



## ANALYZING DISCOURSE WITH A CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Defne ERDEM METE\*

### Abstract

This study, based on the Cultural Discourse Analysis framework of Carbaugh (2007), presents the cultural nature of a discourse analysis example that focuses on parts of a conversation between two Turkish graduate students. The paper highlights the fact that the framework is useful not only to analyze and interpret practices of intercultural communication, but also interpersonal communication. It examines several excerpts taken from the conversation to reveal how culture plays a role in the communication practices including the choice of topics and certain language devices. When viewed especially from the perspective of functional accomplishments in the conversation, the participants use indirectness, reported speech and personal topics to build trust, do relational work and hence, maintain a supportive communication on the whole. It is seen that one of the significant cultural symbols or values related to the discourse elements used in the study is modesty. The study suggests that cultural discourse analysis can be used in foreign language teaching in order to draw learners' attention to how culture plays a role in our daily conversation.

**Keywords:** Discourse Analysis, Culture, Cultural Values, Foreign Language Teaching.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Analysis of our everyday talk reveals that our feelings, social relations and the way we display our identity is shaped by what we believe is appropriate in our culture. Thus, implicitly or explicitly, our communication practices reflect our values and cultural beliefs. Carbaugh (2005: 1) explains this as:

In some sense, then, in every conversation, one or more cultures is at work, if by culture we are drawing attention to symbolic phenomena that say something about our common senses of acting (what we are doing together and how we do it), of being (who we are), of relating (how we are linked to each other), of feeling (about people, actions, and things), and of dwelling together (how we relate to the world around us).

Language learners should be aware of how culture influences the choice of conversational devices in a language. Therefore, activities based on discourse analysis can be used in the foreign language classroom to examine communication patterns (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; McCarthy & Carter, 1994; Riggenbach, 1999). With its sociocultural focus on the interpretation of communication, Carbaugh's (2007) framework of Cultural Discourse Analysis is especially useful in understanding why misunderstandings and conflicts occur in intercultural communication situations. In this paper, it is highlighted that the framework is helpful to focus on cultural elements in daily conversation regardless of whether it is interpersonal or intercultural. Carbaugh (ibid.) raises three main research questions that can be asked when analysing discourse with a cultural perspective: a. what is the functional accomplishment in the communication? b. what is the cultural structure of the communication? and c. what is the cultural sequencing of the communication? In this paper, the conversation of two Turkish people is analyzed mainly from the perspective of the functional accomplishments in the communication. In other words, the outcomes of the communication practices are analyzed in relation to the speech activities used and their cultural nature. Moreover, as the analyzed conversation takes place between two females, their talk is likely to reflect characteristic features of woman talk claimed in the literature. Coates (2013: 282) claims that the characteristics of female talk are "personal topics and gradual topic development, frequent and well-placed minimal responses, frequent use of hedges linked to the topic, questions (rarely information seeking), and collaborative turn taking strategies (jam sessions)."

In her discussion of Carbaugh's (2007) framework, Scollo (2011: 9) states that cultural discourse is an interrelation of thematic code systems. She (ibid.) goes on as "codes are subsystems of symbols, symbolic forms and meanings; the meanings consist of cultural premises (combination of belief and value) that express the meanings of symbols and forms, as well as their sociocultural functions." Two of the symbols that Carbaugh (cited in Scollo, 2011) found in his study on Donahue are 'being honest' and 'sharing', which are

\* Assist. Prof. Dr., Selçuk University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, defnemetem@selcuk.edu.tr.



related to cultural values. In this study, it is claimed that the cultural perspective in the analysis of the excerpts reveals a cultural symbol or value of 'being modest' which functions in maintaining an indirect communication style where necessary. Language learners' awareness of such cultural symbols can be developed by analyzing discourse with a cultural perspective as suggested in this paper.

## 2. DATA AND ANALYSIS

The conversation that is analyzed took place at a university bookstore in United States. The participants were two Turkish female graduate students. One of the participants, referred as A in the excerpts, meets the other participant B by chance, and suggests having coffee and a chat at the bookstore's café. Although they are not close friends, the two participants study at the same department and therefore see each other frequently. Participant A is in United States to study for a year. B is a Master's degree student and plans to go on her doctorate study in United States. She got acceptance from two universities' Ph.D. programmes, and she needs to make a decision on which university to choose. She has recently come back from her visit to one of these universities which is referred as (Uni1) in the excerpts. The other university is referred as (Uni2). The conversation took forty-five minutes and the study focuses on several excerpts of the discourse.

