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## The culture of speeches: Public speaking across cultures

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# The culture of speeches: Public speaking across cultures

## **Abstract**

Extract:

Public speaking is taught in Australian universities to local students and to students from Asian countries studying in this country. The advice given to students about public speaking follows in American or Australian texts, which are generally similar in approach. However, the way of speaking advocated takes little account of a multicultural audience and an implicit assumption appears to be that there is but one way of communicating in public - that given to us by a rhetoricians in Greece and Rome who set the "rules" for public speaking centred around Logos (or Reason), Ethos (or Good Character) and Pathos (the evocation of feelings of pity or sympathetic sadness; a play on emotions). However, students of intercultural communication can find that scholars such as Gudykunst and Kim (1992) suggest that the rhetorical tradition of Europe and North American reflects not a universal communication style but rather the cultural patterns of logical, rational and analytic thinking favoured in those countries.

## **Keywords**

public speaking, multicultural audience, communication, Australian universities

# The Culture of Speeches : Public Speaking Across Cultures

by *Mary Power and Camille Galvin*<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Surveys of graduates and employers indicate that an outcome valued by respondents is that of being able to make interesting and informative oral presentations in a number of contexts. (Bate & Sharpe, 1990) Such public speaking is taught in Australian universities to local students and to students from Asian countries studying in this country. The advice given to students about public speaking follows those in American or Australian texts, which are generally similar in approach. However, the way of speaking advocated takes little account of a multicultural audience and an implicit assumption appears to be that there is but one way of communicating in public - that given to us by ancient rhetoricians in Greece and Rome who set the "rules" for public speaking centred around *Logos* (or Reason), *Ethos* (or Good Character) and *Pathos* (the evocation of feelings of pity or sympathetic sadness; a play on emotions). However, students of intercultural communication can find that scholars such as Gudykunst and Kim (1992) suggest that the rhetorical tradition of Europe and North American reflects not a universal communication style but rather the cultural patterns of logical, rational and analytic thinking favoured in those countries. They say

"In the United States speech is considered to be an object of inquiry, more or less independent of its communicative context, and, for the purpose of systematic analysis, it can be taken out of its social context. The speaker and the listener are viewed as separate entities that are in a relationship defined primarily through verbal messages. A primary function of speech in this tradition is to express one's ideas and thoughts as clearly, logically and persuasively as possible so that the speaker can fully be recognised for his or her individuality in influencing others" (p157).

Gudykunst and Kim's view echoed criticisms made by the Russian writer Bakhtin (1895-1975) of certain language theorists who play down the communicative aspects of language. Bakhtin criticised those who regarded language "from the speaker's standpoint as if there were only one speaker who does not have any necessary relations to other participants in speech communication. If the role of the other is taken into account at all it is in the role of the listener who understands the speaker only passively" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 67). Speech in this view is always a socially communicative act. Bakhtin pointed to the difference between rhetorical speech genres and ordinary conversational

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dialogue. In a rhetorical utterance like a public speech, "quite frequently within the boundaries of his own utterance the speaker raises questions, answers them himself, raises objections to his own ideas, responds to his own objections and so on." (p. 72) whereas in "actual dialogue ...the utterances of the interlocutors or partners in dialogue alternate. Because of its simplicity and clarity, dialogue is a classic form of speech communication. Each rejoinder, regardless of how brief and abrupt, has a specific quality of completion that expresses a particular position of the speaker".

From the constructivist view of communication (Gergen, 1985) conversation allows for meaning to be created between participants. And from this viewpoint, formal public speaking, which allows for no dialogue, is a less effective form of communication. It may be for this reason that new media, such as television, use formal speeches so rarely. When we must hear from politicians we would prefer that they be interviewed by someone who asks the kinds of questions we would ask of the interviewee and makes the kinds of comments about responses that we would make of the speaker. We prefer the semblance, at least, of dialogue.

Dialogue is easier between those of shared backgrounds and when backgrounds diverge speech becomes more formal. In many of the world's forums such as the United Nations General Assembly the formal speech plays a dominant role. In business a less "formal" formal speech format lives on in the form of a "presentation". So universities which seek to prepare students for their future careers feel justified in training students in public speaking. Increasingly, however, classes in our universities are composed of students from a variety of cultures. The influence of culture in these students' future careers and their background appears not to be taken into account in the design of courses in formal public speaking. Impetus for this current research came from a concern that an exclusive emphasis on Western modes of speech was "Cultural Imperialism" as was the widespread use of American textbooks in the area. Not only were students subjected to the "Cultural Imperialism" of American values and attitudes through the ubiquity of American television productions but they were also subject to it by the unquestioning adoption of modes of speaking, perhaps foreign to their own cultures, in their university studies.

