The Role of Sociolinguistics in The Development and Conduct of Federal Surveys

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1. Introduction

With the ever-increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in the United States, the Census Bureau is facing the need to obtain high quality data from non-English speaking households. In Census 2000, the Census Bureau recognized the necessity for data collection instruments in languages other than English and provided the translation of the census questionnaire in five languages other than English. However, obtaining high quality data from households where English is not the home language requires more than just having a correctly translated data collection instrument. It requires the understanding of respondents' cultural expectations in communication and behavioral norms so that we can better communicate with respondents and gain their cooperation.

The process of collection data through surveys involves at least three modes of communication: filling out a survey questionnaire (either on paper or on the internet), face-to-face interview, and telephone interview. Each of these modes entails communication in one or more languages and visual as well as aural modes. Thus answering a survey questionnaire is a communicative event that involves the use of language and the understanding of language in its cultural environment. When dealing with surveys, respondents who speak languages other than English may not necessarily possess the same set of communication norms and interaction skills as English speakers. This affects item response and response rates for non-English speaking populations. We need to incorporate research in other disciplines to find ways to address barriers in data collection associated with respondents' language use and cultural differences so as to increase survey participation and reduce non-response rate, as well as to ensure high quality data.

This paper examines the communicative process underlying surveys from a sociolinguistic perspective. Sociolinguistics studies the interaction between language use and socio-cultural factors and the social function of language, and to identify interaction patterns in a social setting and different ways of language use. It also provides insights on how linguistic and cultural issues influence the way speakers of different languages communicate. By analyzing surveys as a communicative event, I show that sociolinguistic notions can be applied to understanding the interactional aspect and the underlying communicative process of surveys. I begin with the notion of answering a survey questionnaire as a communicative event, and the interactional components of such an event, and then discuss cross-cultural differences in communication styles in each stage of an interaction, and their implications for survey participation among non-English speaking populations. The main purpose of this paper is to raise some cross-cultural issues for consideration in the development and conduct of federal surveys.

2. Answering a survey questionnaire as a communicative event

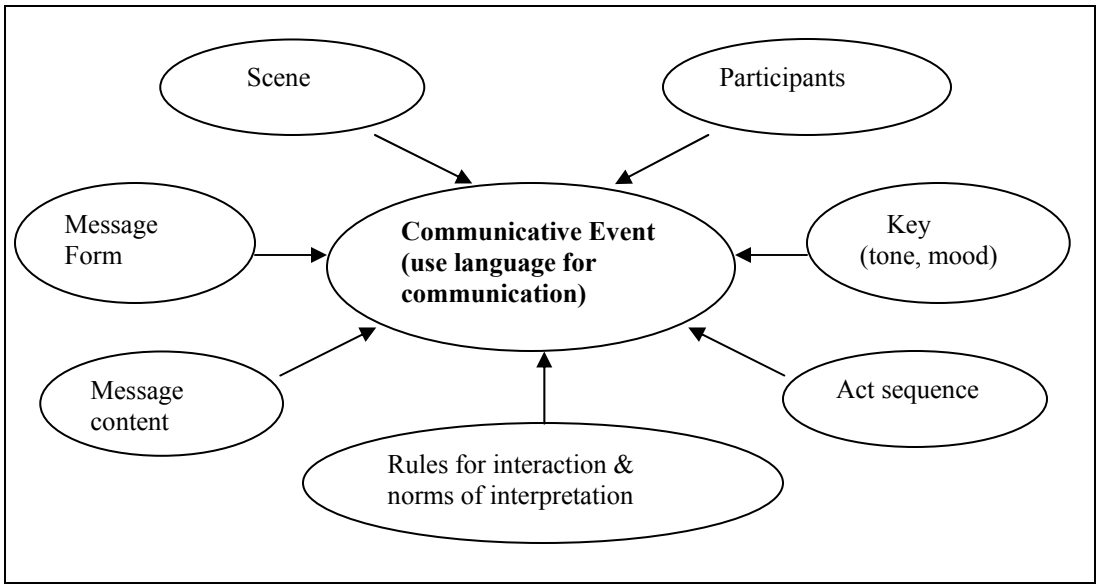
Surveys have been viewed as both cognitive and social processes (Sudman, Bradburn, and Schwarz, 1996). Typical cognitive models of the response process focus on the respondent's internal stages of answering a question (Cannell, Miller, and Oksenberg, 1981). Social models study the interaction of interviewer's demographic characteristics and task characteristics on respondent behavior (Sudman and Bradburn, 1974.) With the increase of cultural diversity in survey population, cultural factors, including cultural value systems and social circumstances of personal experience, have been recognized as a strong influence on survey quality and survey participation. However, much of the discussion of cultural factors is confined to the immediate interaction surrounding question and answer. Issues under discussion include how cultural norms, values, and experiences influence the processing of the four tasks of the response process (Johnson et. al. 1997), how cultural saliency of events has an effect on memory and reporting, and how cultural context affects question interpretation (Braun, 2003; Schwarz, 2003). These elements have a powerful influence on respondent behavior, but are not the only factors that condition and shape cross-cultural norms of survey participation. Cultural differences in communication styles have received little attention as a major causal factor in the survey process. There are clear cross-cultural differences in communication styles and other communicative dimensions in a particular social setting (Saville-Troike, 1989). Survey interaction is no exception. It is, therefore, important to investigate cultural influences on the interactional aspect of the survey process.

