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Some Thoughts on How to Approach Finding One's Feet in Unfamiliar Cultural Terrain

Gerry Philipsen

Consider a person entering a scene or a social world where there is a culture that is initially unfamiliar to him or her. Is there good advice we can give the person as to how to do what Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 13) refers to as “finding one's feet” in such terrain—so as to learn the culture(s) there sufficiently well to be able to be an intelligent, competent, and effective participant in the social world the person has entered? I answer as if responding to a caller at my door, basing my answer on two partially fictive versions of such occasions.

The first caller is Reiko, recently arrived in the US from Japan and enrolled in a university undergraduate course where there is much use of classroom work in discussion groups. I had given a lecture in the course, and Reiko asked my advice in solving a problem she faced—her failure to achieve acceptance of her ideas and of herself, in her group of fellow students.

The second caller is Rachel, who had lived in Seattle, Washington for two years. She is an American with an advanced degree in the humanities, is multilingual, and has lived and worked in several countries. In spite of her education and linguistic skill, she expressed puzzlement, indeed consternation, about the way some people in Seattle communicate on a daily basis, but could not, she said, “put her finger on” what it is about the local ways of speaking that troubles her.

What can one say to Reiko and to Rachel? There are two prominent and popular approaches to the study of cultures and to culturally shaped ways of communicating that one might consider as resources for one's advice.

One of these is an approach that draws from the work of Edward T. Hall (and others) and involves two related ideas—individualistic versus collectivistic cultures and high- versus low-context communication. These ideas have been developed and researched extensively by many scholars, including, prominently, Stella Ting-Toomey and her colleagues (see, for example, Ting-Toomey, 2005). According to this view, (1) societies can be contrasted along an individualistic-collectivistic axis, with those

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toward the individualistic end emphasizing the “I” and those toward the other end emphasizing the “we” in thinking about, evaluating, and enacting communicative conduct, and (2) in societies located toward the individualistic end of the axis, communication tends to be low-context, that is, verbally explicit in the expression of meaning, and in those toward the collectivistic end, communication tends to be high-context, that is, uses a more understated manner of verbal expression.

A second approach is found in the writings of theorists who take a critical-cultural stance toward the study of communication. Prominent in such writings are two instructions to follow in the investigation of particular cultural ways of communicating: (1) search for evidence of power in everything you observe, because it is always there, and the search for it should be privileged over all else; (2) trace the meaning of particular instances of communicative conduct to the nature of the person who produces it, for example using white, male, and powerful as likely indicators of the meaning that can be found in the speaker’s conduct (see my exposition of this approach, with evidentiary citations, in Philipsen, 2010).

Might the two approaches described above be of some help to Reiko or Rachel?

The first approach can claim a large body of empirical research that shows regularities of attitude and behavior across many societies. And it points to notions that can be useful to an inquirer into the particularities of a given society or culture’s ways of speaking, as long as the inquirer uses these notions in a heuristic way, that is as a hunch as to how things might be, on the ground, with the understanding that the hunch likely will be discarded once it has led one to situated discovery. In the spirit of full disclosure, I have proposed such a broad scheme of classification of societies and cultures, and their likely ways of speaking, a scheme that is useful for heuristic purposes, but one which I explicitly stipulate should only be used in the exploratory spirit I have also here described (Philipsen, 1987). The second approach has produced many notions that can be useful to a person who seeks to produce a critique of a society, a culture, or the communicative practices of some social scene. These notions can be helpful to an inquirer who has a critical objective. The approach has attracted many fellow travelers, who are fervent in their endorsement of it. They even have a *National Communication Association* journal devoted exclusively to their point of view.

In spite of the success of these two approaches, I am reluctant to advise Reiko or Rachel to make much use of either of them. The first approach will, I am afraid, lead my callers down alleys that will be confusing and that will divert them from the purpose of their journey. Should they become sidetracked on their journey toward achieving a valid understanding of the culture they seek to experience, as I predict they will, we could send out an ethnographer of speaking to provide emergency assistance to help them get back on a path that could take them to their destinations. But as for those who take the second approach, I fear they will take so many wrong turns that they likely will become irretrievably lost, and it is very likely that they might not even know it. Let us consider these possibilities.

