

Beyond Language (2nd edition)
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Verbal Communication: The Way People Speak

"To know another's language and not his culture is a very good way to make a fluent fool of one's self."¹

Pre-Reading Discussion

1. What does the above quote mean? How do you think it is related to verbal communication?
2. What, if anything, have you observed about Americans and their way of having conversations? Is it similar to the way people carry on conversations in your language and culture? Explain.
3. In your native language, is it considered acceptable for people to interrupt each other when talking? Or, do people wait for others to finish what they are saying? What are your observations of Americans regarding interruptions?

Pre-Reading Vocabulary

1. Definitions
 - a. **heated conversation:** conversation characterized by argument, loudness, a rapid exchange of words, and interruptions
 - b. **hesitant conversation:** conversation characterized by politeness, indirectness, pauses, and a lack of interruptions

Discussion: In some cultures, heated conversations are considered disrespectful, and more hesitant, polite styles of communication are preferred. In other cultures, people think life is boring unless they can get involved in heated conversations! Can you make any generalizations about the preferred styles of communication in your culture?
2. Definitions
 - a. **direct communication:** a style of talking in which speakers do not avoid issues; they "get to the point"
 - b. **indirect communication:** a style of talking in which speakers tend to avoid issues, hesitate, and "talk in circles"

Discussion: Can you make any generalizations about mainstream "American-style" communication? Does it seem direct or indirect compared to yours?
3. Definition
 - a. **conversation structure:** the way people converse; the pattern of their conversations

Discussion: It is said that the structure of a good American conversation is like a Ping-Pong game. What do you think this means?
4. Definition
 - a. **judgment:** an opinion, thought, or critical conclusion

Discussion: Why do people judge others incorrectly? How do different cultural styles of communication contribute to people's misjudgments of each other?

Skimming: For General Information

To get the general idea of the reading that follows:

1. Read the titles and headings of the sections.
2. Read the first and last paragraphs of the reading.

From your skimming, answer the following:

1. Does cultural background influence styles of communication?
2. Do styles of communication vary?

Scanning: For Specific Information

To find specific information in the reading, look for clues such as certain words and numbers. Scan the reading to find the answer to the following:

1. The authors describe four points to consider if you feel that someone is communicating in "mysterious ways." Which paragraph has these four points?
2. What are the four points?

Reading Text

Verbal Communication: The Way People Speak

- [A] Cultures influence communication styles. Although this point may seem obvious, cultural styles can and do create "misunderstandings in conversations among people from different cultures."
- [B] For example, consider the following conversation between an Italian and an American. The Italian made a strong political statement with which he knew his American friend would disagree. The Italian wanted to involve the American in a lively discussion. The American, rather than openly disagreeing, said, "Well, everyone is 'entitled to an opinion. I accept that your opinion is different than mine.'" The Italian responded, "That's all you have to say about it?" In general, the American did not enjoy verbal conflicts over politics or anything else. The Italian actually became angry when the American refused to get involved in the discussion. He later explained to the American, "A conversation isn't fun unless it becomes 'heated!'"
- [C] What does this example say about culture and its "influence on communication? Surely, there are many Americans who do get involved in verbal conflicts over politics, just as there are some Italians who would not become involved. However, the above conversation "represents types of communication patterns that are related to cultural differences."



- [D] In her book *You Just Don't Understand*, the sociolinguistic researcher Deborah Tannen discusses the "notion that people from some cultures value "high involvement" conversation patterns, while others value "high considerateness" patterns.^{2*} Many people from cultures that prefer "high involvement" styles tend to: (1) talk more; (2) interrupt more; (3) expect to be interrupted; (4) talk more loudly at times; and (5) talk more quickly than those from cultures favoring "high considerateness" styles. Many "high involvement" speakers enjoy arguments and might even think that others are not interested if they are not ready to "engage in a heated discussion.
- [E] On the other hand, people from cultures that favor "high considerateness" styles tend to: (1) speak one at a time; (2)* use polite listening sounds; (3) refrain from interrupting; and (4) give plenty of positive and respectful responses to their conversation partners. Most teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) in multicultural

*Teachers should explain that these terms are not commonly used. They are men-

classrooms have observed that some students become very involved in classroom conversation and discussion, whereas others tend to participate only in a hesitant manner. The challenge for the teacher is not to allow the "high involvement" group to "dominate discussions!

- [F] The cultures that Tannen characterizes as having "high involvement" conversational styles include Russian, Italian, Greek, Spanish, South American, Arab, and African.³ In general, the various communication styles in Asian cultures (e.g., Chinese and Japanese) would be characterized as "high considerateness." Mainstream American conversation style would also be characterized as "high considerateness," although it differs "significantly from the various Asian patterns. There are important "regional and ethnic differences in conversation styles within the United States.

