When two people converse, there is a wide variety of possible purposes for the contact, such as exchanging information, accomplishing a task, or expressing feelings. Ultimately, however, all interactions are based on people's need to create social relationships and make connections with one another. In order to do this, each participant presents an image of himself to the other, and together they determine their relative roles in the interaction. Conversation is a cooperative venture, with the maintenance of harmony as its underlying theme. Each person's concern is with preserving his own face and that of his conversational partner. This process is implicit in the situation, and is outside the participants' awareness.

When the conversation is between people of different cultures, many things can go wrong. Although both parties have the best of intentions, they may perceive one another as aloof and unfriendly, aggressive and pushy, impatient, overly passive, rude, or bored. One or both individuals may feel they are not being heard, or that the other person is not making sense. In most cases, neither one is aware that they are operating under different sets of rules for communication. These rules, which are unconscious, are based on a set of norms for what behavior is appropriate in a given situation. The way communication is sequenced, the content and style of expression, the way another's communication is interpreted, are part of a system which varies for different languages and cultures. When crosscultural communication goes awry, it is often because the nonnative speaker is transferring the presuppositions and expectations of his native language and culture to his interaction in the second language. That is, although his grasp of the lexical, syntactic and semantic elements of the second language may be quite good — i.e., he is linguistically competent — he lacks communicative competence.
The concept of communicative competence — "the social rules of language use" (Paulston, p.347) — provides a useful framework for analysis of the problems of cross-cultural interactions for nonnative speakers of English. This body of knowledge, which is so crucial to effective production and interpretation of a language, can be divided into two broad categories: the extralinguistic area, which includes prosodies (stress patterns, pitch and intonation) and paralinguistics (gesture, facial expression, eye contact and proxemics) and the sociolinguistic area, which covers fundamental attitudes about language itself and constraints and expectations about what should or should not be said, how, to whom and under what circumstances. It is the role of the latter, sociolinguistic side of communicative competence in conversations between native and nonnative speakers of English which is the focus of this paper.

A speaker's sociolinguistic behavior is largely culturally determined. Culture, "a series of situational models for behavior and thought" (Hall, p.13), provides the context by which people make sense of their environment and their place in it. Models of appropriate behavior and the range of possible speech events in a given speech situation are specified by the cultural context. For example, one would be unlikely to hear a sermon in a cafeteria; or a lovers' quarrel in a graduate seminar. The influence of expectations on the structure and content of a speech event can hardly be overestimated, and culturally-based differences in expectations lead to many cross-cultural communication problems. Specific components of a speech event, such as the type of topics discussed, the role relations of the people involved, and the register or speaking style which is used, are likely to be situationally restricted. These three elements are subtly yet crucially interrelated, and they all help to determine the course of the speech event.
A speech event consists of a number of speech acts, which take place sequentially. Speech acts, the "minimal unit(s) of speaking which can be said to have a function" (Schmidt and Richards, p.130), are the means for fulfilling such social purposes as asking for information, making offers, requests, commands, threats or promises, granting permission, apologizing, forgiving, expressing approval or disapproval, and so on. A speech act may take a number of utterances to complete, or more than one speech act may be contained in a single utterance. Some speech acts, such as openings, closings or summonses, must be in a specific place in the conversation.

Speech acts are interactive and can best be understood as steps in a sort of cooperative dance between the partners, a series of adjacency pairs. Virtually every conversational "move" that a speaker makes implies the expectation of a relevant response: a greeting implies a greeting returned, a request for information or permission implies a grant or denial from the hearer, an offer made implies acceptance or rejection, etc. The expectation of a relevant response is so great that in most cases any response will be presumed to be relevant. The organization of discourse into adjacency pairs is a universal feature, but the type of conversational "moves" which comprise a speech act differ between cultures. In Indonesia, an apology will appropriately accompany an offer or a farewell. In Japan, it will be used with an expression of thanks.

Searle's categorization of speech acts by illocutionary point, as representatives, directives, commissives, expressives and declarations, is one way of viewing the ultimate purpose of utterances. His paradigm serves to highlight an important aspect of communication, that the surface or referential meaning of an utterance is often quite different from its underlying meaning. It may require considerable knowledge of the cultural context for a hearer to properly interpret the input he receives, or even to realize that interpretation is called for.
The difference between propositional and intended meaning may be manifested in the syntactic form of the utterance. For example, "Have you cut yourself?" may not be an inquiry, where the injury is obvious, but rather an expression of concern. (Holmes and Brown) An apparent request for information, "What are you doing on Friday night?", is actually the prelude to an invitation. A literal response, such as "I'm going down to Hotel Street to pick up sailors", is inappropriate. A particular problem for nonnative speakers is the use of modals "can" and "could" for requests or commands, e.g., "Can you open this jar?" On the surface, these seem to be questioning the hearer's ability to do something, but their function is different.

