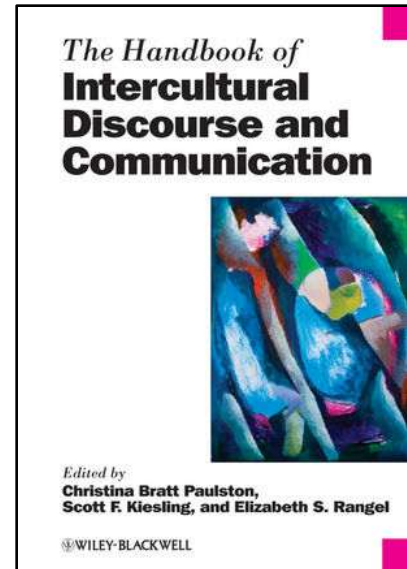


**Christina Bratt Paulston, Scott F. Kiesling, Elizabeth S. Rangel (Eds),  
*The Handbook of Intercultural Discourse and Communication***  
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*Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at [diversophy.com](http://diversophy.com)*

In a recent bit of informal research, I identified sixteen different academic disciplines whose focus was dealing with culture. Perusing the literature of these disciplines one discovers that they frequently draw on similar sources for their perspectives, while at the same time they seem to remain in silos of their own. Making it my business to poke into these diverse disciplines from the perspective of the intercultural practitioner, I try to see how the focus of other disciplines might enrich our work, in this case diving into the field of linguistics.

*The Handbook of Intercultural Discourse and Communication* is a large and wide ranging collection of studies and reports, including everything from high-level theoretical perspectives to explorations of specific ethnic speech practices, often in comparative context.



Linguists, among others, have identified many of the colonial and neocolonial features involved, not only limiting our perspectives in the study of language and culture, but in the dynamics of its teaching. There is no hesitation here in taking a political stance. One feature that I have found particularly annoying, however, is the compulsion on the part of the number of linguists to erect and thrash the straw man of intercultural studies as being perpetrator of a damaging essentialism, as if the worst performances of stereotyping and labeling, which can occur, were the standard of the field. It is obvious that a number of these folks have not left their silos to see what is going on elsewhere. It is unfortunate that the first chapter of the book starts off on this tone. The perpetuation of inequality had based on ignorance and stereotypical knowledge and negative evaluation of “lesser” cultures is certainly a reality that needs to be dealt with. This is a responsibility of interculturalists and others whose studies and experiences lead them to see how the roots of reality found in our social constructions are neither just nor inevitable.

There is a nice historical perspective in the first section of the book on methodology and on the development of typology, both of which tell us where we have been and some of the directions in which we need to go to escape the limitations of our own Western cultural perspectives in the choice of what we study and value. The second section addresses theoretical perspectives that drive methodology, highlighted by the struggles to sort out the relationship between language and culture. Interactional Sociolinguistics studies the differences and diversity that occur in speech events, how speech gets interpreted, framed, and is affected by divergent expectations and rhetorical strategies.

Here culture is the background, whereas in the following chapter on the “Ethnography of Speaking, the nature of two diverse gatherings, the Kuna people of Panama and a USian college fraternity are examined for both their differences and their underlying commonalities. However, the meat of this section consists of critical perspectives about culture, intercultural discourse, and applied linguistics. It observes how these historically may have led inadvertently to what is here more seriously examined as the tendency to essentialist and static views of the nature of culture and language and their interaction, resulting in a reinforcing and, even now, perpetuating unequal distribution of power.

The most perplexing phenomenon in this regard is the distribution of English as the lingua franca of modernist globalization. There are indications of a postmodern shift, which replaces the unilateral cultural flow from the center of power to the periphery with a multilateral exchange of persons, information, technology, finance, as well as ideas. This seems to be the case if one abstracts from the fact that English is the vehicle for most of these processes, the medium in which they tend to be negotiated. Yes, there are many Englishes and the standards of traditional Anglo-Saxon pedagogy are no longer the reference or the norm for the variety of English-speaking communities, even within traditional English-speaking territories.

We generally tend to look at the interaction of linguistic differences and different Englishes from a conflictual perspective, often overlooking the creativity and flexibility of juxtaposed communities in creating mutual understanding, third cultures of communication. Not surprisingly, this is having its effect on how people identify themselves and each other. “Diversity,” conceived in this sense, is much richer and more egalitarian, than in the traditional sense of “diverse” as deviation from the norm. On a practical level this requires the development of skills for communicating with mixed audiences, for example the classroom and the workforce, even when it seems that English is shared throughout. We are constantly creating new cultures as we coalesce our energies and our forms of speech around our needs and objectives.

The third section of the book, “Interactional Discourse Features” updates us on some of the common topics of linguistic research, namely turn-taking, silence, indirectness, and politeness. In the first chapter here, turn-taking is comprehensively and masterfully explored by Deborah Tannen. Many unspoken misunderstandings, with advantages and disadvantages accruing to the participants, are certainly due to cultural differences and preferences in our manners of turn-taking in conversations and meetings, in interpersonal as well as in intimate exchanges. Silence is likewise explored for its various functions in communication as well as differences in its interpretation found across cultures, these again bearing the risk of dominance and subordination.