In order to explore the issue of the interaction of culture and public speaking a study was devised based on a survey, interviews and textbook analysis examining the following questions:

- (a) Is there a universality of public speaking styles and genres?
- (b) What are the expectations of a person who speaks in public in Australia?
- (c) Are the forms of public speaking advocated in textbooks appropriate for Asian and Australian students?
- (d) What is the rationale for teaching public speaking to students in a multicultural university?

#### AUSTRALIANS AND PUBLIC SPEAKING

Giles Auty, art critic and self-styled social commentator lately arrived from England and writing in *The Australian* (Auty 1997), bemoaned the lack of talent Australians display in the field of public speaking, calling their efforts "Marathons of soliloquy" and claiming that most public speakers were "quite numbing in their inability to communicate what could otherwise be interesting facts, experiences or ideas".

Yet, in the same piece he claimed that Australians seem more eager to speak publicly than their English cousins showing "an extraordinary propensity for prolonged public speaking on almost any occasion". While he "couldn't recall speeches at London art show openings at private galleries" he has heard (and given) many speeches at similar events since arriving in Australia. Curiously Auty's solution is more of the same. He gives advice that would be at home in any text on public speaking: "Imagine you are addressing two people at most and seeking to persuade them . . . make eye contact

with various members of the audience . . . Speak from concise notes which act as prompts for the various themes or subjects you intend to address . . . sound more sincere and spontaneous". On the one hand he asks, "Where else can you inflict your thoughts on others who may even have paid to hear you without serious fear of interruption?" On the other, his solution is not for a change in the genre or for turning soliloquy into dialogue, but for more of the same, for he further advises that "public speaking to be placed on the syllabus of every secondary school in Australia".

It has long been fashionable for the English to criticise Australians and what they have not learned not to, we also have not learned how to ignore their criticisms. The next day Malcolm Grey (Master of Ceremonies of the National Speakers Association Australia Conference) wrote saying that "public speaking has never been better." (Grey 1997) However, without being too self-flagellating about our culture we must admit that we have been to more of the kinds of events that Giles Auty was complaining about than to events where Malcolm Grey's exemplars have spoken. It was this experience that motivated us to try to teach public speaking better. This in the end meant that we followed the textbooks more religiously and gave advice very similar to that given by Auty! However, what this did was to put the teaching of public speaking in a category that didn't fit models of communication that stressed interaction, nor did it fit those writings on communication that stressed intercultural sensitivity, particularly important for the multicultural student bodies of the universities that form part of our multicultural society.

Fowers and Richardson (1996) defined multiculturalism as "a social-intellectual movement that promotes the value of diversity as a core principle and insists that all cultural groups be treated with respect and as equals" (p. 609). They go on to say, "for example, individualistic cultures assume that persons are independent entities, distinct from their groups, whereas collectivist cultures view persons as tightly bound up with and defined by their groups". Samovar and Porter (1995) quote Triandis' 1990 estimate that "about 70% of the world's population lives in collective cultures" (p. 90) together with Hofstede's ranking of forty countries on Individualism and Collectivism in which Australia ranked second after the USA on Individualism whereas other countries like Japan (22), Hong Kong (32), and Singapore (34) were at the Collectivism end of the scale. It makes sense for a person from an individualist culture to strut his (or her) stuff - to perform - and to speak clearly, but is it so sensible for a person holding collectivist culture values of "harmony, respect and restraint"? Clyne (1994) points out that not contravening these three values may well lead to an idea of successful communication that values "a certain amount of ambiguity, something which some cultures will tolerate and others will not" (p. 198)

Australians speak at more personal formal occasions such as weddings and parties and funerals as well as Art Gallery openings, so education in this area should include speeches of celebration and eulogy, which despite being done often, are not generally done well. In Australia even people who have no skills in public speaking prefer to speak for themselves rather than engage others to speak for them. Increasingly as our culture changes, women speak more at weddings parties and funerals than they used to. They, too, do not want to be spoken for, when it is possible for them to speak for themselves. In addition we tolerate speeches from inarticulate sports-people, providing they win races or get runs on the board. Perhaps this very lack of professionalism is in fact an interaction with the audience. One account suggested that the reason why Greg Norman was such a popular golfer was not that he was always good, but that he went through the bad patches that every amateur golfer identifies with. Maybe it is thought that unsuccessful speakers gain a sympathy vote. However, while amateur ineptitude might be seen as appealing in Australia, a country where the idea, if not the reality of "equality" is given credence, hierarchically structured societies prefer expertise. When we asked a postgraduate student from Taiwan who would speak at her wedding her answer revealed the hierarchical values of collectivist cultures. She said that the most important person among the invited guests (often a lawyer or a politician) would be asked to speak but the groom (or the bride) would not speak on this occasion. One might expect that such "important people" hone their communication skills in public speaking because ineptitude would lessen their credibility as "important people".

