CONTRASTIVE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND UNIVERSALS IN LANGUAGE USAGE

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My paper will be in two parts:
In the first part I shall investigate the cross-cultural validity of some of the analytic categories I have used in 2 contrastive projects: (1) the Bochum project "Communicative Competence as a learning objective in foreign language teaching" (cf. Edmondson et al. 1982), in which talk between pairs of German native speakers, pairs of English native speakers, and pairs consisting of a German learner of English and an English native speaker in a controlled and structured range of dyadic interactions was analysed and variously compared, and (2) the "Cross-cultural speech act realization project" (cf. Blum-Kulka and Olshtain 1984), based on native speaker and learner data from 7 different languages and cultures: British, American, and Australian English, German, French, Danish, and Hebrew. In this project, data has been elicited via questionnaires featuring discourse completion tasks in which subjects were asked to complete requests and apologies in a variety of socially differentiated situations. In the second part of the paper, I shall try to show how — inside the claimed universal framework — cultural differences can be located at various levels of analysis.

I. In seeking to justify the application of categories to analysis of data taken from different linguistic-cultural contexts, I shall make four claims which I shall deal with in turn.

1. In investigating discourse phenomena across languages and cultures, one may assume that there exist basic *interactional structures* which underpin all human interaction (verbal or non-verbal). These interactional structures are outlined in a model for the analysis of spoken discourse deve-

loped by Willis Edmondson (1981), which was later adapted in a "Pedagogic interactional grammar of English" (cf. Edmondson and House 1981).

I do not wish to suggest that *all* categories provided in the model are interactional universals, but that some so to speak *basic* categories, particularly at the level of the move and exchange, are. In any human encounter, the basic interactional unit for achieving social outcome is a bipartite exchange structure in which the initiating activity of one member is complemented by the sequentially relevant one of another. Of the two elements or moves, the first one is a *stimulus* for the second which is a *response* to that stimulus. (Such two-part structures also underpin the tied-pair phenomenon of the ethnomethodologists). Note that this structure is an interactional and not a conversational one. A question-answer sequence, for instance, constitutes a conversational unit: here the basic two-part interactional structure is filled out by two sequentially placed utterances. In *conversation*, elements of interactional structure provide the *slots*, illocutionary acts are their *fillers*.

The two moves in the basic two-part structure are called *Proffer* and *Satisfy*. Here is an example of this simple structure: the Proffer-Satisfy Exchange.

A Fred: could you translate this into German for me John
   John: sure
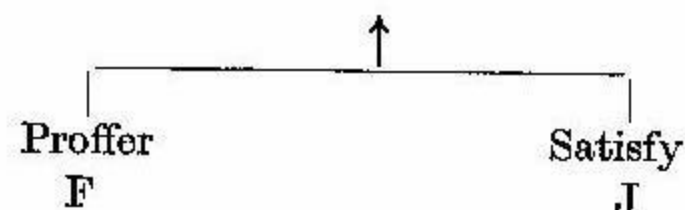
The bracketing indicates a "closed sequence": the arrow placed thereon indicates *outcome*.

Given this basic structure, it is clear that John has another option open to him than to immediately "satisfy" the proffer: if he turns down the request, his move will then *not* satisfy the preceding move. In this case a *Contra* would result. If a *Contra* is satisfied, a three-part-exchange results: cf. the following example.

B Fred: could you translate this into German for me John
   John: hm it's a hell of a length
   Fred: yeah well okay I'll ask somebody else
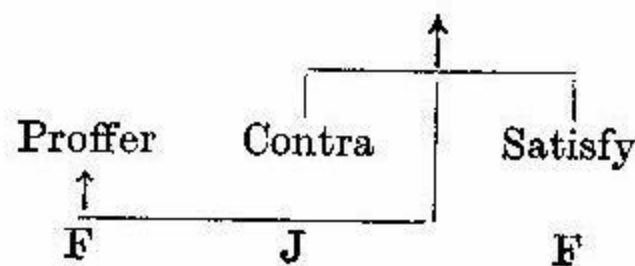
The arrow running back below the line indicates that in contributing to the outcome, F "withdraws" the original *Proffer*. The *Satisfy* works with respect to the preceding move in the same exchange.

