memorization of stories much more than in the United States, where teachers spend a larger proportion of their time working with children individually, coaching them in how to express their personal thoughts and beliefs. (Tobin, Wu, and Davidson 1989: 191)

American anthropologist Frances Hsu, China born and reared, has commented on these differences in an earlier account:

[A]merican schools foster a desire and a skill for self-expression that is little known in the Chinese schools. Even in nursery schools American children are taught to stand up individually to tell the rest of the class about something they know – perhaps a toy or an outing with parents. When I compare American youngsters with those I have known in China, I cannot help being amazed at the ease and the self-composure of the former when facing a single listener or a sizable audience, as contrasted with the awkwardness and the self-consciousness of Chinese youngsters in similar circumstances . . . In modern Chinese schools after 1911, public appearance came into vogue. But even then the responsibility usually fell on the shoulders of the selected few, and practically all of the public oratory in trade and high schools was performed by rote, prepared in advance, and corrected by teachers before delivery. (Hsu 1981: 93–94)

Many of these and other factors combine to give a unique cast to Chinese ways of talking. Yet, partly as a result of not recognizing these factors, some Westerners have engaged in speculations about the reasoning processes and personality characteristics of

Chinese. Time and again, investigators have come up with notions about the “Chinese (or East Asian) mind” (see, for example, Moore 1967, Abegg 1952) along with proposals that the grammatical and other linguistic features of Chinese are influential in shaping Chinese cognition (see, most recently, Bloom 1981). Further, the fact that Chinese lean towards allusive, suggestive statements rather than sharp, clear statements has led some to the suggestion that there is something in the Chinese language which prevents concise, clear, and logical presentations. And yet, what must be pointed out about these efforts is that neither cognitive characteristics nor grammatical or other linguistic elements can predict the actual behavior or response of any Chinese interactant on any given occasion.

When Chinese present ideas and information in English, moreover, Westerners have noted that many of their constructions are foreign-sounding, giving rise to various statements about “limping sentences,” “fractured syntax,” and “drifting words.” What is not noted is that these constructions are largely reflective of the fact that the linguistic system of Chinese provides an altogether different way of producing sounds, connecting utterances, and indicating grammatical relationships. For one thing, Chinese is a tonal language with a different phonemic inventory and syllabic structure, which, in turn, gives rise to a variety of accented English where there is the frequent substitution of “r” or “n” for “l,” as in “fry” for “fly,” and the mispronunciation and misspelling of “gasee” for “gas” or “roase beef” for “roast beef.” (I recorded the latter two from a hand-lettered gas station sign “No More Gasee,” and a butcher’s meat display sign, respectively, in Oakland, California.)

Further, the Chinese have a unique way of sequencing information, connecting ideas, highlighting points, and shifting emphasis; these in turn are partially influenced by fundamental typological differences between Chinese and English (see chapters 2, 3, and 6). For example, Chinese is viewed as a topic-prominent language as compared to a subject-prominent language such as English. It is also distinguished by an aspect system as compared to the tense system of English. Furthermore, it makes no distinction between singular and plural, and the same word can function as noun, verb, or adjective, depending on the context. From the

Western standpoint, however, upon first encountering Chinese ways of speaking, they are often startled into maneuvering through a maze of ideas which appear to be loosened from familiar logic and connected in novel ways.

Yet, the issue goes beyond sound differences and accents or the very real differences in grammar and sentence structure. What both Chinese and Americans do not recognize is that they also have substantially different conceptions of how talk is to be conducted and of communicative strategies in general. For one thing, communication in their respective cultural milieus assumes forms and purposes with utterly different strategies for engagement and strikingly different dimensions, intensity, and emotional charge. For another, they have vastly different cultural beliefs about what should or should not be verbalized, what should be elicited and responded to in interactions, and what is polite or impolite to state directly. As we shall see, Chinese and Americans enter into conversation where they mistakenly assume that the strategies for discourse and interaction are mutually understood and observed. The confusion is compounded in those instances where English is employed. This condition arises because, paradoxically, the use of a supposedly common language code obscures cultural and subcultural differences in patterns of language use, leading Chinese and Americans to evaluate and respond to each other under the misconception that they share similar inferential processes. Taken together, these differences in the strategies and features of talk cause large blind spots that lead to distortion, to the emergence of stereotypical notions such as inscrutability, and to the creation and perpetuation of cultural boundaries.