2.1 Communicative event

A communicative event is a bounded entity of some kind with the purpose of communicating a message. It consists of the following salient components (cf. Saville-Troike, 1989, Scollon and Scollon, 2001) as illustrated in Figure 1:

- scene (setting, topic, purpose, genre)
- key (tone or mood)
- participants (who they are, roles they take)
- message form (speaking, writing, other media)
- message content (what is communicated about)
- act sequence (order of communicative acts)
- rules for interaction and norms of interpretation (common knowledge, cultural knowledge, shared understandings)

Figure 1. Components of a communicative event



These components interrelate to and influence each other. For example, the message form of a greeting is influenced not only by the season, time of day, and physical location, but the age, sex, and role-relationship of the participants, and the purpose of the encounter (Saville-Troike, 1989: 157). These components provide one type of contextual frame within which meaningful differences in interaction behavior can be discovered and described.

Answering a survey questionnaire in any mode (mail, telephone, face-to-face interview or internet) can be viewed as a communicative event because it uses language to obtain information from respondents. This event involves a particular social setting (respondent's home, office, or questionnaire assistance center), participants (interviewers and respondents), message form (mode of data collection), message content (subject matter of a survey), act sequence (question-answer), and shared understanding of roles and interaction norms in a survey. In order for a communicative event of answering a questionnaire to successfully take place, participants need to share not only the language, but also rules for interaction in a survey interaction and cultural knowledge of the social context of surveys.

2.2 The social context of federal surveys

The Federal survey itself is a special kind of communicative event that encompasses a set of definitions and interaction norms. These definitions and norms define the roles of participants and the information gathering process and are open to cultural variation.

As a communicative event, federal surveys have the following characteristics in terms of social interaction. First there is an unsymmetrical power relation between survey respondents and the assumed government voice embodied in a survey. Second, there is the need to communicate to the respondent the legitimacy of sponsorship and authenticity of a survey. Third, there is the need to establish shared purpose of communication, the purpose of questions asked or the validity of the questions asked in a survey. If this is not established, the event does not take place or misleading information will be provided. Fourth, there is the need to convey to the respondent the idea of "reciprocity", or benefits of participating in surveys. Ethnographic studies (Gerber, 2001, Gerber 2003) show that a respondent's decision to answer a survey

questionnaire and specific questions is based on the situational judgment of who is asking the question and whether an interview is legitimate, and their assessment of the consequences and benefits of giving information.

