

**The Role of Communication in the Teaching of English:
Star Trek and the Universal Translator**

Dan Molden

INTRODUCTION

In my classes, I often tell my students that every successful paper has one and only one point. In this sense, this paper is destined to be a failure because it has two objectives. The first objective is to argue for a role for the study of communication in the teaching of English. The second is to introduce the audience to the television program *Star Trek*. With the Ministry of Education's focus on communication in the teaching of English, it might seem wise to consider what the study of communication has to offer to the teaching of English. In particular, I want to focus on two particular areas of study within the larger area of communication: communication apprehension and rhetoric.

Star Trek, on the other hand, has been a part of the United States cultural landscape since it first aired on television in 1966. The subsequent 34 years have seen an animated series, three other live action television series, nine movies, and countless books. In introducing *Star Trek*, I want to concentrate on the portrayal of communication within the show.

The dual focus of this paper is due, in part, to the intertwined interests of communication scholars and *Star Trek*. The world of *Star Trek* revolves around communication issues, often providing the audience a context within which to discuss communication issues within their own lives. Within the context of *Star Trek*, however, communication is assumed to be something that one does, not something that one studies. As a result, the show can also help illustrate what we do not talk about—and the potential role for communication in the teaching of English.

THE STUDY OF COMMUNICATION

Communication can, at times, seem like an almost unacceptably large area for study. Seemingly disconnected concerns as a content analysis of a presidential address, an examination of the physiological responses of a group to advertising, a study of broadcasting regulations for third world radio stations,

and a discussion of non-verbal behaviors in US-Japanese business meetings are all contained under the same label: communication.

Today, I want to consider just two small parts of the study of communication and explain why I think they have a role to play in the teaching of English. Initially, the research in speech anxiety or communication apprehension (CA) offers a glimpse into the fears that people have about communicating. In her brief review of research on CA, Karen Kangas Dwyer noted that, "the communication research shows that CA is not related to intelligence, gender, or neuroticism. However, research does indicate that people who experience CA do try to avoid public communication" (21). The implications of dealing with that fear of communication and the consequent reduction in communication are significant for the teaching of English. Andrew D. Cohen noted in *Learning Language* that, "regardless of whether they start with a silent period, successful speakers are those who eventually end up talking more. By talking, they increase the amount of 'personalized' language input they receive from others. When you do not speak up, you get whatever input is available, whether or not it is at your level" (55).

The second aspect of communication studies I want to introduce today is rhetoric. Aristotle defined rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (153). In a sense, then, rhetoric is about recognizing and making choices any time you must communicate. Developing a rhetorical sensitivity is part of learning how to communicate in a language—because in real communicative encounters speakers are faced with more than one possible option. Part of gaining comfort and talent with a language is learning how to choose between multiple options depending on the situation. This is especially important because we recognize the influence of nuances in our native languages, but may be less sensitive to them in others. Indeed, Andrea A. Lunsford and John J. Ruszkiewicz noted the importance of a rhetorical sensitivity when they argued

All language—including the language of visual images or of symbol systems other than alphabetical letters—is persuasive, pointing in a direction and asking for a response. From the morning news to

the AIDS ribbon, from the American flag to the NIKE swoosh, we are surrounded by texts that beckon, that aim to persuade. In short we walk, talk, and breathe persuasion very much as we breathe the air: *everything* is an argument (iii).

Taken together, the study of communication apprehension and rhetoric broaden the chances of language learners in responding to the variety of experiences they might encounter in real life speaking situations.

STAR TREK AND COMMUNICATION

Star Trek, in part due to its longevity, not only has been mentioned in presidential candidacy nomination speeches (Tommy Lee Jones nominating Al Gore), but it is also the only show with a fan base listed by name in the Oxford English Dictionary (trekkies or trekkers) and it has also gained a great deal of academic attention (multiple listings in both ERIC and the NCA/SCA Index to Journals).

Given that the show has an influence on the United States both inside and outside the academic community, we might do well to consider not only how we can use it to teach communication but also what it teaches about communication—both *communication apprehension and rhetoric*. The first difficulty in discussing the rhetorical conditions of a science fiction universe like that of *Star Trek* lies in the relationship between our world and the imaginary world of the program. To be able to compare inter-cultural exchanges with inter-species exchanges, for example, some sort of additional framework seems necessary. The *Star Trek* universe maintains multiple human cultures—Jean-Luc Picard is of French ancestry, Pavel Chekov is Russian, for example¹. In addition, it has characters like Spock, Worf, and Kira Nirys who

¹ I want to make clear that I am not using culture in an essentialist sense. That is, I do not mean to imply that Picard's ancestry makes him necessarily different from Chekov or Benjamin Sisko, but rather that the assumptions that this character might make about the relative meanings or values of some item/word/etc will have been influenced by the prevailing assumptions of the region where he was raised and lived. This is, however, a different problem with the portrayal of culture on *Star Trek*. Other than the various Earth cultures, no

represent other species from other planets. In order to sort this chain of relations out, I have utilized a scheme created by science fiction author Orson Scott Card in his book *Speaker for the Dead*. In this book, Card divides the world up into four categories: “utlanning” (members of one’s species and home culture met in outer space), “framing” (members of one’s species from a different culture met in outer space), “raman” (beings from other species with whom you can meaningfully communicate), and “varelse” (beings from other species with whom meaningful communication cannot be achieved).