Incorrect Judgments of Character

- [G] Americans can have problems when talking to each other because of differences. For example, New Yorkers tend to talk faster and respond more quickly ("high involvement") than Californians ("high considerateness"). To some New Yorkers, Californians seem slower, less intelligent, and not as responsive. To some Californians, New Yorkers





seem pushy and domineering. The judgments that people make about regional differences within a country are similar to those they make about people from another culture. The reactions to such differences are not usually expressed in the following reasonable fashion: "The way she speaks is different from my way of speaking. She must have had a different cultural upbringing. I won't judge her according to my standards of what is an acceptable communication style."

Instead, people tend to make judgments such as, "She's loud, pushy, and domineering," or "He doesn't seem interested in talking. He's very passive and uninvolved." The people interacting are forgetting that their respective cultural styles are responsible, in part, for their mannerisms and habits of communication. The important differences in communication create problems of stereotyping and incorrect judgments among members of diverse groups.

Directness and Indirectness

Cultural beliefs differ as to whether directness or indirectness is considered positive. In the mainstream American culture, the ideal form of communication includes being direct rather than indirect. ("Ideal" here means that the culture values this style, although not everyone speaks directly.) There are several expressions in English that emphasize the importance of being direct: "Get to the point!" "Don't beat around the bush!" "Let's get down to business!" These sayings all indicate the importance of dealing directly with issues rather than avoiding them. One way to determine whether a culture favors a direct or indirect style in communication is to find out how the people in that culture express disagreement or how they say, "No." In Japan, there are at least fifteen ways of saying, "No," without actually saying the word. Similarly, in Japan, it would be considered rude to say directly, "I disagree with you," or "You're wrong."

Many Americans believe that "honesty is the best policy," and their communication style reflects this. Honesty and directness in communication are strongly related. It is not a surprise, then, to find out that cultural groups misjudge each other based on different beliefs about directness and honesty in communication.

American Male-Female Differences in Directness

It is impossible to say that everyone in one culture communicates similarly. Older people often communicate according to more traditional norms than younger people, and, as mentioned, there are regional variations in the way people speak and carry on conversa-

5 tions. In addition, there are gender differences in communication styles.

To generalize (and we do not want to stereotype), American women have traditionally been less direct (i.e., more polite and "soft") than men in making requests, expressing criticism, and offering opinions. However, when talking about emotional issues and feelings, women tend to be more direct than men. In the workplace, women have learned that in order to compete and communicate with men, they have to be more direct when making suggestions, giving criticism, and expressing ideas. In the mid-1980s, "assertiveness training" courses were designed to help women communicate more directly, especially in the business world. In the 1990s, however,

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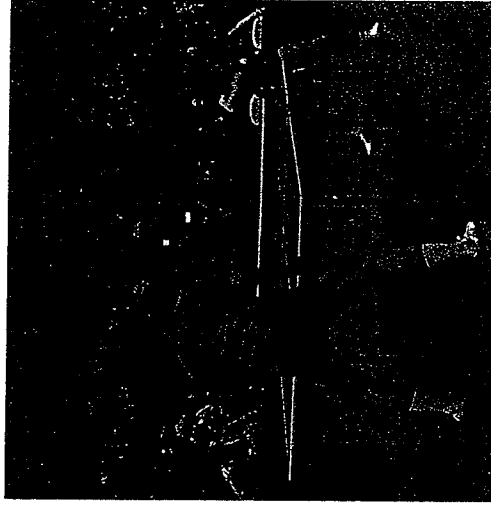
there is more recognition of the "feminine" contribution to work relationships (e.g., nurturing, interpersonal sensitivity, etc.). The emphasis in the workplace is on cultural diversity; women are defined as a "cultural group."

Cross-Cultural Implications

- [M] Americans may judge members of cultural groups that value indirectness (i.e., "hesitating, not "getting to the point," and "beating around the bush") as not being assertive enough. However, many Americans in the business world do not realize that a large percentage of the world's cultures value indirectness and consider it rude to insist on "getting to the point."
- [N] When Americans go to work in countries where indirectness is valued (e.g., in Latin America or Asia), they may need to "modify their communication style. In such cultures, Americans should not be too direct when giving criticism, making requests, and expressing needs and opinions. Some of the goals of indirect communication include not angering, embarrassing, or "shaming another person. North Americans working in Latin America would benefit from understanding the cultural values of "saving face" (and not causing someone else to "lose face"), and maintaining harmony. These two values in personal and business relations almost always mean a more indirect style of communication. (Interestingly, although Latin American conversation style is considered "high involvement," and many Asian styles are considered "high considerateness," they both tend to value indirectness.)