Intonation also causes interpretative problems for nonnative speakers. Sometimes the meaning of an utterance will actually be reversed by means of intonation, as in sarcasm and irony. Many languages do not use intonation in this way, and so comments like "Oh, the team was in good form today" (when they were beaten 37-0) may thoroughly bewilder the foreign hearer. One reason so much humor is incomprehensible to second language speakers is due to this playful manipulation of sound and meaning; as cultural outsiders, they are unable to grasp an inside joke.

Cursing is another example of the difference between referential and illocutionary meaning. Often the surface form of a curse will be virtually nonsensical, yet it is emotionally "loaded". Second-language speakers will often acquire these words quite easily and use them inappropriately, with negative social consequences.

Direct transfer of a formulaic expression from the first language can also cause miscommunications. Use of politness formulae differs between languages. When refusing an offer, an Indonesian says "Thank you", which is what an American says when he accepts it. Neither party knows how to deal with the resultant confusion when this formula is misapplied, since neither realizes that the intended meanings are contradictory.
Among the most variable and significant conversational dimensions is that which determines explicitness and appropriateness. This dimension involves the choice of topic, means of expression, degree of talkativeness and the role of silence in verbal interaction. Selection of an appropriate topic for discussion is partly a function of the relationship of the participants and involves age, sex, social status and rank, as well as the particular social situation. Some topics are suitable in a private but not a public conversation, for example. In addition to these situational factors, there may be established cultural norms which preclude discussion of certain topics. Among Athabaskan Indians, it is inappropriate and tempting bad luck to present oneself in a good light, or to make explicit references to the future such as predictions or optimistic remarks. In Japan, where a strong social value attaches to maintaining homogeneity and submerging the ego, expression of personal opinions or deep feelings has a negative connotation. Japanese see Americans as being far too revealing and selfish in the way they display themselves, and conversely Americans tend to view the Japanese as cold and unfeeling because their deepest emotions are not expressed.

This may create problems in an American classroom, where individual opinion is solicited and students are encouraged to put forth differing points of view. A teacher may see Japanese students as stubborn and uncooperative, while they are made anxious at being pushed to violate their cultural norms.

One measure of communicative competence is knowing what questions may be asked, particularly of a new acquaintance. Asians want to know marital status, length of time married, number of children (or reason for lack of them), and many other questions which Americans consider excessively personal. (A Lao Hmong woman I had known for a short time inquired as to my method of birth control, and a Vietnamese man, learning of our childless state, asked my husband "Teacher, you no love your wife?") Japanese, who live in a highly structured hierarchical society where knowledge of relative rank is vital,
are likely to question strangers closely about their job, age, and the
company they work for. Arabs want to know how much everything costs; such
inquiries violate the norms of this culture.

Expectations related to categories of speech acts as well as specific
topics vary in acceptability between cultures. For the Athabaskans, direct
questions are always considered rude. Obviously, an Anglo teacher who asks
students a lot of questions will have problems with this group. The amount
of elaboration or honesty in an excuse varies considerably for different
peoples. In many cultures, it is virtually impossible to deny a request for
information; it is preferable to answer incorrectly than to cause both
speaker and hearer to lose face by admitting ignorance. (At a train station
in Calcutta, I had to ask five people the track number of my train before I
found two answers that agreed; the other people simply couldn't tell me they
didn't know.)

Similarly, white middle-class American schoolchildren, when questioned
by the teacher, are likely to guess if they don't know the answer, while
Yakima Indian children will admit it right away if they don't. Japanese are
greatly offended by a direct "no" and will go to any lengths of evasiveness,
lying or even exiting to avoid saying it. Loveday gives the example of a
Japanese man in the U.S. who accepted an invitation that he knew he couldn't
honor, because he didn't have the skills needed to decline. In Sweden, one
cannot give an indirect or evasive answer to a question, no matter how tactless;
once it has been asked, it must be answered.

Appropriate use of register and forms of address is a problem area for
many nonnative speakers. They are apt to transfer overly formal, "textbook"
styles of discourse to everyday usage, greeting friends with "How do you do?"
The subtle shifts of register which signal changes in relationship (from
stranger to acquaintance or friend) are beyond many nonnative speakers.
They may continue to use the consultative style of communication, in which
a great deal of background information is supplied, when the less explicit,
higher-context casual style should be used. Thus, others may think that the second-language speaker is holding them at arm's length with his excessively precise speech. This unfortunate state of affairs is reinforced by many language teachers, who stress the use of complete sentences and slang-free expression.

Native-language modes of expression may also be mistakenly transferred to English. In Japanese, for instance, routine speech formulae are much more widely used than in English, as are titles, even with first names. People are generally referred to by their proper names (Mr. John) or their position (Mr. Head-of-a-Subsection); use of pronouns is considered rude. These indicators of politeness, "the appropriate form in the appropriate context" (Loveday), sound strange and stilted to Americans.