In part, the scheme itself is important for understanding communication within *Star Trek*. Card posits four possible positions of “personhood” between and within species: Those of your species that you share a common cultural background with and those you do not, and those of other species that you can communicate meaningfully with and those that you cannot. In essence, Card’s scheme helps begin to address the rhetorical choices facing a person living in such an intergalactic world.

Given this scheme for understanding the science fiction universe, what can *Star Trek* tell us about communication? Initially, it seems clear that communication is important in the *Star Trek* universe. Although the original series is often characterized as featuring battle scenes (the famous fight between the Gorn and Captain James Kirk in “Arena,” for example), these battles are almost always followed by a long speech. Edward Gross argued in his book of reviews of the first four *Star Trek* series that the essence of *Star Trek* was not the conflict, but its peaceful resolution. In his discussion of the episode “Darmok,” for example, he noted that “what follows . . . is a perfect encapsulation of the *Star Trek* philosophy, as the characters attempt to overcome their differences—be they cultural, philosophical, or linguistic—and work together” (52).

other planet is seen as having much variety in culture—there are no Klingons portrayed who don’t believe in the story/founding religion of Kahless, for example. There are also no non-human “framing”—people from other core cultures of Bajor or Romulus, for example.

UNIVERSAL TRANSLATION

Perhaps the most fascinating technology in the *Star Trek* universe is the Universal Translator. This device allows the members of the Federation of Planets to communicate with any species that has a form of communication. Indeed, over the years, members of the Federation have spoken to members of a bewildering array of species including a moving silicate rock from a species named the Horta (that, albeit through a “mind meld” rather than the Universal Translator) in “The Devil in the Dark,” a large, spacefaring, cloudlike entity called the Companion in “Metamorphosis”—featuring the initial appearance of the translator, then a hand held device, a large, sentient, space travelling crystal in “DataLore,” small drilling machines called Exocomps in “The Quality of Life,” even smaller nanotechnological machines called Nanites (The Nanites actually take control of Data to speak) in “Evolution,” dinosaur like (actually Geiger’s Alien design-like) creatures from “fluidic space” called Species 8472 in “The Scorpion I and II” and “In the Flesh,” a microscopic, inorganic lifeform called the Microbrain in “Home Soil” and the half biologic/half cybernetic beings called the Borg in multiple shows and the movie “First Contact.”

What is particularly interesting in the *Star Trek* universe is the virtual lack of what Card would call “varelse” among the sentient species. If a species can communicate it can communicate meaningfully. The few examples of non-discursive species include a “macrovirus” in “Macrocism” and insect-like humanoids collectively referred to as “The Swarm” that seem to have little desire to communicate (“The Swarm”). The macrovirus is, however, non-sentient. “The Swarm” may be capable of communication, but they tactically avoid it as their space is protected by the sense among others that they are unthinking attackers. (Thus, it may be that they are not truly varelse—being unwilling rather than incapable of communication). Despite this one counterexample, virtually every other species in the *Star Trek* universe that shows signs of sentience (the Swarm do have technology) and can communicate does, and is understood.

Consider the scope of that statement for a few seconds. Federation humans are not only capable of discovering that microscopic inorganic crystals

in water are alive, not only capable of discovering that they have some form of communication, not only to translate their words, but they are actually able to understand and meaningfully communicate with them. This understanding extends to situations where the other species we are communicating with are seemingly centuries if not millennia extinct. Take the episode “Masks” for example. In this episode, the crew of the Enterprise D are confronted by a probe that re-programs the ship and Data, the ship’s android, to play out parts in a mythic story. The rest of the crew are given masks to wear and must determine their roles in the myth and then act out the myth in order to terminate the re-programming. They never learn who sent the ship, what they wanted, who they were, etc. Somehow, however, they can and do understand the myth communicated to them well enough to determine their roles in the story and complete it, ending the program.

As a comparison point, I might ask you to consider the human difficulty in the 20th Century of communicating with people from other cultures. A brief example might be my own students at Aichi Shukutoku University whose understanding of “independence” and “freedom” are very different from my own. They might understand, to borrow from another scheme, the denotation of these words, but their connotation is entirely different. Their chances of being able to recreate a Greek myth from a few masks and one character giving a limited, first person retelling of his or her role in the myth, for example, would seem slim at best—especially given the severe time constraints the crew of the Enterprise D faced.