Now, instead of immediately Satisfying a *Contra*, a speaker may, of course, Contra it (and this may, in fact, be repeated such that a whole string of Contras results). Consider the following example.

C Fred: could you translate this into German for me John
   John: hm well look Fred I'm pretty busy at the moment
   Fred: oh please John it's pretty short
   John: oh okay then seeing it's you
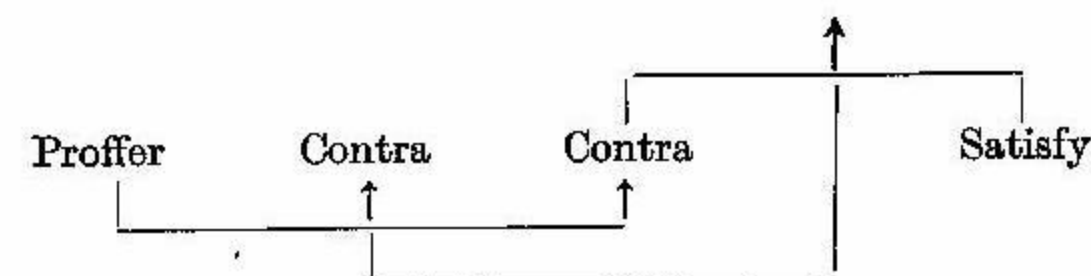
The three moves: *Proffer*, *Satisfy*, and *Contra* are the major elements of exchange structure, and these moves may, I would claim, be taken as universals in the sense that they provide "invariant points of reference for *description* and *comparison*" (Kluckhohn 1968:282). What this claim to universality amounts to is simply the following:

(1) if any effective social outcome is to be possible among members, one member must initiate the contact

(2) following such initiation, the addressed either faces the choice between behaving in a way *consistent* with the initiator's intention or approach, or of *not* doing so. In the case that the latter option is followed, rule 2 applies recursively.

Now it is, of course, clear that in conversational behaviour the options are not restricted to a clear Satisfying or Contraing of an initiation. This leads me directly to my second claim.

2. It is a generally accepted fact that social structures influence interaction (resulting, for instance, most obviously in the use of specific situational varieties or "registers") and that these social structures can generally be characterized by a) the presence or absence of a power relationship and b) by the presence or absence of an intimacy or familiarity relationship. These two dimensions have, in fact, been posited to be universal by many anthropologists, e.g., by Radcliffe-Brown (1952), Leach (1972), and recently by Brown and Levinson (1978), who add a third one, "Ranking of impositions in a particular culture". These dimensions regulate who may speak to whom how long or on what topic,

when, in which manner, and so on, and they influence the manipulation of interactional structures via the use of *strategies*. The most important point here is the following: given a social hierarchy inside any structured social organisation, there will always be different rights to decision making over others. This leads, I would claim, to different requirements in different speakers re *face-work* and negotiations and thus *strategic behaviour*.

In employing strategies, a speaker brings not so much his linguistic skills, but his psycho-social skills into play, which he often employs unconsciously and intuitively, managing to anticipate, discredit or combat his hearer's reactions in advance. The art of supporting one's hearer while, at the same time, trying to attain one's own goals, is the gist of this notion of strategy. From this it becomes clear that we are here dealing primarily with the *psychological interpretation* of conversational structure, and it is this general human psychological basis which may be taken as a justification of the speculated universality of strategies.

In Edmondson's model, it is the following type of strategy which seems to fulfil this claim to universality: the relation holding between two or more contiguous moves performed in one turn of talk by the same speaker, where this relationship is one between head move and one or more subordinate moves. These subordinate moves are called *supportive moves*, and their use is a strategic one. While not directly entering into interactional structure themselves, these supportive moves are derived from such structures via *anticipation*; examples of such strategic categories are the *Grounder*, used by a speaker to ground for instance a *Request*, the *Sweetener*, used to sweeten an imposition on the hearer implied in the request, or the *Disarmer*, used to anticipate a possible offence. Now, the realization of these strategies in particular types of moves may well differ widely — this is an empirical issue which would obviously have to be tested out with a wide range of languages.

