

Patricia Covarrubias, **Communication, Culture and Cooperation: Interpersonal Relations and Pronominal Address in a Mexican Organization**, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Pub., Inc., 161 pp, \$29.95, 2005.

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Focusing on naturally occurring, situated uses of pronominal address, this study offers rich insights into the relational dimensions of cooperative engagements in a Mexican work-organization in the city of Veracruz. Pronominal usage is indeed a highly patterned and context-sensitive aspect of linguistic interaction. It has been studied in a wide range of languages and in a variety of social settings for its role in both reflecting and constituting relational identities and positionings. Building on the exploration of this core aspect of all sociolinguistic systems – the use of language to point to people in particular ways – this study illuminates the relational work associated with the accomplishment of cooperation in the organizational context in which the author situated her inquiry. Firmly grounded in the research tradition of the ethnography of speaking, the study thus provides a richly textured and culture-sensitive account of a particular organizational setting and the ways in which the communicative construction of work relationships and shared endeavors is articulated in face-to-face interaction.

Working from within the ethnography of speaking research perspective, the author elegantly applies its assumptions and insights to the illumination of organizational life. These include, primarily, the assumption that "societies differ in the types of resources available for speaking" and that "societies differ in how speaking (or not speaking) is valued and managed as reflected in the mosaic of socially constructed norms and rules regulating and adjudicating speech practices" (p. 11). Based on these assumptions, the author's language-focused inquiry into forms of address seeks to promote a meaning-centered approach to the study of organizational communication. In so doing, she acknowledges the reality of workplace stratification, proposing pronominal address "as a powerful focal point for the study of relational and cultural meanings" (p. 13). It is through such linguistic resources as pronominal usage, workplace gossip and joke telling, that organizational participants both confirm and resist hierarchical structures as well as express and establish interpersonal uniqueness. As Covarrubias points out, "these linguistic manipulations are ubiquitous, concrete, and inherently value-laden" (p. 14). Their exploration, therefore, provides a most promising site for cultural analysis.

Pronominal usage, in particular, provides a highly productive discursive site in and through which both members and researchers can "read" the ways in which participants in organizational settings place themselves within an ever-shifting, complex relational web that is shaped by a tension between the often competing desires for social distance on the one hand and social proximity on the other. Following earlier research in this area, Covarrubias analyzes the uses of *tú* and *usted* Spanish pronouns in this particular Mexican setting in terms of two kinds of culturally-grounded interactional alignments – horizontal or symmetrical relations as contrasted with vertical or asymmetrical ones. The detailed and meticulous analysis she provides of the ways in which these pronouns are used in a variety of face-to-face exchanges

within the workplace allows her to link pronominal usage both to issues of organizational cooperation and hierarchy and to the broader cultural patterns of kin-like relational communication in Mexican society.

Juggling between proximity and distance, the organization functions within a depersonalized and hierarchical structure that is at the same time permeated with familial metaphors. As the author demonstrates, the uses of *usted* and *tú* play an important role in demarcating interpersonal distance and hierarchy. The use of *usted* implicitly serves organizational goals by invoking person categories and organizational roles rather than individualized identities and ties. Her analysis, however, avoids the pitfall of romanticization, insightfully acknowledging the relational complexities of organizational life: "... although *usted* is used to minimize intimacy and individualization by segregating and typifying humans and objectifying interactions, depersonalization is not necessarily invalidating. In fact, social typification is actively embraced by the majority of workers. The use of *usted* to classify humans can be a strategic means for articulating *respeto* [respect], *reconocimiento* [acknowledgement] and reverence, which constitute social currencies coveted at all levels of the social ladder" (pp. 58-9). At the same time, she points out, organizational members "seek and perform the mutual exchange of *tú* to establish, maintain, and modify kin-like bonding. Via *tú*-mediated communication interlocutors can and do achieve *identificaciòn* [identification], *compenetraciòn* [copenetration], and *cercania* [physical and affective closeness] ... Whereas uses of *usted* generally preclude the sharing of information which transcends business conversation, the use of *tú* enables workers to engage in more individualized conversation" (p. 59).

Inductively generalizing from fieldwork materials relating to the uses of *tú* and *usted* in the organizational setting she studied, and members' commentary on these forms of address, Covarrubias conceptualizes two cultural communication codes that co-exist in this Mexican setting (and presumably others as well) – the code of *respeto* (code of respect, associated with the use of *usted*) and the code of *confianza* (code of trust, familiarity, associated with the use of *tú*). The identification of these culturally focal codes, which may have complementary or competing positions within the cultural repertoire, suggests stable links between communicative practices and cultural meanings so that group members can use them "to create, affirm, and modify community-specific models of persons and models for persons to align themselves vis-à-vis one another in and through the terms they use" (p. 88). Much of the book's analysis is devoted to the discussion of work situations in which the codes of *respeto* and *confianza* are locally enacted. Whether set in contraposition to each other, or implicating each other, they are employed to articulate "oppositional, yet interdependent, cultural thematizations of what it means to be a speaking person working in community" (p. 107).

Having established that the Code of *Respeto* and the Code of *Confianza* can serve as "hallmark conceptualizations for the ways humans use independent, contrapositional, and interdependent sets of communicative strategies to create, maintain, and modify the relational networks wherein they achieve their everyday work lives," Covarrubias explores the ways in which these notions can illuminate processes of organizational cooperation as defined and analyzed within a number of approaches to the study of organizational behavior. Of particular interest is her development of the notion of strategic multicodality, a concept she defines as "the deliberate activating by interactants of one or more of their particular cultural codes in order to achieve their particular situational ends" (p. 121). This concept underlines members'

agency in activating a particular cultural code, and their competence to strategically choose from an available repertoire as well as move smoothly between multiple codes, or, for that matter, recognize infringements and sanctions associated with inappropriate code enactments.

Using a rich array of situated examples derived from organizational encounters, this interpretive study of the Mexican codes of *respeto* and *confianza* – as instantiated in the Spanish address forms *tú* and *usted* – offers important insights into the working of multiple cultural communication codes in localized settings, offering a persuasive argument for the value of applying the ethnography of speaking perspective to the study of organizational life. This book will therefore be as much of interest to students of organizations who seek to enrich their explorations by employing a discourse-centered, naturalistic mode of inquiry as it will be to ethnographers for whom the study of organizations as culturally localized discursive arenas is an important yet relatively uncharted domain of contemporary life.