In addition, the legitimacy of an interview requires an additional personal assessment of the interviewer, based on the interviewer's behavior and bearing. As a result, "respondents' search for authenticity in sponsorship became more personalized" (Gerber, 2001, p6). This implies that interviewers' communication styles can be the very first sign for personal assessment by respondents. Since survey transactions are interactions between strangers, participants rely heavily on communication styles to make a judgment of the situation and assessment of the other person. Mismatch in communication styles can lead to a misread of signals and mistrust. Understanding cultural differences in communication styles thus can help interviewers to turn an anonymous relationship into a personal one and to gain cooperation from respondents.

2.3 Communication styles and their effects on survey interviews

Communication styles refer to different ways of using language in social interaction. These different ways of language use include knowledge and expectation of who may or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, to whom one may speak, how one may talk to persons of different statuses and roles, what appropriate nonverbal behaviors are in various contexts, what the routines for turn-taking are in conversation, how to ask for and give information, how to request, how to offer or decline assistance or cooperation, how to give commands, and so on (Saville-Troike, 1989:21). This knowledge and expectation, together with language ability, comprises communicative competence in a communicative event. Cultural differences in communication styles can be observed in the three interactional components of a survey interview.

3. Interactional components of a survey interview

Given the aforementioned social context of federal surveys, from a social interaction point of view, there are three key components in a survey interview:

1) opening an interaction
2) obtaining/giving information
3) maintaining an interaction

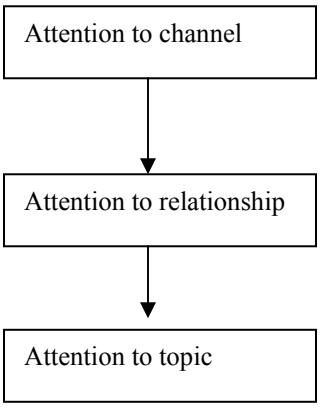
Opening an interaction sets the stage of an interview as a social encounter. The interviewer's role and the respondent's role are negotiated, defined and developed as the interviewer engages the respondent in the interaction. After the relationship and topic are defined in the opening stage, the interview can proceed to the next stage of obtaining/giving information. The third component of maintaining an interaction consists of use of verbal and nonverbal cues to ensure smooth interaction between the interviewer and the respondent.

However, each culture has its own set of norms or conventions that influence individual behaviors. When respondents participate in a survey interaction, they bring with them their cultural knowledge and behavior norms of how to act at each stage of the interaction. According to Behling and Law (2000), social norms and conventions that have significant impact on respondent behavior include the way in which strangers are treated, the openness with which particular topics are discussed, and the manner in which ideas are expressed. These social norms and conventions are reflected in language use in the three interactional components of a survey interview. The following section will examine how verbal and nonverbal features signal different communication styles.

3.1 Opening an interaction

Sociolinguistic research (e.g., Scollon, 1998) shows that a social encounter follows a three-step pattern in opening an interaction: attention to channel, attention to relationship, and then attention to topic (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Three-step pattern in opening an interaction



That is, the participants need to first open a channel for communication (e.g., telephone, face-to-face, or in writing), then define or develop the role that each participant is going to take in the encounter, and then introduce the topic of the interaction. A survey interaction follows this pattern too, but cultures differ in their preferred way of giving attention to relationship and topic in a social encounter. The following two examples illustrate how cultural differences can be observed at the opening stage of an interview.

Interaction 1
In a middle class neighborhood in the Los Angeles region a Chinese-English bilingual field interviewer knocked on the door of the first household. A middle-aged white woman answered the door. The field interviewer started the conversation.

1. FR: "Hello, how are you?
2. R: "I'm fine."
3. FR: [shows badge and name card] "My name is Lily Wong. I'm from the Census Bureau. We are conducting a survey on current population. We would like to ask you for help."

Interaction 2
At the second household in the same neighborhood, a middle-aged Asian woman opened the door. The field interviewer started the conversation.

