

We are all familiar with the notion of culture shock, when we find ourselves involved in a new way of life within which we feel totally lost. This book is about language shock, when we find ourselves involved in a new conversation within which we feel totally lost. But, as the subtitle suggests, it is about culture too. The reason why we get lost is to do with the cultural differences which permeate language.

Language in Michael Agar's sense is far more than what most people think of as language — a matter only of grammar and vocabulary. It involves aspects of language use which go well beyond these domains. Try explaining to a foreigner the idea of a date (between two people). Try getting a satisfactory explanation of when to use *du* and when *Sie*. Try reading between the lines of a political speech in a foreign language. In each case, the words and grammar take you so far, then drop you into a deep cultural pool.

Nor is this just a matter of communicating with foreigners. In this book, learning a second language and using your first language are said to raise exactly the same issues. When people speak at cross-purposes, or fail to get through to each other, it is because they are bringing different cultural perspectives to bear on the structures they use.

The communication problems encountered in both foreign and mother-tongue situations demand an equal focus on language and culture, in order to be solved. Agar's way of obtaining this focus is to invent a new term, *linguaculture* — a hybrid term which sticks in the throat when you first encounter it, but after you've lived with it for a couple of hundred pages, seems an old friend. It is partly Agar's friendly style which enables this to happen. He writes in an informal, anecdotal way. The chapters are split into many sec-

# Words' worth

BY DAVID CRYSTAL

## LANGUAGE SHOCK; UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURE OF CONVERSATION

BY MICHAEL AGAR  
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tions, and the paragraphs are short. He introduces a general point, tells a story or two, then rounds it off with the general point again. It is a highly effective rhetoric.

The "langua" part of the term is not grammar and vocabulary, but discourse — the patterns which make up conversational interaction. The culture part goes well beyond dictionary meanings, and into the network of social relationships which make up the real world. What are people really saying, when they talk? How does a network of words cut up the world so that we can see what they mean? We need to develop a sense of the frames within which communication takes place, to understand the speech acts which people perform. Agar provides dozens of well-chosen examples of these factors.

Agar's focus is on understanding, not solution. Differences between people (and the way they speak) are not a threat, but an opportunity. If we focus on the differences, and on the mistakes which we make when we try to communicate, we can develop our awareness, and form a growth in understanding (in a narrow, linguistic sense), and we can promote our understanding (in a broad, cultural sense). Agar wants to change the way we look at the world, as we live from day to day. He knows



he cannot solve the world's problems. But he believes that if he can open lines of communication between people, based on what they are, rather than on what they are not, there are grounds for hope. His way of doing this is to make us look in detail at culture, and at the way culture is communicated through language. Agar is an anthropologist, but he has learned a great deal of linguistics, and his aim is to integrate the two.

The focus of the book is firmly on American culture. Agar wants Americans to break free from what he calls their cultural superiority complex and to join the "growing global conversation". I recognise the problem, having encountered as many American tourists abroad as anyone else, and I can see the need to argue the

point from scratch. Agar wonders how the book will be received in the United Kingdom, because, as he says, some of the book's arguments are taken for granted there. Well, intellectually, maybe. Given the influence of J. R. Firth and Bronislaw Malinowski on British anthropology and linguistics, I doubt whether many British academics in these fields need to be persuaded about the way cultural differences pervade our conversational behaviour. On the other hand, there is an insular mentality in Britain which is not very different from what Agar sees in the United States. British tourists have cultural blindness too. And, notwithstanding the optimism of a post-Maastricht age, Agar's message is relevant to all members of the European Union.

I am uncomfortable with the *linguaculture* notion, as Agar explains it, in two respects. Notwithstanding a disclaimer he makes early on, when he regrets the distinction Ferdinand de Saussure made between the notions of "language" and "speech", he seems to be talking about spoken language. His arguments do not have the same force when it comes to written language. I recognise the many differences between British and American *linguaculture* but they don't add up to a major reading problem. I wonder how Agar views standard English, which is a written model?

It is also important not to overstate the case. Agar points out that not all differences are cultural, because people do things differently within the same *linguaculture*. I think he might have worried a bit more about this. I reflect on some recent misunderstandings I have had, in both a first and second language context, and in most cases I think I can attribute them to differences in such areas as temperament, personal preference, priorities, attention, memory, and ignorance. When all these factors of individuality are taken into account, I wonder just how much will be left for *linguaculture*?

But I don't want to distract from the important focus on *linguaculture*, or quibble with the way Agar introduces it. Stay with this book to the end and, as he claims early on, you will probably not look at language in quite the same way again. I sniffed at that point. I thought I was too well steeped already in a *linguacultural* perspective for this to happen to me. But after this book I have to say that I feel my sense of this issue has been sharpened. So if you have no time to read more than one book on a linguistic topic a year, try this one.

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