### 2.1. Indirectness

The conversation starts with a small-talk. Then, A wants to hear about B's trip to (Uni1). So, once they go to the café, they start as:

A: orhan pamuğun kitapları da var, onları görmüş müydün? (1)

*they have orhan pamuk's books too, have you seen them?*

şeyden sonra getirdiler herhalde

*they probably brought them after the thing*

B: hmmm, evet belki (2)

*hmmm, yes maybe*

bende bir kitabı duruyor okumak istersen verebilirim

*I have one of his books if you want I can give it to you*

A: hangisi?

*which one?*

B: benim adım kırmızı

*my name is red*

A: hmmm [onu okudum (2) hıhı sadece onu okudum

*hmmm I read that one (nodding) that's the only one I read*

B: [hmmm

*hmmm*

A: evet söyle nasıldı (2) [(Uni1)

*yes tell me how was? (Uni1)*

B: [(Uni1) mi?

*(Uni1)?*

This small-talk has a culturally shared topic, the winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, Orhan Pamuk. At the time when this conversation took place, the writer had received the prize recently. If the participants were from different nationalities, the small-talk would probably have a topic that is more likely and less risky to be known by a larger group of people. When A asks B whether she has seen his books, she is making an assumption that B *must* know Orhan Pamuk, as obviously he is very well-known in Turkey at the time. Thus, A is both implying her knowledge about Orhan Pamuk and the fact that she has checked his books in the bookstore before. She is checking B's knowledge at the same time, by asking whether B knows that the bookstore has his books.

Her comment that the bookstore must have brought the books after the 'thing' is indirect, as the 'thing' is referring to Orhan Pamuk's being awarded the Nobel Prize. B does not ask what that 'thing' is, as again it would be awkward not to know such an important fact. B shows her knowledge about the topic by stating that she has one of her books, and A again displays her knowledge by saying that is the only one she read among his books. The word 'only' gives an underlying meaning that she regrets having read only one of his books, and that she would like to read more.



This small-talk is different from typical small-talks as it is not about the weather or other topics of everyday life. Although in a small-talk it may be challenging to talk about a topic that requires specific knowledge as this one, in this case, it is still doing its typical function of building a bond between A and B (Tracy, 2002: 141). Both their shared backgrounds of nationality and the academic field they study make this choice of topic for the small-talk not risky. The indirectness of A does not make the talk hard to comprehend for B. On the contrary, if A had been more direct and asked B explicitly if she knows about Orhan Pamuk's achievements or about his books, it is very likely that B would have felt offended. As Tracy (2002: 179) points out about question formations, an explicit question would seem as if B is not treated 'knowledgeable' although she is. Hence, apart from forming a bond between A and B, indirectness is also functioning as altercasting here. By being indirect, A is implying that "I see you as a person who knows what is going on in the intellectual world."

Participant A keeps the small-talk short by a shift of the topic with an emphasized "yes" which is used to mean "ok, let's come to the point." It is implied that both of them know (Uni1) is intended to be the main topic of discussion. Indirectness is used by A again by not uttering the name of (Uni1) immediately, as if it is not necessary. B shows that she knows this by giving an overlapping response of "(Uni1)?" at the same time with A. After the small-talk, and after giving some information about her trip, B narrates what she has done in (Uni1):

B: kadın da beni aradı (1) işte şey yapıyo (2)  
*the woman called me sort of doing the thing*  
ikna (1) [etmeye hmmm çalışıyo  
*trying to hmmm convince me*

A: [(Uni2)'deki mi? vaaay (1) ne güzel  
*the one in (Uni1)? wow...how nice*

B: "kaç para alacaksın [(Uni1)'den?@"  
*how much money will you take from (Uni1)?*

A: [yaaa? (1) @ ama çok güzel birşey, değil mi?  
*really? but that's very nice, isn't it?*

B: mecbur dinledim (.) öylece kaldı. "biz o kadar veremeyiz"  
*I had to listen she couldn't say a word we can't give that much*