1. FR: "Hello, do you speak Chinese?"
2. R: "Yes."
3. FR: [switches to Chinese] "I'm from the Census Bureau. The Census Bureau is conducting a survey on current population. We would like to ask you for help. By the way, my name is Lily Wong." [shows badge and name card]

These two interactions are the first segment of an interviewer-respondent interaction. In terms of structure, they are similar: the interviewer initiates the conversation by greeting the respondent, the respondent answers the interviewer's greeting. Then the interviewer explains the purpose of her visit. But a linguistic analysis of the three initial turn exchanges shows the inherent differences in the opening of an interaction in the two interactions: In Interaction 1, the interviewer started by a formulaic greeting of "How are you?"

The respondent answered by following the formulaic: “I’m fine.” Then the interviewer showed her ID card and stated her name, the organization, and purpose of her visit. In interaction 2, the interviewer started by asking if the respondent spoke Chinese. When the respondent answered “yes”, the interviewer switched into Chinese and stated the name of the organization that she worked for and the purpose of the visit. She stated her name at the last utterance of the turn.

Two cultural norms are being observed here. When meeting for the first time, Americans tend to volunteer to introduce themselves first by stating their name: “I’m so-so, from such-and-such organization.” The individual’s identity is important for the opening of an interaction. In interaction 1, the interviewer followed this norm in immediately providing her name and stating the purpose of the visit.

On the contrary, it is relatively rare for people from a collectivist society, such as Japan, China or Korea, to volunteer to introduce oneself at the first meeting. They will wait for the third party to introduce them to one another. If there is no third party, they ask the listener’s name and where he/she is from before they reveal any information of themselves. They almost never engage in a conversation with a stranger because there is relatively greater social distance between strangers as compared to that of American society, and it is harder to cross the ingroup and outgroup boundary.

In Interaction 2, the interviewer didn’t state her name first. She asked if the respondent spoke Chinese and then switched to Chinese. This code-switching has the function of closing the social distance, because being able to share a language indicates something in common between the two strangers. After a common ground was established, the field interviewer went on to provide the information of the organization and stated that the Census Bureau was conducting a survey. She gave her name at the very end of the turn with a phrase of “by the way” to indicate the insignificance of her self-identity. By doing so, she emphasized the importance of the organization and the survey, which gave her a legitimate reason to interact with a stranger.

Different societies treat strangers, especially strangers asking questions, in different fashions. Pareek and Rao (1980) identify three norms governing responses to strangers. First is the reticence norm, which is the tendency of individuals to express ideas and opinions only to those they know well. Strangers are viewed with closed-mouth suspicion in some societies. Second is the hospitality norm. Many societies have traditions of hospitality in greeting strangers. Respondents are likely to be open with strangers, but may give answers that they believe will please the questioner rather than expressing true feelings or beliefs. Third is the mischief norm. Some societies see strangers as fair game. Individuals in such societies may take considerable pleasure in “playing game” with strangers (see also Behling and Law, 2000, p6, p46).

These cultural norms in treating strangers have an impact on respondents and field interviewers as well. For respondents, they may simply refuse to participate in a survey because they don’t want to talk to a stranger. For interviewers, they will have to learn how to deal with respondents with these different behavioral norms. This can be a special concern for bilingual interviewers. We learned from our field observation in the Los Angeles region that it is very difficult to keep bilingual interviewers on the job. Many bilingual interviewers quit after a short time, especially those who grew up in countries outside the US. One of the main reasons is that those field interviewers find it hard to act and interact in behavioral norms that are different from what they are accustomed to. For example, knocking on the door and talking to a stranger may not come naturally for Americans, but it can be even harder for Asian-origin field interviewers, because there is a clear distinction between inside and outside groups in Asian cultures. People generally do not interact with outsiders and therefore lack communication strategies or interaction skills to deal with strangers. Since the job nature of a field interviewer can very well be just the opposite to the cultural norms of communication for many bilingual field interviewers, it is essential to provide training to address this specific concern.