The amount of talkativeness exhibited by a speaker is another variable which is part of communicative competence. Compared to many peoples, Americans are talkative, and nonnative speakers who do not conform to this norm may be considered unfriendly, cold or rude. English-speaking people generally place a positive value on speech; this is not true for all cultures. The Japanese regard language less positively, and people who talk a lot may be seen as shallow, insincere or hypermanic. Japanese can be comfortable with long periods of silence which make Americans uneasy. Consider this perceptive passage, written by a Japanese graduate student:

Take the difference of the way of thinking between American people and Japanese people...Japanese people, who have historically been homogeneous, have an idea that originally human beings are not so different from each other (and) that we can get consensus and communicate without talking so much, through mutual understanding. On the contrary, however, American people seem to have an idea that every individual has a quite different way of thinking and doing by nature. So they try to make themselves understood to other people very much. Therefore every kind of method of communication is a very important thing for them. Even a little thing which seems to be a trifling matter to us Japanese tends to be discussed in detail in order to clarify the differences between the people.

(The above was written by a student in ELI 83, English Language Institute, University of Hawaii, October 1981.)
The degree of talkativeness can also indicate power relations between speakers, in terms of display behavior. American children are expected to "display" or perform for their parents, exhibiting their abilities in order to gain approval. Their role is subordinate; the parents, as spectators, are in a dominant position. In Athabaskan culture, the correlation is reversed: adults display to their children, who learn from keeping quiet and watching. (This is true of many cultures with an oral tradition, such as traditional Hawaii, where children learned hula and chants from watching their elders.) Thus, to Athabaskans, talkativeness or display is characteristic of a dominant role. In a classroom, Athabaskan children remain respectfully silent as befits their subordinate status, while their frustrated Anglo teachers are irritated at the children's arrogant, superior attitude.

The amount of conversational "space" required varies within cultures according to the situation and relationship of the participants. An Athabaskan may be quite talkative once he gets to know someone well (which is the point at which an American feels free to be silent), but he regards conversation with strangers as threatening and prefers to guard their individuality and his own by remaining silent. Thais are usually more restrained in their speech than Americans, but in at least one situation, visiting a sick friend, Thais are far more talkative and boisterous than Americans; each group is following its own rules for consideration.

Silence can be a speech act. In some cultures, it indicates assent; in others, it means refusal. In Thailand, silence is the most polite response to a sneeze. Warm Springs Indians do not feel obliged to answer questions when they are asked, or to acknowledge either questions or information; it is assumed that the listener is listening. In this country, silence is appropriate behavior toward a stranger at a bus stop, but in many places this would be extremely rude. It is not hard to imagine the resultant problems in social interaction or in the classroom when one culture's attitudes toward silence are transferred to another context.
Cross-cultural discourse problems are sometimes due to differing information structures. This term refers to the way the language is structured to indicate emphasis and to distinguish between information which is old and new. In English, a stress-timed language, this is achieved prosodically, by a combination of intonation, stress and pitch, and syntactically, by variations in word order. Many languages, such as East Indian and Athabaskan languages, do not use prosody for emphasis; instead, this is expressed with morphemes (affixes or particles). Speakers of these languages have a great deal of trouble hearing and interpreting such variations. Also, these speakers may be misunderstood by native English speakers because the pitch and intonation patterns which they carry over from their own languages are so different. Rising tones, used by Athabaskans to show episodic structure, are interpreted as questions by English speakers, who then respond (interrupt). Prosodic variations also have affective connotations, which can be misread.

One means of syntactic information structuring in English is by preposing the new, most important or foreground information to the front of a sentence. Athabaskan languages use postposing for this function. Clearly, it will be difficult for English and Athabaskan speakers to select the most important ideas in each other’s speech.

Having presented some of the general distinguishing features of discourse, I will now describe its sequence. This is basically invariant for all cultures. A conversation almost always begins with an exchange of greetings, followed by the introduction of a topic, usually by the first speaker. By definition, a conversation is two-way communication, so one of its characteristics is turn-taking behavior. This may be punctuated by interruptions as participants get (and lose) the floor. New topics may be introduced, accepted and discussed. The conversation will end with closing and farewell. This ordering of the speech event is universal, but there is great variance within the general framework, from one culture to another.
The function of the first speech acts of a conversation, exchange of
greetings, is to make an initial social contact and to establish phatic 
communion, creating a harmonious atmosphere as a prelude to further inter-
action. (Goffman calls these opening moves "contact signals", which open
the channels of communication.) When greetings are exchanged in passing
rather than as part of a chain of speech acts, a momentary connection or
recognition of the other's existence is the sole function served. A small
sampling gives an idea of the diversity of greetings:

American: Hi, how are you? How's it going? How've you been? etc.
Palauan, Indonesian: Where are you going?
Nepalese, Chinese: Have you eaten?
Korean: Are you at peace?
Japanese: There is respectful earliness.
Navaho: All is well.