### **Theoretical orientation**

How can we sharpen our understanding of Chinese communicative behavior in cross-cultural interactions? How can we approach cultural differences in discourse and interaction with enough detail and sophistication to get us beyond apparent differences and clichéd generalizations?

I suggest that recent work in interactional sociolinguistics will help us answer these questions. This work anchors itself on actual taped conversations and seeks insight into the linguistic details and the interactional ends or consequences of talk. It reveals the

nanced and often unnoticed ways in which different discourse strategies and interpretive conventions can distort and confuse encounters between conversationalists who do not share similar social and cultural backgrounds.

More specifically, this work looks into the inner workings of ordinary conversation to develop understanding of its interpretive and interactional achievements. It examines how grammar, culture, and interactive conventions affect conversationalists' competence to make inferences and negotiate intent. It looks beyond individual words, utterances and the things they signify to just how they are used and perceived within the turns and sequences of an exchange – that is, in their links, contexts, and interdependence – and within these turns and sequences, what signalling mechanisms are crucial to the operation, success, or failure of an exchange. Though the focus is on exceedingly subtle matters, it is precisely the details that cause misplaced interpretation.

As background to this method of analysis, we need to understand what various researchers have said about talk and conversation in general. In the first place, ethnographers of communication have made it clear that talking takes on different functions in different situations in different cultures. So, in fact, does silence. Participants also have mutual expectations and perceptions about how to conduct and experience talk. They share sociocultural and situational assumptions about the obligations of gender, status, and relationship, the conventions of power, performance, and participation, the nature of the communicative task and how it ought to be achieved and enacted, the various strategies, choices, and options guiding the production and perceptions of talk (Bauman and Sherzer 1974). Participants know that there is a time to speak, a tone of voice to be used, and a moment to pause just as they know the split-second to drop (or raise) their eyes and the right instant to nod, smile, or bow. However, an action that is natural and necessary in one culture may be considered a *faux pas* in another. Anthropologist Edward Hall long ago pointed out in *The Silent Language* (1959) and other books how ingrained cultural habits of space, gaze, posture, and gesture can undermine communications cross-culturally. For instance, a Chinese or Japanese subordinate who sits rigidly and stares fixedly at some

point on a superior's neck or over his or her shoulder as a respectful sign might, in American eyes, appear unbecomingly timid. Conversely, American speakers who insist on making eye-to-eye contact might seem brazen, even threatening, to these same Asians.

Apart from this, once talk begins, participants use unawares a whole complex of multisensory procedures involving elusive and ephemeral phenomena. Kinesicists, for example, point out how interactional partners fall into a rhythmic synchrony by subconsciously making constant and delicate adjustments to one another's movements (Condon and Ogsten 1969, Birdwhistell 1970). From a different perspective, research by social psychologists on impression formation has consistently pointed out how readily people use cues to classify and stereotype persons into groups and categories (Giles and Powesland 1975). In socially strained situations, these microfeatures can take on macro-importance and cause alarming consequences.

As an example, let us look at anthropologists Frederick Erickson and Jeffrey Schultz's (1982) work on linguistic mis-evaluations and "gate-keeping" encounters; their work reveals how inadvertent misassessments of the smallest details in face-to-face exchanges can compound and perpetuate social disadvantages. Following kinesicists, they show how interlocutors' speaking and listening behaviors take on an extraordinary coordination; without realizing it, interlocutors develop a rhythmic synchrony and move together almost as if they were participating in a perfectly choreographed piece. Erickson and Schultz go on to stress that without this synchronization, the rapport in encounters can suffer; a sense of disharmony can amplify to the extent that communicants fall prey to distorted evaluations. The situation worsens when communicants with different backgrounds assume that because they share the same grammar and lexicon, they share the same cues for listening and speaking. That this is not the case is revealed in Erickson and Schultz's frame-by-frame analysis of black student-white counselor interviews in which such barely perceptible asynchronous miscues contribute to an overall sense of interactional dissonance, ultimately sabotaging students' efforts to secure information needed for career advancements.

Conversation analysts, meanwhile, have shown that conversa-