A: hmmm  
*hmmm*

B: "yani genelde onbir binle ondört bin arası veriyoruz (2)  
*I mean generally we give between eleven thousand and fourteen thousand*  
belki onbeş bine çıkarabiliriz"  
*maybe we can go up to fifteen thousand*  
"ama yazın da biz üç bin dolar veriyoruz (2) hani çalışırsan"  
*but in the summer we give three thousand, if you work*  
"hani onsekiz bin dolara çıkmış olur (1) hani aslında (Uni1)'le aynı"  
*well then it would be eighteen thousand in total, well the same as (Uni1) in fact*

A: hmmm  
*hmmm*

B: ama demedim ki (3) hani (Uni1) de sonuçta yazın üç bin dolar veriyosun, çalışırsan @  
*but I didn't tell her that well in fact (Uni1) gives three thousand in the summer too, if you work*

A: hadi yaaa? @  
*really?*

B: o zaman yine değişen birşey olmamış oluyor.  
*then there is again no difference*

A: evet  
*yes*

B: gerçi kesinlikle parasında değilim (3) cidden değilim.  
*in fact money is not the issue for me really it isn't*



B starts talking about what happened in (Uni1) by saying “the woman called me.” The choice of the word ‘the woman’ is interesting here due to the use of ‘the’ article. Obviously, B is talking about a specific woman who, in normal circumstances, is supposed to be known by A. However, in fact A does not know who ‘the woman’ is. She just knows B was accepted by (Uni2) as well. Despite this fact, it does not take her long to make sense of who she might be talking about, once she hears the word ‘convince’. What can be inferred from the use of ‘the’ in this case is that, it gives the meaning of “you must know who I am talking about”, functioning as a reference to the shared past of A and B, although not long, and hence forming a social bond between A and B. We would say B is assuming that A will know who she is talking about.

If this situation is thought in isolation from this context, one would expect B to say “a woman who works at (Uni2) called me”; “a woman working at the department in (Uni2) called me” or “the woman who works at the department in (Uni2) called me.” However, bearing in mind that her use of ‘the woman’ was still made sense by A shows that it is not very important who ‘the woman’ actually is, what matters is what she said. Therefore, it can be claimed that the use of the word ‘the woman’ is showing the stance of B, seeing the woman not as someone whose *identity* is necessary to be known, but instead as someone whose *action* is worth knowing, in this case convincing her to choose (Uni2) for Ph.D.

B’s use of the discourse marker ‘thing’ in the same sentence is also interesting, which functions as making an indirect reference to the following action of ‘convincing’. The same discourse marker was also used before by A, again to be indirect. While A had not explicitly mentioned what she meant by ‘thing’, B explains what she means by it just after saying it. If she did not make an explaining statement after ‘thing’, A would not understand what she was talking about. Therefore, ‘thing’ is used here to avoid making a direct statement of the action. This is probably because a more direct statement has the risk of being understood by A as ‘showing off’. When thought in the framework of Turkish culture, making a direct statement such as “someone called me to try to convince me for a scholarship” would not be modest. Therefore, it can be claimed that a cultural symbol or pattern that is present in B’s discourse is ‘modesty’ which is an important cultural value in Turkish culture.

## 2.2. Use of Reported Speech

Wooffitt (1992) explains that, generally, reported speech is used by the reporter to show that one is objective on the matter. In this way, the listener can also judge what is told objectively. However, it is not very likely that the reporter can be so accurate in his/her sayings. That is because one can report as far as one remembers. Therefore, while reporting, it is very likely that the person is reporting the event from his/her perspective. He/she may be highlighting some aspects which are important to him/her. As Tracy (2002: 157) points out, intonation and choice of words can also be indicators of what the reporter’s stance is in terms of the matter. We can see such examples in the previous excerpt.

What ‘the woman’ is offering to B is obviously something that would be appreciated by anyone - offering a good amount of scholarship- however, the attractiveness of the offer is not the point of B. The point that B is trying to make is “she is trying to convince me not knowing that (Uni1) is offering me more than (Uni2).” Buttny (1997) states that reported speech has the function of criticizing, challenging or resisting actions that are seen as troublesome. In the above excerpt, although there is not a troublesome, unwanted situation, the reported speech functions as highlighting the naivety of ‘the woman’. From another perspective, the situation is troublesome due to the naivety or lack of knowledge of ‘the woman’.