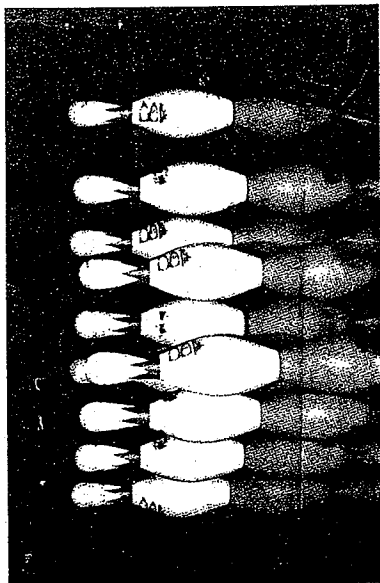
Conversation Structures

- [O] Let's look at another example of how people's communication patterns differ: the way people converse. Some foreigners have observed that when Americans hold a conversation, it seems like they are having a Ping-Pong game.⁴ One person has the ball and then hits it to the other side of the table. The other player hits the ball back and the game continues. If one person doesn't return the ball, then the conversation stops. Each part of the conversation follows this pattern: the greeting and the opening, the discussion of a topic, and the closing and farewell. If either person talks too much, the other may become impatient and feel that the other is monopolizing the conversation. Similarly, if one person doesn't say enough or ask enough questions to keep the conversation moving, the conversation stops.
- [P] Many North Americans are impatient with culturally different conversation styles simply because the styles are unfamiliar. For



example, to many North Americans, it seems that some Latin Americans monopolize conversations, or hold the ball too long. (Remember the "high involvement" style mentioned.) Speaking of her co-workers from several Latin American countries, one North American woman said, "I just can't seem to 'get a word in edgewise. They seem to take such a long time to express themselves. They give you a lot of unnecessary details." When she talked with them, she became tense, because she found it so hard to participate. Yet she also noted that when they talked to each other, nobody seemed uncomfortable or 'left out.

[Q] The North American woman didn't know how to interrupt the Latin American conversations because North American ways of listening and "breaking in are very different. She had been taught to listen politely until the other person had finished talking. (Once again, there are gender differences; it has been observed that men tend to interrupt women more than women interrupt men.) When the North American woman did what was "natural" or "normal" for her (i.e., listen politely without interrupting), she was not comfortable in the conversation with the Latin Americans. The result was that she became more 'passive in her conversations with her co-workers. The



differences between the unspoken rules of conversation of each cultural group "interfered with their on-the-job relationship.

"Ping-Pong" and "Bowling" Conversation Styles

[R] An example of a conversation style that contrasts with the American "Ping-Pong" conversation style is formal conversation among the Japanese, which has been compared to bowling.⁵ Each participant in a Japanese conversation waits politely for a turn and knows exactly when the time is right to speak. That is, they know their place in line. One's turn depends on status, age, and the relationship to the other person. When it is time to take a turn, the person bowls carefully. The others watch politely, and do not leave their places in line or take a turn out of order. No one else speaks until the ball has reached the bowling pins. Answers to questions are carefully thought out, rather than "blurted out. In Japanese conversation, long silences are tolerated. For Americans, even two or three seconds of silence can become uncomfortable. Americans do not like the feeling of "pulling teeth" in conversations.

[S] The American who is used to the "Ping-Pong" style of communication is probably going to have some difficulty with someone whose conversational style is like a bowling game. According to some Japanese, Americans ask too many questions and do not give the other person enough time to "formulate a careful answer. The American, however, is not doing something "wrong" or "insensitive



on purpose. The Japanese feels that the American is "pushy and overly inquisitive because of the difference in cultural conditioning.

[T] To the American, the Japanese speaker appears passive and uninterested in the conversation. The Japanese style takes too long for the average American. The Japanese person is not doing anything "wrong" and is not less interested in conversation. Each person has misjudged the other because neither is familiar with their culturally different conversational styles. (Conversely, to many people having "high involvement" styles of communication, the American does not seem pushy and inquisitive. From their viewpoint, the American seems more passive!)

Ethnocentric Judgments

[U] The judgments that people make about each other are often "ethnocentric. That is, they interpret, judge, and behave in a way that they assume to be normal, correct, and, therefore, universal. However, "normal" and "correct" often mean what is "normal" and "correct" in one's own culture. When two people from different cultures communicate, they must continually ask themselves, "Do people understand me the way someone from my own culture would understand me?"

There may be a gap between what a person is communicating and how people are understanding the message.

[V]

People cannot assume that their way of communicating is universal. If people from another culture seem to be communicating in what you feel are "mysterious ways," consider the following four points:

1. It is possible that the way they speak reflects a cultural style.
2. Your success in developing cross-cultural rapport is directly related to your ability to understand others' culturally influenced communication styles.
3. Your ways seem as "mysterious" to others as their ways seem to you.
4. It is often valuable to talk about cultural differences in communication styles before they result in serious misunderstandings.