The following chapter on indirectness gives pause. Is there in fact such a thing as directness or indirectness, or is it simply in the ear and mind of the listener who possesses a specific value system and set of practices in this regard? Certainly the variety of perspectives found in this chapter lead one to suspect that this dichotomy constitutes a false problem, and, because it is so heavily used in intercultural work, perhaps a

significant weakness in our profession. Certainly the complexity of the issue deserves more attention and less classification and judgment.

Finally, what is politeness? Here, as in the case of indirectness, we may have spent a lot of time and effort attempting to nail Jell-O to the wall. Certainly we're all familiar with norms and judgments that come into play about our own and others' behaviors and interactions, particularly across cultures where face giving and face-saving are frequently at stake, and not only in interactions between East and West. Here, knowing when and how to "kiss, bow and shake hands," as well as manage and hold our tongue are still as relevant as ever on the level of everyday behavior.

The fourth section of the book looks at settings where intercultural discourse and communication work take place. There is rightfully no theory or thoroughness to be expected in this section, but rather well detailed specific explorations, a good sampling of the research work. Chapters address Anglo-Arab intercultural communication, Japan-Anglo-American, national stereotypes with a focus on Venezuela, interactions of Turks and Greeks, issues in South African healthcare, and power issues between mestizo and aboriginal populations in the Mexican marketplace. Of these I was most taken by the healthcare issues where linguistic confusion can be a matter of life and death, as well as by the Turk-Greek discussion because of its conflict issues being more historical than cultural, or cultural because they are historical.

"*Traduttore, traditore*" is an age-old pun on the translator's likelihood of betraying the original text in trying to transmit it to a new audience. Though it probably originated with disgruntled authors, it is complicated today by our deeper knowledge of how words, even in the same language, are connected by its users to their own cultural and linguistic roots. Translation (and interpretation) may be the best we have in many circumstances, but two sides may be in deep disagreement about what is conveyed, as contexts may differ substantially. The essay on this, the first in the Fifth Section of the book on "Interactional Domains" raises rightful suspicion of translation in a number of areas on the part of the speaker or writer, the translator and the listener or reader. Fundamentally it attempts to explore the circumstances in which translation may alternatively be seen as a bridge or barrier.

Other chapters in this section deal with intercultural dimensions of business communication, law, medicine, education and religion. The first of these, on business communication, seems antiquated in the light of contemporary practice, scarcely budging from the frameworks set by Edward Hall forty years ago. The chapter on law is focused on the common law approach of Anglophone countries and on the particular challenges found by second language speakers who must function in a court of law. There are many, from the linguistic confusion to the meaning of silence and other behaviors that may be culturally missed or misinterpreted. Practices of police interrogation may be stereotypically based and create a slippery slope for a minority person to slide into being judged guilty. Lack of cultural savvy on the part of the legal profession, the formalism of court procedures, power relations and the legal culture itself may all be involved in

failures of legal systems and procedures and hence justice in regard to non-mainstream groups and individuals.

The chapter on Medicine is largely about healthcare interpretation, a key issue, but certainly not the only one. Having personally been involved in creating educational tools to support healthcare professionals both in the USA and now in Europe has made me aware of how much there is to understand and misunderstand in this field, given that not only the clientele but the caregivers themselves may represent a wide variety of cultures and views on how symptoms are reported, caregiving decisions are made, and how diagnoses and prescriptions are established as well as whether or not or how they will be understood and carried out. There is a cultural overload to juggle here, and it all too often must be done in relatively urgent circumstances where the margin for error is small and the consequences are significant.

Education is a similarly muddled area, where language, power relations and identity are constantly being negotiated between students and teachers and with each other in classroom discourse as well as in institutional hallways. Parental expectations of the educational process may differ as well. There are particularly large stakes in US classrooms where African-American and Latino language usage have their own rules and values. Moreover certain educational disciplines impose their own language, vocabulary and syntax on the acquisition of knowledge in that field. Students are willy-nilly called on to “acquire” multiple languages in the educational experience.

Religion is the final dimension discussed. Religion is difficult to define, almost universal, and necessarily intercultural as it deals with some of the deepest held human values and usually seems to have its own distinct forms of expression. In addition, the hieratic languages dominating the core literature of certain religious groups yield philosophies of language that influence the everyday religious expression of their followers. Despite the massive influence of religion on language and culture, it is fertile but untilled ground as far as research is concerned.

This book provides a rich and diverse sampling of the intercultural work going on from various linguistic perspectives, some authors being more reliant on established intercultural theory and practice and others resisting it. It assumes some familiarity with linguistic tools and discourse analysis for the intelligent understanding of a number of the studies, hence not an easy read for the layperson. One finds not only a discussion of the varieties of English but experiences it even in this academic exploration. It is a blessing that bibliography follows each chapter where it can be quite useful, rather than being amassed at the end of the book. It is a blessing that bibliography follows each chapter, rather than being amassed at the end of the book.