In the use of strategies, notions such as "tact" (cf. Leech 1977) and "politeness" are at issue, notions which are centrally concerned with the degree to which a speaker takes his hearer into account and suits what he says and how he says it to what he believes his hearer's reactions might be. Such strategic activity is subsumed by Edmondson (1981) under the "H-Support-Maxim", which applies to both participants in any dyadic interaction and which, I would speculate, is also a panhuman, pancultural principle, given the assumption of basic rationality in human beings and their need for communication, the latter concept — if one takes its etymological roots into account — implying "sharing" and "distributing".

In sum, the concept of mutual support in an interaction, which in itself facilitates that interaction, may be a universal principle governing interactional behaviour in that any human being will have to make sure that his interlocutor (minimally) cooperates with him if he himself is to reach his own goals.

3. There are some *universal categories of speaker-meaning*, which I shall for convenience call "illocutionary categories", though the understanding of illocutionary acts is here non-standard. These categories may be derived from a small set of very basic *perceptual-cognitive distinctions* that reflect fundamental social needs. In other words, I boldly posit that there are some things you have to be able to do with words in any natural language...

Consider the following three perceptual distinctions:

(1) *Past versus Present*

Let us consider an event or state of affairs P. The claim is that a current or past-time located P is experiencable in a way that is fundamentally different from a future P. Note that this conceptual distinction underpins language acquisition ontogenetically and is independent of the time/tense system in any specific language. A non-future P is renewable, a future P is either plannable, or plans can be made in the light of its eventuality. I assume that the ability to make decisions re the future is intrinsically and uniquely human.
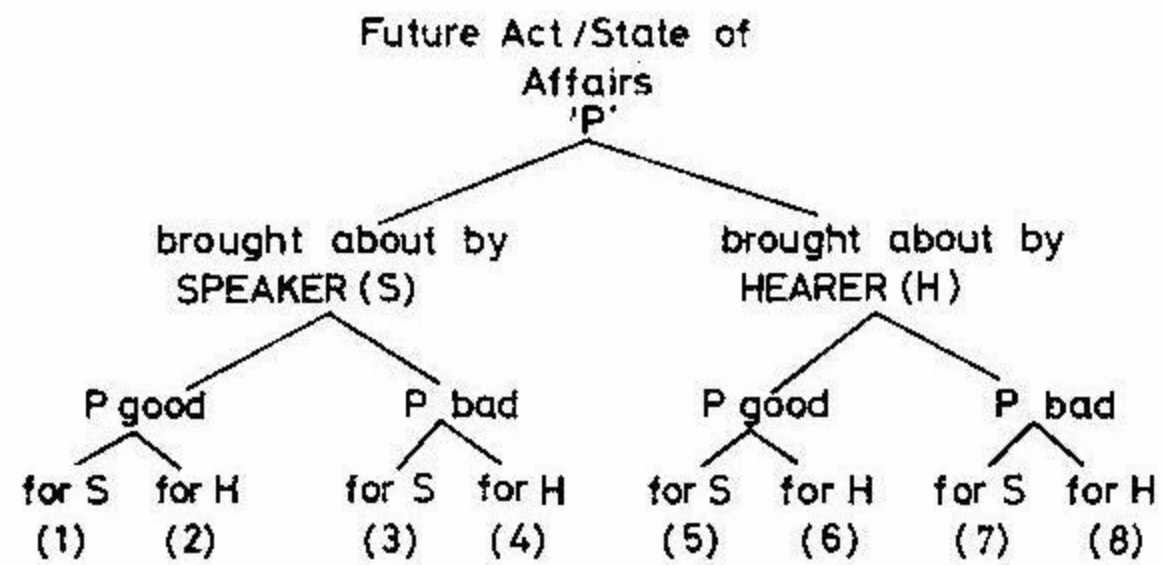
(2) *Self versus other*

Is the speaker agentively involved in a certain event or state of affairs, or the hearer? This distinction is one that also plays a crucial role in the first stages of language acquisition in children. I do not need to elaborate the claim that this perceptual distinction is a socially central one.

(3) Is an event (or state of affairs) deemed *desirable* or *undesirable*? This distinction reflects the difference between a *Satisfy* and a *Contra* — the two basic moves in interactional structure mentioned before. The claim is essentially that all human beings are prone to evaluate.