[W]

It is not possible or necessary to know everything about the way a cultural group communicates before having contact with that group. It can take years to understand verbal style differences. However, if you can anticipate differences in communication style, your judgments about people will be more accurate, and you will have fewer cross-cultural misunderstandings.

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Comprehension Questions*

Note that this section now contains multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

1. According to the authors, cultural styles: [A]
 - a. create misunderstandings in conversations between people from different cultures.
 - b. help people from different cultures understand each other.
 - c. are all the same.
2. How did the American respond to the political statement made by the Italian? [B]
3. The authors say that many "high involvement" speakers: [D]
 - a. consider politeness more important than verbal involvement.
 - b. enjoy arguments.
 - c. may think someone is not interested if he or she does not want to participate in a heated discussion.
 - d. both (b) and (c).

4. People who have "high considerateness" styles tend to: [E]
 - a. speak at the same time.
 - b. be polite and respond respectfully.
 - c. interrupt frequently.
 - d. both (a) and (c).
5. Name three cultures with "high involvement" conversation styles. [F]
6. The authors say that the various Asian as well as mainstream American communication styles can be characterized as "high considerateness," although the two styles do differ. Is the difference significant or slight? [F]
7. The authors suggest that Americans can have problems when they talk to each other. What examples do they give? [G]
8. According to the authors, differences in communication can: [H]
 - a. solve disagreements for most people.
 - b. create problems of stereotyping.
 - c. result in incorrect judgments among members of diverse groups.
 - d. both (b) and (c).
9. What is one way to determine whether a culture favors a direct or indirect communication style? [I]
10. The authors say that cultural groups misjudge each other. How does this happen? [J]
11. According to the authors, when Americans go to work in countries where indirect communication is valued, they may need to: [N]
 - a. criticize the new country.
 - b. "go native" in order to adapt.
 - c. modify their communication style.
12. Many Americans are impatient with culturally different conversation styles because the styles are: [P]
 - a. heated.

13. Give an example of a conversation style that contrasts with the American "Ping-Pong" style. What analogy do the authors use to describe the example? [R]
14. The authors discuss differences between American and Japanese speakers. Sometimes, both speakers can misjudge the other because: [T]
 - a. they are familiar with the other's conversation styles.
 - b. they have taken too much time to give an answer.
 - c. they are not familiar with each other's conversation styles.
15. In their discussion of ethnocentric judgments, the authors talk about a "gap." What does this mean? [U]
16. What advice do the authors give regarding judging people more accurately? [W]

Discussion Questions

Students should prepare these before class discussion.

1. What does the example of the Italian and the American given in Paragraphs C, D, and E have to do with culture and its influence on communication?
2. Reread the list of characteristics of "high involvement" styles in Paragraph D. Based on your experience, can you add anything to this list?
3. Reread the list of characteristics of "high considerateness" styles in Paragraph E. Based on your experience, can you add anything to this list?
4. In Paragraph G, the authors say that reactions to cultural differences in communication style are not usually reasonable. What example of a reasonable response do they give? Why don't people usually respond in this way?
5. In Paragraph I, the authors state that the ideal form of communication in American culture includes being direct rather than indirect. Can you think of an example of when an American was direct or wanted you to be direct? Describe the situation.
6. In Paragraph J, the authors say that honesty and directness in communication are strongly related. Is this reflected in the American conversation style? According to the authors, what is a result of different cultural beliefs about directness and honesty in

7. The authors discuss American male-female differences in directness in Paragraph K. Can you make any generalizations about the way men and women communicate in your culture? Discuss any similarities and differences regarding male-female communication in your culture as compared to American culture.
8. According to Paragraphs L and M, when should women be more direct in order to compete and communicate with men?
9. As discussed in Paragraph L, in the 1990s the emphasis in the workplace is on cultural diversity, and women are often considered a "cultural group." What do you think this means?
10. If you were to teach a class to prepare Americans to be successful businesspeople in your country, what advice would you give regarding communication, based on the discussion in Paragraphs L, M, and N? Think of three tips, and indicate which one is the most important.
11. In Paragraph O, the authors talk about conversational "games." What game does the American conversation resemble according to the authors? Describe a conversation you had with an American. Did the conversation go according to the game?
12. In Paragraph R, Japanese conversation style is compared to bowling. The authors note that long silences are tolerated between turns. How do Americans generally react to silence in a conversation?
13. The authors suggest in Paragraph T that one reason people misunderstand each other is that they might not be familiar with different conversation styles. Do you think it would be easy to talk directly about conversation styles with your friends or associates from another culture? What would you ask people from a different culture about their conversation style? Make a list of the questions.

Vocabulary Exercises

Vocabulary List

As you read the vocabulary list below, find two or three words you already know. Give their definitions.

Paragraph A	Paragraph B	Paragraph C
misunderstandings	entitled	influence