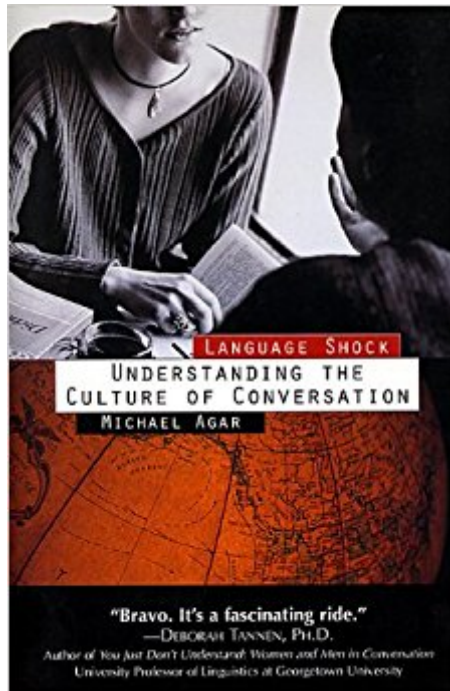




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Language Shock: Understanding The Culture Of Conversation



Synopsis

The key to communication, says linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar, is understanding the context and culture of conversation. In *Language Shock*, Agar reveals how deeply our language and cultural values intertwine to define who we are and how we relate to one another. From paying an electric bill in Austria to opening a bank account in Mexico to handling a parking ticket in the United States, he shows how routine tasks become lessons in the subtleties of conversation when we venture outside our cultural sphere. With humorous, insightful stories from his extensive travels, Agar engages us in a lively study of "languaculture" and enriches our view of the world.

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Customer Reviews

Agar, an anthropologist and ethnographer, wants Americans to break out of their cultural superiority complex and to join "the growing global conversation" embracing multicultural voices. Leaning on linguist Benjamin Whorf's theory that each language shapes its speakers' ways of seeing, acting, thinking and feeling, Agar relates personal encounters with language and cultural differences, drawing on his stay in Austria during the Kurt Waldheim Nazi scandal in 1986, his work as a public health official treating heroin addicts in Kentucky in 1968, travels in Mexico and Greece and village kinship systems in India. The informal, highly anecdotal narrative sketches a theory of "languaculture," Agar's coinage emphasizing the inextricable links between language and culture and the way we build mental "frames" to organize our expectations. Agar, who teaches anthropology at the University of Maryland, serves a smorgasbord with tasty tidbits instead of a full meal. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or

unavailable edition of this title.

Perceptive anecdotes from Austria, India, and Mexico, from heroin-addict treatment centers, scuba dives, and linguistics conferences pepper this primer on the intricacies of cross-cultural discourse and ordinary conversation. Coining the term “languaculture” to merge two somewhat ambiguous concepts into one slightly less uncertain term, Agar, a professor of linguistic anthropology (Univ. of Maryland, College Park), argues that language is not simply grammar and vocabulary (never mind phonology); that culture is as tangible and fluid as daily life; and that the two are intertwined--and often get snarled up. In his astute informal gloss of converging concepts in linguistics and cultural anthropology, Agar takes exception to the Berlitz notion of standardized phrases for generic situations as a means of getting along in foreign countries, as though communication merely involved set responses to set frames of reference. In his search for ethnographic “rich points” (where native and non-native speakers are likely to trip themselves up), Agar sometimes fixes on commonplace words that have particular cultural significance but slippery definitions. In one instance, while working in Vienna, he spent some free time trying to find the meaning of Schm„ha sort of defensive irony, or sly black humor, or slick equivocation. One student gave the example of Austrian-born Marie Antoinette’s infamous “Let them eat cake” as typical Schm„h; but though Marie’s French was perfect grammatically, the sans-culottes still did not catch on to her intention, which was not to mock the lower classes but to deflect the tension of the situation through humor. Speech acts--more general forms of social discourse like joking or lying--can be more slippery still for both speakers and society, as Agar demonstrates in an analysis of Kurt Waldheim’s rationalizations of his Nazi collaboration. If his discussion of scholarship tends to skim over important figures and ideas (such as Wittgenstein and anthropologist Harold Garfinkel) and his original insights are slight by comparison, his presentation is readable and his observations engaging. A stimulating personal reflection on the complexities of communication between people, in whatever language or culture. -- Copyright ©1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Michael Agar has a Ph.D. from the Language Behavior Research Laboratory at Berkeley and currently teaches at the Dept. of Anthropology, University of Maryland. Agar’s opening remarks, in a chapter entitled “Culture Blends” is not what one might expect. Is he talking about cross-cultural problems? Well, sort of. Is he talking about sub-cultural “conflict” “yes, in a way. His