B is being indirect when she is reporting. When she says “I had to listen”, she is showing her stance, implying that “there was actually nothing to listen, but I listened out of politeness.” There is also a gap in the sequence of events. After she says “I had to listen”, she continues by saying “She could not say a word.” What is missing between the two utterances is something like “I told her how much (Uni1) is offering me.” However, A can still follow her, as she can understand what she means based on the context. The next sentence which is a direct reported speech “We cannot give that much” is bearing an indirect phrase ‘that much’.

Obviously A can infer that (Uni1) is offering more than (Uni2), but she does not know how much. B does not feel the need to state the amount explicitly either because the phrase ‘that much’ makes the point. If the explicit amount was stated here, again it would not be seen very proper by A, taking the cultural background they share into account. As it was mentioned before, there is the risk of being seen as showing off with one’s words in Turkish culture. Therefore, B is choosing her words carefully, and not being very direct even when she is reporting directly.

However, even the indirect phrase ‘that much’ could be considered not so modest from another perspective. The fact that A responds to B in a supportive way shows that she does not see what B says as something to ‘show off’. It can also be claimed that the supportiveness of A makes B feel more comfortable



about what she is saying. Then, B feels free to report the exact amounts. We can say that there is a conversational preference of acceptance and supportiveness by each side. Although we don't see this preference much in B's speech so far, she will show this in her later conversation with A.

In the same utterance of "we cannot give that much" the language choice of 'cannot' is also worth paying attention, as it gives some sense of B's stance too. We do not know whether 'the woman' actually used 'do not' instead of 'cannot' in her actual speech. It is clear that there is a meaning difference between the two. 'Cannot' gives a meaning such as "although we would have liked to offer more, it is beyond us." Thus, it sounds as if 'the woman' admits their 'lower' status when compared to (Uni1), which makes the direct reported speech seem more objective and convincing.

Rather than intonation as a sign of stance as Tracy (2002) mentions, in this excerpt we see the use of laughter. B's laughter at what she is saying shows that she finds the situation funny. For instance, in her second laughter, what is funny is not the amount of money offered, but the fact that 'the woman' does not know that (Uni1) offers the same amount of money in the summer too, which is somewhat naivety. Each time B laughs, A responds with a laughter too. A's first laughter has the function of showing a sign of happiness for the offer which is accompanied with a direct utterance of "that's very good, isn't it?" Thus, the laughter of each side does not necessarily have the same function.

The end of the excerpt is interesting as it shows a moral stance of B. The utterance can be seen as a self-presentation device. Tracy (2002: 160) points out that in narratives we can sense self-presentational devices although they may not be very visible. In this case, B is making a deliberate choice of showing her stance explicitly. After reporting the speech of 'the woman', which was somehow indirect in its underlying meaning, B feels the need to be very explicit by saying money is not actually the issue for her. It is almost a clarification that means "please do not misunderstand me, money is not my priority." The reason B might have felt the need to state this may be A's more neutral responses to what B was telling. As can be seen in the excerpt, from A's responses it is not very clear whether she is still supporting B or whether she also finds the situation amusing as B does.

### 2.3. Choice of Personal Topics

The first ten minutes of the conversation is about B and her academic plans. Afterwards, we see a quick switch of topic which is performed by B after a silence of three seconds. Turkish culture is more tolerable towards silence than American culture probably because it is a high-context culture while American culture is low-context. Therefore, the three seconds pause below is not a disturbing silence for the participants of the conversation to make an attempt to initiate a new topic of conversation.

B: doğru mu değil mi bilmiyorum (2) ama olabilir

*I don't know whether it's true or not but maybe*

(3)

B: sen nişanlıydın (1) değil mi?

*you were engaged right?*

A: evet (1)[hıhı

*yes (nodding)*

B: [hmmm

However, B's attempt to change the topic makes it clear that she thinks there has been enough talk about herself, and now they had better talk about A. This attempt is interesting in the sense that it is a very direct start for a new topic. The topic of the new conversation is totally different from the previous one. B asks A whether she is right or wrong in remembering that A is engaged. If she had said "what about your academic plans?" that would be a more expected switch of topic for A. The new topic is about the personal life of A. B can be considered to make a relational work by this question as if meaning "I want to know more about you." She can be trying to build their relation by not hesitating to ask her about her personal life. As Tracy (2002: 161) explains, the topical content of the conversation is an important factor to understand the kind of relational work.