However, one suspects that, as in Australia (as Auty found) rank and position sometimes stand instead of skill in public speaking.

#### WHAT IS ADVOCATED IN COMMUNICATION TEXTS?

Choice of texts contributes to the curriculum students experience in communication courses. Accordingly, analysis of content of such texts is important in discerning the messages about public speaking being received by students. As with most communication texts, many of those which deal with public speaking are American. For the purposes of this study, we examined Lucas's (1995) "The Art of Public Speaking", Adler and Rodman's (1995) section on "Public Communication" and an Australian text, McCarthy and Hatcher's (1996) "Speaking Persuasively".

The American texts do not see public speaking as the "dialogue" that Auty suggests is preferable. While Lucas and Adler and Rodman have sections on audience analysis, the emphasis is on pre-planning rather than interacting and adapting as the speech progresses. Students are told "the primary purpose of speechmaking is "to gain a desired response from listeners" (Lucas, 1995. p90), but the authors do not address the issue of dealing with questions or actively involving the audience in detail. This is surprising since the literature on adult learning suggests that active involvement is an important part of effective learning (O'Connor, Bronner, & Delaney, 1996). It is not so surprising though, when one considers Bakhtin's point that in the rhetorical tradition the speaker's standpoint is paramount and the audience is considered as passive.

McCarthy and Hatcher (1996) see the process as more dynamic and interactive. They take what they call a "coactive approach" (p.9) to communication and quote Hugh Mackay's aphorism "it's not what our message does to the listener, but what the listener does with our message that determines our success as communicators". They also prefer the term "reader" to "receiver" of messages because it indicates a more active process.

Admittedly, because of the inability of a speaker to make "repairs" and "adjustments" as is done in conversation when the body language of the other indicates lack of comprehension, public speeches do need to be more structured and contain more redundancy than conversation. However, while teaching students about structure is important, too rigid adherence to a list of rules can result in a speech that is merely formulaic.

Lucas, and Adler and Rodman offer instructions about structuring speeches which can have the effect of diverting the major part of students' attention from content to form. Lucas tells students they should be "able to state their specific purpose in a single infinitive phrase" (p 76), "keep each point separate" (p. 184) and give each equal time (p. 183). Adler and Rodman say that "the basic speech structure demonstrates the old aphorism "Tell what you are going to say, say it, and then tell what you have said". In their "Checklist for organising a speech" (p. 421) while stressing the independence of each point, they allow "at least two divisions of each main point". While constant repetition of ideas is justified by the way it aids the listener's memory there is some, but not equal stress on maintaining audience attention through variety. There is an assumption that it is possible to "read" one's audience and its needs so well that all possible questions are predicted and answered and that the information is delivered in optimum-sized bytes repeated in a variety of forms through the use of clear structures. This is not a conception of communication that allows for a mutual construction of meaning, rather the message is delivered packaged for consumption. The resulting product is familiar to those who have paid large amounts to hear a visiting (usually American) speaker whose enthusiasm and fluency verges on the evangelistic, even when talking about money, and becomes positively so when speaking on topics such as glass ceilings or saving the planet. One becomes conscious of the segue when local references to the host city, the local politician and the day's headlines are inserted into such formulaic productions.

In saying, "you choose a pattern that best serves both your listeners and your topic" (p.71), McCarthy and Hatcher aim to encourage a close connection between audience, topic and structure, but they give the same list of possible structures as other texts do - chronological, spatial, causal, topical, theory and practice and problem and solution, which amounts to a heavy weighting on the sensible organisation of the topic rather than the needs and background of the audience. Following this kind of advice students tend to create a kind of all-purpose talk for any audience. It is mostly those students who follow explicit instructions (Lucas, 1995. p. 105) to pre-survey audiences and to structure content in order to meet the particular audience's needs, so revealed, who deliver the kind of "interactive" speech that engages an audience, although such "interaction" lacks the immediacy of a conversational dialogue. Organisation is an important part of any speech. However, despite strictly following textbook patterns of organisation many students from non-western cultures seem to produce disjointed presentations which do not connect with the audience. In seeking how to best teach these students we attempted to explore patterns in their thinking which might mean that the kinds of books which worked for students from American or Australian backgrounds would not produce the same results for students from non-Western cultures.