Now these three universal perceptual distinctions may be used to develop a system for distinguishing categories of perceived events or states of affairs (cf. Leech 1977 and Edmondson 1981) which seem to fit well with the perception of different kinds of speech acts, as this perception is reflected in the lexis of English. The system is based on 4 binary feature-pairs as follows:

(1) An event or state of affairs P is ($\pm$) future-located
(2) Either the speaker (S) or the hearer (H) is involved in causing P to be the case (to be glossed as agentive-involvement)
(3) P is perceived by a speaker as having positive or negative consequences
(4) for either the speaker (S) or the hearer (H).

For illustrative purposes, consider the values resulting from this matrix when the first choice is [+future], i.e., we are considering a future event or state of affairs P involving S or H with good or bad consequences for S or H, as follows:

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                  Future Act/State of
                       Affairs
                        'P'
            ┌─────────────────────┴─────────────────────┐
      brought about by                          brought about by
        SPEAKER(S)                                 HEARER(H)
       ┌──────┴──────┐                          ┌──────┴──────┐
    P good        P bad                      P good        P bad
    ┌───┴───┐    ┌───┴───┐                  ┌───┴───┐    ┌───┴───┐
  for S  for H  for S  for H             for S  for H  for S  for H
   (1)    (2)    (3)    (4)                (5)    (6)    (7)    (8)
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(1) "RESOLVE"/"DETERMINE"   (='RESOLVE')
(2) "OFFER"/"PROMISE"   (='WILLING')
(3) "RESOLVE" ETC (TO DO NOT-P)   (='RESOLVE')
(4) "RESOLVE" ETC (TO DO NOT-P)   (='RESOLVE')
(5) "REQUEST"/"PLEAD"/"ORDER" ETC (='REQUEST')
(6) "SUGGEST"/"ADVISE" ETC   (='SUGGEST')
(7) "REQUEST" ETC (TO DO NOT-P)   (='REQUEST')
(8) "SUGGEST" ETC (TO DO NOT-P)   (='SUGGEST')

Note that the terms used to gloss each constellation of features are *English* lexical items: my hypothesis is that for the analysis of conversational behaviour in *any* language, speech events which communicate the feature constellation attached to the events distinguished in the matrix, will have distinctive significance. Thus if a speaker communicates in an utterance a positive attitude towards his doing P in the future *in his own interest*, this is likely to be interpreted as an illocutionary act communicating an *intention* to do P. If a speaker communicates a positive attitude towards his doing P in the future, *as in the interests of H*, this will be interpreted as an indication of *willingness* on the part of S to do P, and so on.

The concept of illocutionary act here is somewhat more broadly based than is the case in Searle, for example. My claim is that utterances which "address", so to speak, events and perceived attitudes designed in this matrix *will have a distinctive social significance* — hence such broadly defined illocutionary categories may well have universal application in the analysis of social talk.

4. *Ritual Openings and Closings* of Encounters featuring a variety of verbal routines are available in any language community. These ritual routines are provided in any language to help speakers in the management of potentially face-threatening transitional stages which tend to be perceived as fraught with interpersonal peril because of the natural tension in any human being between keeping one's territory and transcending it and letting others approach one's territory.

Transitional ritual routines frequently occur in the form of fixed formulae

(characterized, for example, in the German and English interactions I examined by simple two-part exchange structures) which are indicative of the frequency of their use. The universality of such verbal routines has been proposed, among others, by Ferguson (1981), who provided examples from various different languages and who claimed that the use of greeting routines is related to the greeting behaviour displayed by many animals.

The specific ritual illocutionary categories occurring in Openings and Closings will, of course, vary across cultures. Thus I would not venture to claim that the categories I have set up in comparing German and English Openings and Closings in the Bochum project, such as, for example, the *Territorial Breach Apology* (apologetic formulae uttered in recognition of the fact that territory has been broken into) or the *Extractor* (used when a speaker wishes to "extract" himself from an encounter that has not led to a natural close), are universally applicable. My claim is merely that there is a universal *availability* of opening and closing routines, and it seems clear that different types of categories will be necessary to describe the specific manifestations of these universally available routine formulae in openings and closings in different cultures.