Agar (1994) actually came when he was speaking English to a university colleague, a female, who initially took what he said (an intended pick-up line which she rebuffed). Agar's point here is to show the intertwining of language and culture and the subtleties interlaced in our conversations with one another. In that example it was between the world of the male and the world of the female. Agar gives another example. A policeman in Washington, D.C. shot a man who turned out to be Hispanic. The officer didn't speak Spanish. A riot ensued because of the lack of communication between the officer and the inhabitants of the area of D.C. the officer was in. But the author notes that people tend to "squeeze the concept much too tightly." He goes on to say: "To understand language, you have to understand that DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE GO WELL BEYOND WHAT YOU FIND IN THE GRAMMAR AND THE DICTIONARY" (His emphasis). (p. 15f). He notes that the grammars "are clear as freshly washed crystal. Du, the informal version [in German], is for relatives, friends, and kids. Sie is for everybody else. However, the rule doesn't carry you very far." (p. 18). We are talking about the difference between SPEAKING a language and COMMUNICATING in one. This is why, if you are going to speak across cultures or even across sub-cultures, this book is important. He says: "Culture changes you into a person who can navigate the modern multiCULTURAL world." ([his emphasis] p. 21). If you are interested in learning what it means to COMMUNICATE (as opposed to speaking) in a language, this book is for you! COMMUNICATION is more than just using the language. (Agar does not refer to Edward T. Hall except on p. 189. But E. T. Hall's book THE SILENT LANGUAGE, published as long ago as 1965 but still available as a reissue, is an important illustration of just how culture and language are spun together). To remind the reader that language and culture are so intertwined, Agar used the term "languaculture." He says, "What I want to happen, what I want you to remember at the end of this book, is that whenever you hear the word LANGUAGE or the word CULTURE, you might wonder about the missing half. That the reason for the clunky term, as bad as anything Saussure invented. 'Languaculture' is a reminder, I hope, of the NECESSARY connection between its two parts, whether it's THEIRS, or YOURS, or, as it always is when it becomes personal, something that belongs to you both." (p. 60). (emphasis the author's). One of my students had decided to take a "foreign language" at our institution because, he was told, he had to! Since he was an

American who had lived many years in Nicaragua, he decided to take Spanish (instead of my Greek class!). He told me (apologetically) he thought it would be a breeze. It turned out to be the most abstruse class in his curriculum! He had not even realized there was so much difference between the "formal" Spanish and the "street" Spanish which he thought was the normal language throughout Nicaragua. He had learned his Spanish in one "circle" of Nicaragua and thought that was Spanish. It was, but it was not the "circle" of Spanish he thought he would be learning in the classroom. Agar introduces his readers to the "circle" in his second chapter. On p. 33, Agar gives an example of how classical linguists ("historical linguists") take words from various languages and can compare them: "English, Father; German, Vater; French, pere; Spanish padre. But the author conveys his discussion far beyond the "words" or the "grammar" to show how the interaction between language and culture cannot be ignored if COMMUNICATION is your goal. Agar's chapter entitled "Cultural Signifieds" tackles the connection between language and culture. He discusses the writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf, a bad name for some linguists. Agar likes to use the word "languaculture" to show this intimate relationship between language and culture. It is in this chapter that Agar discusses the concepts of LINGUISTIC DETERMINISM and LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY. And it is this discussion that raises the importance of our understanding between why the original Whorfian view is surely wrong, but why the "weaker" Sapir-Whorf is surely right. If another author wants to throw Benjamin Lee Whorf's approach to language in the trash, Agar's book is the one to read to present you with the correct perspective. In his chapter entitled "Situations" he introduces his reader to the technical term "rich" that is, a point in which the culture and the language are so intertwined that he calls some words in a language "rich" because they are so very subtle and imbued with deep meaning. Agar likes to use a lot of anecdotes and this makes the book a very interesting read. Make no mistake. This book is about language. It is also about culture. It is, moreover, about anthropology and other sub-disciplines in the social sciences. And, yes, since this book is written by an academic, it has notes but Agar confesses that this book is NOT an academic book! Yet, since this

is a book written by an academic, the notes are kind of "prosaic" and stretch from p. 259 to p. 272. It has a wonderful index but, alas, it does not have a bibliography in the formal sense of the word. Bibliographic references are embedded, instead, in that prosaic treatment. Not bad for a popular approach to language and culture. Pick this book up. Read it! You'll be rewarded with an expansive mind about the interrelationship between language and culture.

One of my top 3 favorite anthropology books of all time. Lays out some of the major issues in linguistic anthropology in a clear and engaging way, and never loses sight of the human experience that is the *raison d'être* of ethnographic analysis. His concept of "rich points" in language is one I've used in my own writing and teaching. Very sad that we recently lost this innovative scholar and great human being. RIP Mike.

When I went to a recent conference on this topic, nearly all the scholars cited this work. That's especially interesting because it's written for the lay reader, not for scholars. Yet the book accomplishes its goal. It presents in clear terms some of the many reasons that it's hard to communicate with people from other language groups. Cultural expectations so often get in the way, or at the very least, they complicate things. Agar spent a long time in Austria, so he has many useful personal experiences to draw upon. His book makes it clear that communicating to people of other cultures is a tremendous feat. So many things can go wrong! But in this global world, developing the savvy to talk to international colleagues is crucial. Although Agar's book was published nearly twenty years ago, it's still very useful. For teachers who will have second-language writers in their classrooms, the book should be on a must-read list.

Has some interesting points, but rife with redundant anecdotes. Hard to find any true epiphanies in this text.

Easy book to comprehend. Explains theories with examples rather than interpretations.

Few books are in the 'must read' category. This is one of them.

I purchased this as a gift for a dear friend. He loves this book. It was a wonderful purchase for people that are interested in this topic.

good

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