Reiko has recently come from Japan, which some authors say is a collectivistic, high-context society, and has arrived in the US, which these same authors say is an

individualistic, low-context society. So I could advise her to read Ting-Toomey and others for a wide array of propositions about how “members of individualistic cultures,” and “members of collectivistic cultures” conduct themselves communicatively. But I question the value to Reiko of hearing that the culture she is “in” now, the US, is a low-context culture, if by low-context one means that the meanings expressed in social interaction are explicit, not subtle, understated, or reliant on a great deal of shared background for their interpretation. I assume Reiko is confronting communicative practices in her US classroom that are influenced by a culturally distinctive code of communicative conduct, but if US communicative practices were as explicit and overstated as the low-context proposition suggests, wouldn’t Reiko already have grasped the code underlying those practices as she is experiencing them? And if her Japanese notions, if indeed these are Japanese notions, are as understated as we have been led to believe, how was she able to express to me so explicitly what she wanted from her discussion group, that is, explicit verbal assurances that she was accepted and explicit positive acknowledgment of her expressed opinions in group discussions?

Another matter that makes me hesitant to draw on this system of ideas is the notion of culture it entails; that is, one in which people are described as “members of a culture,” for example, as in Ting-Toomey’s expression “members of individualistic cultures” (2005, p. 84) and “members of collectivistic cultures” (2005, p. 84). I use “culture” differently, not to refer to a place, country, or group, but to a code—that is, a historically situated, socially constructed system of terms and meanings, premises, and rules. I do not, using my definition, speak of being a “member of” a culture, but rather speak of someone who “uses,” “deploys,” or “experiences” a particular cultural code. In treating culture in this way, I give to Reiko a concept she can use immediately. Momentarily, I will describe how she can use this concept productively, but for now I raise the further concern that for Reiko’s classroom group we don’t know for sure who is a “member” of which “culture” (or cultures, as is likely the case), and which cultures do the members of her group actually use in social interaction? And of which culture(s) is Reiko a member? We know she is *from* Japan, but of what can we be sure she has found there, of Japanese “culture,” and carried with her to the US? And is the collectivistic and high-context communication aspect of Japanese culture all of the culture she has available to her as a rhetorical and interpretive resource?

Perhaps critical culture theory will be of some use to Reiko, but I doubt it, and so I do not recommend it to her to help her find her feet in this American classroom. Perhaps she can find a hierarchy of participation or response within her discussion group, a hierarchy based on privilege that derives from skin color, wealth, or gender. Perhaps there is deployed in the group a code of participation, discussion, and inclusiveness that is based on hidden traces of hegemonic tradition. But to make these assumptions, without preliminary field inquiry, might lead Reiko to make simple mistakes of interpretation and judgment, just as these methodological dispositions have led some of their advocates to make such mistakes in print (see, for example, my critiques of some objective errors or candidates thereof in the

writings of some prominent critical scholars, errors that I trace to the unreflective use of the two epistemological principles I present above: see Philipsen, 1989–1990, 1991, in reference to Fiske, 1991; and Philipsen, 1995, in relation to the critical turn in Pearce and Cronen's coordinated management of meaning theory; Philipsen, 2000, on critical race theory; and Philipsen & Leichter, 2007, on Deetz, Heath, & MacDonald, 2007 on conversational stoppage). So I do not advise Reiko to turn to critical cultural theory in the service of her present purpose.

For Rachel, I also do not advise a turn to either of the approaches I have described above. First, I think she would not be helped much by telling her that she is dealing with Americans and that they are “members of an individualistic culture” and therefore likely to be verbally explicit in their meanings. This would only increase Rachel's frustration, because her complaint to me is that she, an American, and also presumably “a member of the culture,” finds these particular Americans to be puzzling and troubling, and she cannot put her finger on the reason for this but feels it has something to do with their communicative conduct. Rachel, it turns out, is just as individualistic as the other “members” she has encountered in Seattle, a city in which she was, at the time of our discussions, employed and working successfully. So I do not recommend to her that she read about collectivistic cultures, individualistic cultures, and high- and low-context communication. Rather, she is experiencing some pretty high-context communication, spoken in English, by Americans, and what she needs to do is to figure out those aspects of that context that she does not yet understand. That is, she needs to learn something she doesn't already know about the culture she is experiencing, something she probably cannot learn from a theory itself.

Nor do I recommend to Rachel that she turn to critical and cultural theory, at least not in the service of her immediate practical problem. It might be that she would find the answer to her question through an investigation of manifestations of power in the discourse of those Seattleites with whom she has found interactions to be troubling and puzzling, but I wouldn't advise her to assume that. Nor would I advise her to assume that she can locate the difficulties in the discourse she experiences as puzzling and troubling by searching most vigorously in the discourse of those of her interlocutors who happen to be in high positions of power, or white, or male—because, as I hear her tell it, the problematic encounters she has experienced have been with people who seem to be no more powerful than she is, and her interlocutors in these interactions are women. I don't rule out absolutely the possibility that some version of critical discourse analysis might prove useful to her in some way, but I don't rule it out only because I like to stay open to any possibility and not because I think that critical discourse analysis is where she will find the key to unlocking her mystery.