CONCLUSION

This returns me to that categorization system I mentioned a while back. It seems to me that, in the *Star Trek* universe, there are almost no varelse and an extremely small number of raman. We not only engage in meaningful communication with the other species of the universe, but we understand and participate in a sort of common galactic culture.² In essence, virtually all the

² So common, in fact that the celebrated example of Darmok (where the universal translator fails) the aliens are so easily understood that it boggles the mind that they were not

other sentient species in the *Star Trek* universe are not really raman, they are at worst framling. In all but one of the cases discussed above, communication was established and a peaceful resolution was reached. Again, no threats or further use of force were required to maintain a tentative peace. The Federation was able to understand the other species well enough to find mutually agreeable solutions. Only the crystal entity was destroyed, but that destruction was a result of the malicious act of one individual and it was treated as an act of murder. Even the common non-Federation species, the Klingons, the Romulans, and the Cardassians are all “people”—the differences we suffer with them are political rather than cultural.

In sum, then *Star Trek* shows the hope of inter-cultural communication. If we can talk, we can understand. This is an extremely optimistic message. It also establishes a positive and meaningful ethic for communication. Because productive communication leads to understanding, unproductive communication implies only that more communication is needed. In this sense, communication becomes community. If we can talk, we must talk. When we talk, we will relatively quickly understand. When we talk and understand, we will come to accept each other’s innate personhood.

This message is also potentially dangerous, however. *Star Trek* seemingly under-values the importance of culture to the comprehension of communication—it undervalues the choices involved and, hence, the rhetorical sensitivity required. There are no examples of a point at which we reach an understanding impasse despite the ability to talk—no instances of communication apprehension or rhetorical indecision, for example.³ The

comprehensible to the translator. Surely these “metaphoric” (really allegoric) statements could be translated as generic comments: “Darmok and Gilad at Tenagra” really seems to mean that two people that perceive themselves to be adversaries must meet (in the face of some greater adversity) to become allies, for example. That the universal translator would be thrown by generic statements seems silly.

³ This portion of the argument presents the greatest difficulty as I am arguing about a lack of examples in the *Star Trek* universe rather than arguing from examples in the universe.

universal translator seems to be able to translate the entire import of a language for the people of the Federation. The technology, however, raises additional questions: Do all members of the Federation share such a "universal" culture? Does the universal translator operate for them as well? (Does it translate Betazoid or French?) Have all members of the Federation developed idiolects that the translator makes meaningful to the other members? The danger of using *Star Trek* as a way of reflecting on inter-cultural exchange is that the culture of the United States is again projected as all encompassing. The other species all represent varieties of the base culture of the universe and, of course, the base culture on a show produced and written in the United States would be that of the United States. The danger is that we may come to view our culture as the universal culture (ultimately understanding and understandable)—the Universal Translator works both ways, after all: It also seems to make humans comprehensible to the other species of the universe.

REFERENCES

- "Arena." *Star Trek*. (January 19, 1967). Script by Gene L. Coon.
- Aristotle. *Rhetoric*. As quoted in *The Rhetorical Tradition*. Eds Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg. (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's. 1990.) 151-194.
- Card, Orson Scott. *Speaker for the Dead*. (New York: Tor. 1994).
- Cohen, Andrew D. *Language Learning*. (New York: Newbury House. 1990).
- "Darmok." *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. (September 30, 1991). Script by Joe Menosky.
- "DataLore." *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. (January 16, 1988). Script by Robert Lewin and Gene Roddenberry.
- "The Devil in the Dark." *Star Trek*. (March 9, 1967). Script by Gene L. Coon.
- Dwyer, Karen Kangas. *Conquer Your Speechfright*. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace. 1998).

- "Evolution." *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. (September 23, 1989). Script by Michael Pillar.
- Gross, Edward. "Darmok." *Trek Navigator*. (Boston: Little and Brown. 1998). 50.
- "Home Soil." *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. (February 20, 1988). Script by Robert Sabaroff.
- "In the Flesh." *Star Trek: Voyager*. (November 4, 1998). Script by Nicholas Sagan.
- Lunsford, Andrea A. and John J. Rusziewicz. *Everything's an Argument*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. 1999).
- "Macrocosm." *Star Trek: Voyager*. (December 11, 1992). Script by Brannon Braga.
- "Masks." *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. (February 21, 1994). Script by Joe Menosky.
- "Metamorphosis." *Star Trek*. (November, 10, 1967). Script by Gene L. Coon.
- "The Quality of Life." *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. (November 16, 1992). Script by Naran Shankar.
- "Scorpion I." *Star Trek: Voyager*. (May 5, 1997). Script by Brannon Braga and Joe Menosky.
- "Scorpion II." *Star Trek: Voyager*. (September 3, 1997). Script by Brannon Braga and Joe Menosky.
- Star Trek VIII: First Contact*. 1996. Script by Brannon Braga and Ronald D. Moore.
- "The Swarm." *Star Trek: Voyager*. (September 25, 1996). Script by Michael Sussman.