The common element in all of the above greetings is that they are not
expected to be taken literally. The American does not really want to
hear about one's gallbladder troubles, nor does the Palauan really want to
know a precise destination. The appropriate response is as formulaic as
the initial greeting: "Fine, how are you?" or "Over there", respectively.
Second language speakers do not always understand the conventionalized
quality of another culture's greetings: I recall being irritated by
the apparent nosiness of Javanese, who I thought were overly concerned
with my plans.

Nonverbal greeting behavior, or kinemes, are equally varied and equally
ritualized, ranging from the American handshake or the French kiss on both
cheeks, to the Andamanese, who "greet one another by one sitting down in
the lap of the other, arms around each other's necks and weeping for a
while" (LaBarre, p.173). One can easily imagine the sorts of misreadings of
that can occur

greetings/across cultural boundaries.
After greetings have been exchanged and before the first substantive topic is introduced, there is often a brief period of "small talk", inrosquential discussion of neutral topics like the weather. Like greetings, these function to preserve the face of both parties rather than as an exchange of real information.

As a general rule, the person who opens a conversation also nominates the first topic. In cross-cultural discourse, sociolinguistic differences may put one person at an automatic advantage. The Japanese reluctance to approach someone until that person's relative social position is known, and the Athabaskan's reluctance to speak to anyone he does not know well, mean that contacts between these people and native English speakers will usually be initiated by the latter. This, of course, means that the nonnative speaker will rarely select the first topic of conversation. The Athabaskan is likely to remain in the more passive role because of cross-cultural differences in distribution of talk.

Distribution of talk refers to the way time is divided up between discourse participants. Its variables include who speaks first, length of turns, and changes of topic. Discrepant expectations regarding any of these factors can cause miscommunications. Athabaskan discourse patterns call for longer turns than those of English speakers, taking the form of alternating narrative monologues rather than dialogue. Because their pauses within utterances are slightly longer than those of Americans, Athabaskans are frequently interrupted before their messages are complete. When the English speaker has completed a speech act and pauses for a response, the Athabaskan still does not get a chance to speak, for by the time he is ready (having waited for a suitable interval), the American has already resumed talking. Thus, English speakers think Athabaskans don't have any ideas because they don't say anything, and the constantly short-circuited Athabaskans view English speakers as egocentric and overly talkative.
John Gumperz' conversational analyses of Indian English and British English speakers provide other examples of problems attributable to disparate discourse features. An Indian man increases the loudness and pitch of his speech in an attempt to regain the floor when he has been interrupted, and this is inferred to be an expression of anger. This paralinguistic feature contrasts with the more direct verbal signals which would be used by a native English speaker, such as "I'm not finished".

The flow of conversation in English is regulated by discourse markers or gambits, conventionalized expressions which indicate the direction of discourse. Gambits signal speech functions such as summarizing or rephrasing ("in short", "to put it another way", "that is to say"), return to a previous topic ("as I was saying", "well, anyway...") expression of opinion ("the way I see it", "in my opinion") and comparison of ideas and topics. These gambits are not likely to be part of the nonnative speaker's inventory. Problems in reception can result when he is unable to read these signals: he may have difficulty following the native speaker's train of thought, feel the other is incoherent or talking too fast. This can be especially problematic in a nonconversational context, such as a classroom lecture, where requesting explanation or repetition may constitute a loss of face. Just as important, the second-language speaker's own speech production is likely to seem disjointed and abrupt, as these stock phrases are required for smooth transitions.

In the final phase of conversation, closing and farewell, the ability to recognize and use these discourse markers is particularly important. Many a cross-cultural encounter has ended on an awkward note because the second language speaker did not know the proper way to finish. In general, closing behavior features include slowing of speech, lengthening of pauses, use of summarizing and reference to the conversation itself ("Well, it's been nice talking with you") and references to hoped-for future contact ("See you", "Let's get together soon"). Like the opening speech acts, these are politeness
routines which function to preserve speaker and hearer face rather than to express literal intentions. The nonnative speaker may misinterpret these formulae and eagerly accept an insincere invitation, or, unable to produce the appropriate stock phrases, may exit too quickly, leaving the native speaker wondering how he has caused offense.

Most nonnative speakers of English are unlikely to ever approach nativelike competence in social interaction, because they cannot (nor, in most cases, do they want to) shed their own cultural outlook. They may expand their knowledge of appropriate communicative behavior in English, but this competence will not supplant most of the assumptions and expectations which they carry over from their native context. To some degree, these socio-linguistic factors will continue to interfere with their communicative competence in English.
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