So what do I advise Reiko and Rachel to do?

I advise them to use an approach that is designed to understand a local culture on its own terms, and thus turn to speech codes theory, a theory grounded in a large body of empirical data, most of which is descriptive-comparative ethnography. In particular, but not exclusively, I turn to proposition five of the latest version of the

theory, the proposition that says “the terms, rules, and premises of a speech code are inextricably woven into speaking itself” (Philipsen, 1992, 1997; Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005, p. 62). This empirical proposition can be translated as saying that what one can learn about a locally distinctive cultural code of communicative conduct can be found expressed in the communicative conduct of the people whose speech one is trying to comprehend. Thus, for Reiko and Rachel, it tells, *affirmatively, where to look and listen* for a local code of communicative conduct, and, *by implication, suggests where not to look and listen*. Affirmatively, it says that in order to learn the local terms, meanings, rules, and premises with which people plan, enact, interpret, and evaluate communicative conduct, you must first observe that conduct, in all its modalities, in situ. What proposition five implies—by omission—that one should *not* do, is to rely on a theory about types of cultures or a hypothesis about the singularly most important dimension of social life in any society or culture. The exposition, elaboration, and illustration of proposition five of speech codes theory (especially in Philipsen, 1997, pp. 142–146, 1992, pp. 131–136) provides a practical scheme to help Reiko and Rachel try to learn and understand a local culture (or cultures) by looking and listening for: (1) patterns of communicative conduct that can be observed in the local scene; (2) the terms that the people themselves in a particular social world use for talking and thinking about communicative conduct; (3) the local use, rhetorically, of indigenous meta-communicative vocabulary; and (4) the use of a local meta-communicative vocabulary in various forms of communicative activity, including but not limited to, rituals, myths and stories, social dramas, and aligning actions.

It is important to emphasize that the strategy that I refer to above, the one that I recommend to Reiko and Rachel, is not something that I just pull out of a hat. Rather, I select it, and not some other strategy, because I have seen it work in multiple empirical instances. I have seen it work across dozens of language varieties and dozens of speech communities, in English, Hebrew, Japanese, Chinese, Finnish, German, four varieties of Spanish, and more. It enjoys propositional status in speech codes theory because of the large body of experiential data upon which it rests. And it will enjoy that status unless and until someone comes along and provides a series of counter-examples that would require a reasonable person to say that it should no longer enjoy that status. For the present, the evidence in favor of the proposition is overwhelming; nonetheless, as with any empirical proposition, it is not sacred, it is merely something that has not yet been disconfirmed. And thus I bet on it, and not on the others I have mentioned here. For reviews of the work of the group that has produced this body of evidence, see, from the perspective of a communication theorist, Leeds-Hurwitz (1990), a humanist, Smith (1992), a historian of science, Murray (1993), and a contributing member of the research group, Carbaugh (1995, 2009).

When I talk with Reiko, I advise her, briefly, to start observing what happens in her classroom discussion group, to try to figure out what works there, communicatively, and what does not work there. This is not mere common sense, it is uncommonly good sense—for what it advocates, but also because of the false leads it does not

provide. When I talked with Reiko, I had recently read a book by a Japanese scholar who, like Reiko, came from Japan to study in the US, and in the US experienced a culture that was initially puzzling and problematic to her. That scholar, Haru Yamada (1997), operated much in the way I have advised Reiko to do. Yamada searched for and recorded evidence of recurring patterns of action in everyday life in the US, studied US words pertaining to communication and social interaction, examined the claims that people in the US made about the intelligibility and morality of various lines of social interaction, studied US history, literature, and arts; and with all of these, juxtaposed her new knowledge to her knowledge of Japan, and then used all of these materials to figure out what works locally in the particular social world in which she found herself at the moment.

