

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 refers to as "finding one's feet?" 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 U.S. 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. Despite 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. A second approach is found in the writings of theorists who take a critical-cultural stance toward the study of communication.

Despite the success of these two approaches, I am reluctant to advise Reiko or Rachel to make much use of either of them. 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. In short, what you can learn about a locally distinctive cultural code of communicative conduct can be found in the communicative conduct of the people whose speech you are trying to comprehend.

Thus, for Reiko and Rachel, to learn the local terms, meanings, rules, and premises with which people plan, enact, interpret, and evaluate communicative conduct, they must first observe that conduct. Reiko and Rachel can 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.

When I talk with Reiko, I advise her 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.

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 U.S., and in the U.S. experienced a culture that was initially puzzling and problematic to her. That scholar, Haru Yamada (1997), operated much in the way I advised Reiko to do. Yamada searched for and recorded evidence of recurring patterns of action in everyday life in the U.S. She studied U.S. words pertaining to communication and social interaction and examined the claims that people in the U.S. made about the intelligibility and morality of various lines of social interaction. She also studied U.S. history, literature, and arts. By juxtaposing her new knowledge to her knowledge of Japan, she 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 could find, based on Yamada's studies of Japanese and U.S. 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 two cultures she ~~studies~~ studies comparatively. On a last visit to Reiko's class, I observed her giving 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 space 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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." Proceeding just as I had advised Reiko to, 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, i.e., 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. 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.

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. Put one foot ahead of the other, hang out on street corners where people meet to talk, and stop in coffeehouses and peer over shoulders to see what people have on their laptop screens. Enter living rooms and sit for a while with the people who live there. Visit social websites and situate yourself wherever there is communicative conduct, and watch it and listen to it, with eyes and ears alert and open to the particularity of what you find there. You 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. You will find, where it is to be found, particular ways that power shapes and can be used to explain, local communicative conduct.