3.2 Obtaining/giving information

One of the important functions of surveys is to gather information. Surveys are based on the assumption that people can express their opinions and preferences openly and directly. Questions are designed to elicit direct response from respondents. Americans take direct expression of opinions as being honest and sincere, and believe that everybody is equal and has the right to say what he/she thinks. However, this belief and assumption may not be shared by all cultures. In terms of communication styles, cultures differ in the dimension of directness and openness in expressing opinions.

- *Directness vs. indirectness*

According to Storti (1999), whose work draws heavily on Hall's (1959, 1976) concept of high-context and low-context culture, cultures can be placed on a continuum of directness and indirectness in expressing opinions (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Cultures and Continuum of Directness

Continuum of Directness

Key:
A - Africa C - China F - France G - Germany I - India J - Japan M - Mexico
ME - Middle East R - Russia S - Spain SEA - Southeast Asia UK - United Kingdom
US - United States

(Based on Storti, 1999:99)

From this we can see that people from Western cultures tend to be direct in expressing their opinions while Asians and Africans tend to be indirect. Thus it can be very uncomfortable for respondents from these cultures if they are forced to give direct answers. The data collected are less likely to be reliable.

Directness and indirectness also has an effect on pretesting questionnaires in other languages too. We need to consider if respondents are willing to directly tell us what they really think. For example, during cognitive interviews on the Census 2000 Chinese form, Chinese respondents first ask: "Who wrote this question? Did you write this question yourself?" They want to know this information because Chinese often do not separate a person from his or her actions or opinions, and thus opposing an idea is in effect criticizing the person expressing that idea. They would feel uncomfortable critiquing survey questions in front of a researcher. When being probed for their own interpretation of questions, they often just repeat the question word-by-word without using their own words because it is relatively difficult for them to express their opinions directly.

- *Introduction of main point*

Directness in expressing one's opinion is reflected in the ways of presenting one's main point as well. Successful communication depends on knowing what your conversation partner is talking about and making sure your conversation partner knows what you are talking about. That is, to understand each other's main point. There are two patterns of presenting one's main topic/point: deductive and inductive patterns (Scollon and Scollon, 2001).

A deductive pattern of topic introduction gives the main point first and then develops the argument by providing details and reasons. The most important information is provided upfront; supporting information is given afterwards. This is the pattern preferred by Americans in speaking and writing: tell others your main point first, then add the relevant supporting details.

An inductive pattern of topic introduction refers to the message structure of putting supporting details or reasons first before reaching the main point. The background information of the main point is laid out first and the main point (or topic) is deferred until sufficient backgrounding of the topic has been done. This pattern also lets the speaker receive the listener's reaction before he/she goes on to the main point.

The deductive pattern is often perceived as being direct and linear, while the inductive pattern as indirect and circular. As a general practice, the deductive pattern is preferred in Western cultures while the inductive pattern is the preferred norm in Eastern cultures.

Survey questions are designed based on this Western preference of direct communication. It is expected that respondents follow the deductive pattern in giving a "yes" or "no" answer without "beating around the bush". However many cultural groups, such as Arabs and Asians, may prefer the other style. The straightforward answer sounds too abrupt and arrogant to respondents from these cultural groups that they prefer the inductive pattern of presenting information. They may say something that seems irrelevant and then come to the point of the question. This can cause confusion and will lead to item nonresponse as the interviewer may not capture the respondent's main point.

3.3 Maintaining an interaction

During a survey interview, it is equally important for field interviews to keep the interaction going by building a rapport with respondents. In a communicative event of survey interview, participants rely on verbal and nonverbal cues for smooth interaction, and at the same time, applying appropriate politeness strategies to rapport building. We will consider some aspects of verbal and nonverbal cues relevant to survey interaction in this section.

- *Verbal cues*

Verbal cues include a range of linguistic strategies that participants of a communicative event employ to signal meanings and messages. Of importance to survey interviews are turn-taking practice and linguistic politeness.