So I advised Reiko to read Yamada's book, where she can find, based on Yamada's studies of Japanese and US business meetings, that task-oriented groups in Japan tend to start with the assumption that support must be given to all members and that task-oriented groups in America tend to start with the assumption that members must actively earn the respect of their fellow participants. Reiko can use this as a resource for her own investigations into the particularities of the two cultures she studies comparatively. On a last visit to Reiko's class, I observed her give a speech in which she tried to persuade the class that the key ingredient in working well with others in a group is to provide explicitly for support to be given to all members. On that same day we heard an American student, assigned to speak on the same general topic, say the key ingredient for a successful working group is for the individual members to have the courage to speak, and the courage to listen, to each other, about the matters that are of importance to the group. And there we have it, an example—in the speech of the local US group—that captured something essential for Reiko to know, something that, fortunately, echoes the learning that she can take from Yamada's book. And thus was begun the process of Reiko's learning something about a culture that she would find, in myriad ways and places, as she continued to study in a US university.

I advised Rachel that she must start doing the kind of looking and listening I had advised Reiko to do. Rachel was a busy woman, with other responsibilities to meet, and she did not take up a focused inquiry into her present cultural scene. But an undergraduate student at the University of Washington, unaware of Rachel's concerns, read about what one writer refers to as "the Seattle freeze." The student, Angeline Candido (2009), began to study local discourse about "the freeze," and did so by explicitly using proposition five of speech codes theory, in particular, but the other propositions as well, as a heuristic and interpretive resource. Proceeding just as I had advised Reiko to do, Candido eventually discovered something that some people have experienced in some Seattle discourse, an interactional sequence in which a long-time resident greets a newcomer in an overtly friendly manner and then does not follow up, in the way the newcomer would expect, with commensurately friendly offers of shared time and friendship. Candido found that not only do many Seattleites, newcomers and natives alike, recognize the pattern of interaction that the frustrated newcomers mention, but also that the discourse of those who comment

favorably differs importantly from the discourse of those who comment unfavorably on the phenomenon that Candido, and her respondents, describe.

When Candido presented her findings and interpretations in a talk on campus, Rachel heard it and said that Candido has put her finger on the previously puzzling practice. In the discussion that followed, someone speculated that, because there are so many Norwegian-Americans in Seattle, the “freeze” might bear traces of Norwegian culture. There is a body of extant ethnography of contemporary Norway that could be consulted here, ethnography that mentions a Norwegian disposition to seek “peace” and “quiet” in social relations, and that says that the disposition leads some Norwegians to eschew social contact as a way to protect their sense of personal wholeness and control of self (Gullestad, 1992; see also my treatment of this in Philipsen, 2008). Candido found traces of this Norwegian code in the speech she examined in which Seattle natives talked about the freeze. But she also found in that speech a different local interpretation as well, one that emphasizes a preference for talk that is not superficial, that has more “depth,” that goes beyond “ordinary chitchat.” Such talk can be heard as echoes of the speech of the Seattle informants Tamar Katriel and I talked with in the 1980s (see Katriel & Philipsen, 1981), and this is a different code from that spoken by the Norwegians that Gullestad studied. Thus, the range of interpretations one finds by inquiring into the local code on its own terms is more complex, more nuanced, and less misleading than the interpretation one might have only by importing commonsensical notions into the treatment one gives a local practice.

The lessons I draw from these stories of Reiko and Rachel is that the best way to find one’s feet in terrain infused with a culture (or with cultures) that one is trying to figure out is to start walking around, putting one foot ahead of the other—to hang out on street corners where people meet to talk, to stop in coffeehouses and peer over shoulders to see what people have on their laptop screens, to enter living rooms and sit for a while with the people who live there, to visit social websites—that is, to situate oneself wherever there is communicative conduct, and watch it and listen to it, with eyes and ears alert and open to the particularity of what one finds there. For such on the ground learning, I recommend the investigative strategy that is sketched in speech codes theory (especially proposition five, but all the propositions are pertinent to such discovery) and that is illustrated and elaborated in the large body of work that has informed that theory (I also recommend the excellent treatment of these matters in Carbaugh, 2005). The inquirer who takes such an approach will find, if it is there to be found, evidence of collectivism, or individualism, or of both, if that is what the people in the scene studied are experiencing, and will find, where it is to be found, particular ways that power shapes and can be used to explain, local communicative conduct (see, for an example, Philipsen, 1986, p. 256; see also Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005). And I predict that wherever one walks or stops to visit, in America, the cultural scene I have studied directly, there will be high context communication, whether it is bowling trophies in funeral parlor windows, a speech in a city council in which the speaker seems to become unhinged, or a wife who tells her thoroughly responsible husband that she is leaving him to find better

“communication” and, in the process, herself. For a theoretical and practical resource in the support of such an approach I recommend the several expositions and developments that can be found in the literature of speech codes theory.

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