II. Inside this claimed universal framework, cultural differences can be located on at least the following 5 levels of analysis:

1. At *the formal level*, communicative acts will clearly be realized via different tokens. This is too obvious a claim to be expatiated on further.

2. *The collocational and sequential possibilities* of different communicative acts will vary across speech communities, i.e., a sequence of communicative acts in Culture A does not have a 1:1 correspondence to a functionally equivalent sequence of communicative acts in culture B. For instance, in comparing openings in certain telephone conversations in such closely related speech communities as the German and the Britisch ones, I found that the German sequence is, conventionally, of the following form:

X — Identification
Y — Identification
as compared to the English sequence featuring most commonly
X — Greet+Identification+Offer of Help
Y — Greet+Identification
or consider leavetaking rituals in German, where the tied pairs (Auf Wiedersehen — Auf Wiedersehen) are often repeated due to the convention of handshaking which prompts an extended leavetaking sequence.

3. The degrees and ways in which *verbal and non-verbal means of* realizing different universal communicative acts are related, is *not a constant*.

Many of the illocutionary values derived from the matrix featuring the 3

universal perceptual-cognitive dimensions will most likely be realized in variously interlocked stages of verbal and non-verbal expression in different cultures.

In my comparison of German and English interactions I found, for example, that in many instances in the German data the adjacency pair *Thanks — Minimization of Thanks* conventionally occurs *verbally*, whilst in the English data the *Minimize* slot is frequently realized *non-verbally*.

If there is variation in verbal and non-verbal realization of communicative acts even in such closely related languages and cultures, one may hypothesize that various slots in interactional structure will be realized in different modes depending on specific cultural conventions and traditions.

4. The degree and manner of *routinization* operating for the performance of different communicative acts, is clearly a cultural variable, so is, of course, the *range* of existing conventional formulae.

It is the occurrence of differential degrees of routinization which constitutes, in fact, one of the major overall results of my comparison of German and English interactions: in the English dialogues, tokens realizing certain ritual communicative acts in opening and closing phases, certain types of conversational strategies as well as illocutionary acts such as *Thanks* and *Apologize*, were found to be consistently more "routinized" than was the case in the equivalent German interactions. Thus, German speakers were prone to "improvise", to use more content-oriented, verbose and less pre-fabricated formulaic tokens to fit a specific occasion.

5. Despite the fact that the ways the *social dimensions of power* and *social distance* conventionally operate in language communities, *are probably similar or equivalent*, the social structures of a particular community will, of course, be unique to that community. Thus, we can, for instance, *not* assume that classroom discourse (in particular the level of formality conventionally holding between students and teachers) or doctor — patient interactions as conventionally conducted, will evidence structural and strategic similarity. The issue I am addressing here concerns the phenomenon that members of different cultures — in accordance with the way they perceive the social structure in their community — tend to select tokens evidencing different *degrees* of politeness or "directness". I am referring to what anthropologists have called the "cultural ethos" (cf. Bateson 1972), "the effective quality of interaction characteristic of members of a society" (Brown and Levinson 1978:248). In the Bochum project, for instance, we have found that this "cultural ethos" differs even between two such closely related cultures as the (British) English and German ones, and the comparison of politeness phenomena in the expression of Requests and Complains (cf. House and Kasper 1981) revealed substantial differences in the directness levels of both Complains and Requests in German and English, i.e.

etically speaking, German speakers tended to behave consistently less politely than their English counterparts.

For the purpose of contrastive discourse analysis, it is necessary to relate the posited universals to such empirically observable cultural differences as outlined in the five levels of analysis just described. In this area, cross-cultural empirical work is just at its beginning, and much empirical work needs to be done if we wish to get beyond speculative claims.

A valid claim of pragmatic universality can either be founded on investigations of X different languages and cultures (i.e., it might be empirically investigated), or it might be based on some psycho-social-communicative theory and a concrete model which is testable. In this paper I have followed the latter course. However, the model which underpins my claims has also been tested in a number of studies comparing German and English interactions (cf. House 1979, 1982a, b, c; House and Kasper 1981). Further, several of the categories provided in this model are currently being tested out with a number of different languages in the on-going Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project. The results so far seem to indicate that there is, indeed, a system of pragmatic regularities which underlies conversational behaviour.

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