Turn-taking means the practice of how each person participates in a communicative event, such as when to speak and how long to speak. There are clear differences in turn-taking practices across cultures. For example, certain American Indian groups are accustomed to waiting several minutes in silence before responding to a question or taking a turn in a conversation, while the native English speakers may be talking to have very short time frames for response or conversational turn-taking, and find silence embarrassing (Saville-Troike, 1982). Studies show that among African Americans conversations may involve several persons talking at the same time, a practice that violates White middle-class rules of

interaction (Abrahams, 1973). Even among native speakers of English there are regional differences. Tannen (1986) shows that New York people have a tendency to speak at a fast pace while California speakers tend to talk at a slower pace.

Differences in turn-taking practices across cultural groups may affect how participants in a communicative event feel about the interaction. If two people do not share the same turn-taking practice, the person with the fast pace will dominate the conversation, leaving the other participant little chance to contribute. During one of our field observations, we noticed that the field interviewer spoke at a fast pace. When he finished reading the question, the respondent was silent for a second. The interviewer then immediately repeated the question, thinking that the respondent had difficulty understanding the question. The respondent might have been just about ready to answer the question when the interviewer repeated it. When the respondent was formulating the answer, talking at a slower pace, the interviewer started to take over the speaking turn by clarifying the respondent's answer or by adding something to what the respondent was saying. The respondent may feel that he/she was being cut off by the interviewer.

Another kind of verbal cue is politeness strategy used by participants in a social encounter in order to ensure smooth interaction. Although the general principles of politeness are universal, each culture has its specific way of signaling politeness. What is the considered polite way of saying things in one culture may not be polite in another culture. How to signal politeness seems a simply question, but actually it involves deep cultural values and social norms that govern the use of politeness strategies.

In American culture, the use of "please" and "thank you" is the normal and standard way to show politeness. These two phrases are used more often than other polite hedges. Does it always work to insert "please" and "thank you" in a sentence that we want to use and make it polite?

One example to illustrate this comes from a consultation session with an American telecommunications company (c.f., Pan, Scollon and Scollon, 2002). A consultant on Chinese language and culture was called upon to monitor the professionalism and politeness of the Chinese-speaking sales representatives in a telecommunications company. The training manager of the company was trying to get their Chinese-speaking sales representatives to use markers of politeness such as the equivalents of English "Please" and "Thank you" in making their sales pitches. The sales representatives were given a Chinese script translated from the English script. According to the script, the sales representatives were supposed to state their full name first and use "please" and "thank you" at every possible point in the conversation where it would be appropriate in American English.

During the three days of the monitoring, 10 Chinese-speaking sales representatives were monitored. Most of them got 0 point in the item of politeness level because they failed to use "please" and "thank you" in their conversation with their customers. As a result they failed in their performance evaluation, because their politeness level was not up to the company's standard. However the calls monitored were very polite by Chinese standards, and most of the sales representatives succeeded in signing up their customers for the company's service. Yet by the manager's rating scale they received 0 point. The sales representatives were very frustrated with the training program.

In many languages including Chinese, it is not customary to use expressions like "please" and "thank you" in daily conversation. These terms are used mostly on very formal occasions. The use of 'please' and 'thank you' may sound too formal to the extent that it enlarges, instead of closing, the social distance between the participants. When used excessively in interviews, it sounds fishy and gives the feeling of setting up a trap to get customers to buy some service. In Chinese conversations politeness is indicated by other linguistic features, including repetition of a verb (e.g., "see, see", "read, read") or adjective phrase (e.g., "fine, fine"), a tag question (e.g., "Is that OK?"), prosodic features (tone of voice, intonation, rate of speech, or pauses), and other discursive features (Pan, 2000).

This shows that while to be polite and nice is a universal desire in social interaction, how to signal politeness differs from culture to culture. It is naïve to assume that our way is the best way and most effective way to show politeness. We need to be aware of other ways to show politeness and adjust our strategies to match the expectations and general practice of the cultural group with whom we are dealing.

