Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach Review

Scollon, Scollon and Jones first explore ‘the problem with culture.’ They explain that the biggest problem with the word culture is that “nobody seems to know exactly what it means, or rather, that it means very different things to different people” (Scollon, Scollon & Jones 2011, p. 3). They explain that a problem arises when people think those from one specific area or culture are all the same and/or have no differences, as well as when people assume there are no similarities between people of different cultures and backgrounds.

However, Blommaert (2013, p. 193) argues that the problem with culture and “superdiversity” is one of imagination. He says that the ways we have grown up to think about the world and the ways we have bracketed people as this or that, simply do not work. With the emergence of the internet, combined with new forms of migration, communities have changed drastically, blurring the lines between different cultures and nationalities.

Scollen, Scollen and Jones (2011, p. 3) say perhaps the best way to define culture is “a way of dividing people up into groups according to some feature of these people which helps us understand something about them and how they are different from or similar to other people.” This is an important concept when understanding intercultural communication, as to understand the communication between cultures, you must first understand what culture really is. They go on to explain how some people look at culture as something you have, like courage or intelligence, or as something you live inside, like a building or a house, which is not particularly accurate. Which leads to the next idea explored, culture as a verb.

Scollon, Scollon and Jones then look at the idea of culture as a verb. They say culture is not something that you think, possess, or live inside of, but rather something you do. And the way that you do it might differ at different times and in different situations. For example, how you speak to your friend online uses a very different set of knowledge and abilities as opposed to how you speak to your Grandmother.

This idea of ‘culture as a verb’ is very important when studying and understanding intercultural communication. It means if we want to understand intercultural communication, rather than focusing on people and trying to work out what ‘culture’ they are from, we should focus on what they are doing and try to understand what kinds of ‘tools’ they have at their disposal to do it.

Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2011, p. 5) explain that in order to do anything we need use ‘cultural tools.’ These ‘tools’ include physical things such as chopsticks or knife and forks, as well as more abstract things such as morals, beliefs, and language, eg. slang. For example, when conveying ideas to another person, we need language or some other system of communication to be able to convey the idea. Or, when cooking a meal, we need different kinds of pots, pans and other implements. Not everybody has the same kinds of tools available to them, and even when they do, not everybody uses them in the same way.

Gruzd, Wellman & Takhteyev (2011) also look at idea of language as a cultural tool, but in the

online sense. Their article focuses on Twitter as an ‘imagined community,’ meaning a community of people who will likely never meet in person.

Gruzd, Wellmen & Takhteyev (2011, p. 1302) found that there was common language, or “Twitterspeak,” within the twitter community, such as the use of Hashtags or the terms “retweet” or “like.” This “Twitterspeak” was found to be important when conducting productive conversations or, when identifying oneself as part of the overall Twitter community.

This idea of a common language is in all cultures and communities, both imagined and physical. For example, those Australia use the cultural tool of the English language differently to those from England or America, even though they all are speaking the “same language,” English, leading to some things being lost in translation. This leads to the next idea explored in the book, language is ambiguous by nature.

One of the final ideas Scollen, Scollen and Jones focus on is the idea that language is ambiguous by nature, meaning we can never fully control the meanings of what we say and write. They explain that the meanings we exchange through speaking and writing are not given in the words and sentences alone, but also out of how the listener or reader interprets them to mean (Scollon, Scollon and Jones 2011, p. 11).

The example that is used in the book is the saying, “the man is at the door.” This tells us something about where the man is located, but not very much. We can assume that he is outside the door, even in reach of the door where he has most likely just knocked or rung the doorbell. However, if we use the saying, “the taxi is at the door,” we assume that the taxi is at a further distance from the door, say in the driveway or on the road in front of the house. In order to understand these sentences, we must call upon our knowledge of the world, more specifically what we know about ‘men’ and ‘taxis’ and how they wait ‘at’ doors.

This is what Scollen, Scollen & Jones mean by language is ambiguous, the words themselves do not give us enough information to fully interpret their meaning. It is important to remember when communicating interculturally however, that ambiguity is common in all language, and not the result of poor learning (Scollen, Scollen & Jones 2011, p. 14). We must all rely on our cultural tools of language to make sense of what is being said or written, and the full meaning behind it.