Although there is a direct start, there is indirectness maintained by the use of 'were'. The use of past tense is giving a meaning of "as far as I was told." A had not spoken to B about her personal life before. If B had said "I know that you are engaged, aren't you?" it would be more direct and would sound awkward. However, asking for confirmation shows that she is trying to be polite. The quick response of A without waiting for the clarification shows that she is welcoming B's intention to know more about her. Therefore, in this part of the conversation we can see both the topic of conversation and using indirect language forms as a





strategy to do relational work. The conversation follows with A's plans of her wedding ceremony in the summer.

A: yemek olsun istiyoruz

*we want (the ceremony) to include dinner*

B: hmmm... (1) haaa o güzel

*hmmm ooo, that's nice*

A: ama işte o bile (2) karar vermesi zor oluyor (1) yer bulmak falan (2)

*but even that is hard to decide on finding the place etc.*

ben açık havada bir yer istiyorum mesela

*for example I want an open-air place*

B: aaaa (1) süper çok güzel olur

*ooo super it would be very nice*

A: ve koca şehirde öyle bir yer bulamadılar (1) ona yani ben hayret ediyorum

*and they could not find such a place in that big city I am well shocked by it*

B: hmmm

*hmmm*

A: öyle bir yer var mı? (1) evet sen de düşün

*is there such a place? yes think about it*

In the above excerpt A is using the pronoun 'we' to refer to herself and her fiancé. This shows that the decision of finding a place for a wedding ceremony that includes dinner is a matter of what the two of them want. However, then she uses the pronoun 'they' when she is somehow complaining about her fiancé and his family. Therefore, while in the first case both A and her fiancé were the agents, in the second one A becomes the 'acted-upon' and her fiancé and his family become the agents. This shows how A is positioning herself depending on how she feels. As Tracy (2002: 163) mentions, shift of pronouns in the narration are signs of one's positioning oneself based on the situation.

Kansu- Yetkiner (2006) also gives examples of positioning oneself by the use of shift of references in her analysis of a Turkish discourse. She states that the use of 'we' would give a message of sharing the responsibility of the action. In the above excerpt, A obviously does not want to share the responsibility of finding a proper place for the wedding dinner by preferring to use 'they' instead. Also, this distancing of A from her fiancé and his family makes her close to B, as by complaining about 'them' she becomes an objective outsider who is commenting on the situation just like B. The fact that she feels free to complain about her fiancé and hence sharing details of her personal life with B is an attempt of showing closeness to B, giving the message that "I know I can trust you in telling these things."

From another perspective, when considered in the light of Turkish culture, for a woman who is about to get married or already married, complaining about her fiancé's or husband's family is not an unusual topic of conversation between women. This is probably due to the cultural expectation or belief in the Turkish society that there is likely to be a tense relationship between the married woman and her mother-in-law. Therefore, this conversation of A about her fiancé's family is not necessarily reflecting that A is having a really important problem with 'them', she is not actually giving a very personal detail about her personal life. Complaining, here, has more a function of gossiping by choosing a common topic of talk among women. Therefore, the speech-act of complaining accompanied by a typical cultural topic is making a bond between A and B. It turns out to be an act of 'asking for advice' as A asks B to think of a possible place for the wedding dinner. B cooperates by thinking about it and showing her collaboration and supportiveness even before A's asking.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In the excerpts of this conversation we see that indirectness, the use of reported speech and choice of personal topics function for a common aim of the two participants: maintaining a supportive conversation and forming a social bond. The analysis also reveals some possible underlying meanings which would not be apparent to a listener immediately. Listening to the conversation several times lets a listener have a deeper understanding of how the conversation is constructed through identity-related issues. Also, culture seems to be an important factor that lets the conversation go fluently. Someone from a different cultural background might not easily recognize the underlying basis of some of the self-presentation and stance-taking devices in the conversation whereas a Turkish person would have less difficulty in understanding them. Learners of a foreign language would benefit from having an awareness of such conversational devices as culture is an



integral part of language learning. The study shows that one of the cultural symbols or patterns that appear to explain a significant amount of certain discourse features in the conversation is modesty. Future studies can focus on other cultural symbols to analyze discourse in interpersonal communication contexts.

#### Appendix

Transcription Conventions:

[ Overlapping utterances

. Falling pitch.

? Rising pitch.

, Continuing intonation.

\_\_\_ Marked stress (underlining)

(.) Brief pause up to half a second

(1) Number of seconds (one second)

@ Laughter

"..." Reported speech

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