- *Nonverbal cues*

Nonverbal cues are as important as verbal cues for successful interaction. Three types of nonverbal cues are of importance to cross-cultural communication: kinesics (gestures, body movements, facial expressions, and eye contact), proxemics (personal space), and chronemics (concept of time). People learn nonverbal cues as part of their communication competence when they grew up and may not have a clue how to interpret nonverbal cues of other cultures.

For example, patterns of eye contact learned in childhood seem to be relatively unaffected by later experiences (Jandt, 1995). Americans are taught from childhood to maintain eye contact while talking to people to show honesty and sincerity. Arabs, Latin Americans, and Southern Europeans focused their gaze on the eyes or face of their conversational partner, whereas Asians, Indians and Pakistanis, and Northern Europeans tend to show peripheral gaze or no gaze at all (Harper, Wiens, & Matarazzo, 1978). In Korean and Japanese cultures, direct eye contact means challenge and disrespect to the addressee.

Proxemics refers to personal space and positioning of self in a communicative event. Each culture has some implicit rules and conventions for this practice. Cross-cultural research shows that Americans tend to sit across the table, and face-to-face when talking to each other. They prefer to have relatively a large personal space, while Asians tend to have a smaller personal space, and tend to sit side-by-side. For Asians, seating arrangement is based on the hierarchical order among participants. So in a survey interview, paying attention to the proxemics practice of the target population can help to create a positive impact on respondents. Skillful interviewers adjust their personal space and positioning according to the circumstances. For instance, a Spanish-English bilingual field interviewer doing a Current Population Survey interview in the Los Angeles region sat side-by-side with a Spanish-speaking woman on a sofa, very close, while conducting the interview. In the next household, she sat face-to-face across a table with an English-speaking female respondent. This subtle change in positioning indicates her cultural sensitivity to the environment and the respondent.

Knowing the general principles of how nonverbal cues work in cross-cultural settings can help field interviewers quickly identify cues that signal the appropriate behavior and then use the comparable nonverbal cues to build a rapport with the respondent.

4. Conclusions and implications

This paper gives an overview of sociolinguistic principles and discussed the application of these principles to survey research. Discussed in this paper are two concepts central to describing cultural differences in survey design and implementation process, namely, communicative event and communication style. I showed that surveys are inherently a communicative event, which involves three interactional components. Cultural differences can be observed in every stage of the interaction process of answering a questionnaire, therefore, more research needs to be done to identify influential cultural factors in interview events that mediate the conditions of respondent survey participation and response quality.

The second concept discussed in this paper is communication styles. It is very likely that respondents from different cultural groups have different communication expectations and communication styles from survey designers. However it is important to note that communication styles discussed in this paper, including directness, indirectness, deductive and inductive pattern of topic introduction, turn-taking practice, politeness strategies, and nonverbal cues, are present in all cultures, but the manifestation and the

significance attached to them differ from culture to culture. This is why communication can break down even if people are using the same language.

The concept of communication styles has practical implications for field interviewer training. Given other requirements of the interview situation like the need to control the interview and the need to limit time, training in cross-cultural communication will provide field interviewers with techniques and strategies to handle language and cultural diversity. In order to be successful in dealing with people from other cultures, we need to understand our own communication styles and be aware that there are different ways of communicating. While it is impossible to cover communication norms of all cultures, the training can focus on general principles of differences in communication norms relevant to survey interviews. This kind of training will benefit both monolingual and bilingual field interviewers. Monolingual field interviewers need to understand communication norms of respondents from cultures other than their own, even when they speak the same language. Bilingual field interviewers need to understand that while it is important to be able to speak another language, being able to adapt to the cultural expectations of respondents is crucial to get cooperation from respondents. It is also essential for bilingual field interviewers of other country origins to receive training about communication norms in American society, so they will be not only bilingual, but also bicultural.

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