#### WHAT THE LITERATURE SAYS ABOUT THE ASIAN RHETORICAL STYLE

Clyne (1994) suggest that "People of all backgrounds do try to facilitate successful communication including successful intercultural communication as long as it does not contravene their cultural values, which may be harmony, respect and restraint" (p.198). He suggests that in attaining these three qualities some discourse is deliberately allowed to be ambiguous. Clyne (1994) quotes Leach (1983) as attributing differences in cross-cultural communication as due to strategies rather than principles. What he appears to be saying is that we wish to make the "right" impression on our listeners. For Jewish, Israeli and Black American speakers "saying a lot and immodesty" are ways to be cooperative, to do what is expected. In contrast, for the Chinese and Vietnamese, "being cooperative means saying little enough to avoid a conflict". Clearly within cultures one must behave in a way that is expected. Clyne suggests that in comparison with the blunt German-speaking Swiss who express their ideas directly, English people "tend to 'share'" a text, to negotiate about the choice and development of the topic. However, in contrast with Japanese discourse which "suggests possibilities" Clyne quotes Harder (1984) as describing English discourse as "arguing ideas, supporting them . . . forcefully". So, successful public speech seems to depend upon with whom one is being compared. Kaplan (quoted in Clyne, 1984 p169) described "Oriental discourse" as circular along the lines of Cam Nguyen's (1991) research which found a "Vietnamese discourse pattern that considered "all implications and answer[ed] all possible objections, not coming straight to the point, but looking at various aspects with a bearing on the point". However, Clyne quotes Mohan and Lo who found a high degree of linearity in Chinese students' essays and on that basis challenged Kaplan's claims that Chinese discourse was roundabout and required many introductory explanations and justifications before coming to the point. Clyne suggests the generalisation that "harmony, respect and restraint" epitomise "most South-East Asian cultures" while "truth and certainty" are more valued in European discourse. He thereby seems to describe a significant barrier to communication across cultures. One can imagine that a lie, uttered with the intention of keeping the peace, might be regarded as a significant breach of trust in a society that valued "truth and certainty". However, in situations where values clash, Clyne calls for "people of all cultural backgrounds to understand and tolerate one another's discourse patterns" (p214) and, it seems, not to be ready to assume that one's ways of operating are naturally the best.

## PILOT SURVEY RESULTS

In order to explore how students from different cultures relate to instruction in public speaking twenty-two students from a course on intercultural communication were polled on their opinions about their tuition in public speaking. All these students had completed a core communication course in which both the theory and practice of public speaking had been taught. Seven of these students were from Australia and one from USA: The other 14 came from Asia - 2 Hong Kong, 3 Taiwan, 1 Singapore, 3 Korea, 3 Indonesia, 1 China. Students were asked who would give the speeches on three important occasions in their lives: their weddings, the funerals of a parent and their own 21st birthdays. Most responses from Asians indicated that speaking at weddings and funerals was still the domain of men: only one, a woman from Hong Kong, indicated that her elder sister would speak at a parent's funeral. (This is consistent with other reports that women often speak in public in Hong Kong). Taiwanese respondents indicated that speeches were not common at functions in their culture unless by a politician or other important invited guest. The expectations that these students had about the likelihood of their being public speakers varied as much between Asian countries as they did with Australia.

Students were also asked to rate from least to most appropriate on a 7 point Likert scale (from their own cultural perspective) a series of instructions on public speaking. Many of the instructions were quoted directly from advice given in public speaking texts. Others were derived from Clyne's summary of Asian logic and argument style (referred to above). However, t-test analysis indicated no significant differences between the Asian and Australian groups on any of these items. One explanation for this is that we had taught the Asian students too well! They had internalised instructions to the point where they felt that their own cultural approaches were not acceptable in the context of a public speaking or communication class.

When asked to comment on what they had learned about public speaking and how instruction could be changed to better suit their culture, the issue of "organisation" was raised by a number of Asian students (5 of 14). For some it was the area where they had learned the most, while others said they needed more instruction in organising a speech. Further research could explore whether students from Asia were impressed by the concept of organisation because it differed from expectations gained from their own cultures.

## INTERVIEWS

In order to explore the area of speech communication in a more qualitative manner we interviewed two informants who had experience of both Asian and Australian speech cultures. A Hong Kong-born academic of Chinese background who went to school in England and to university in Australia warned of categorising an "Asian style" because he believes that Hong Kong, Singaporean, Taiwanese and mainland Chinese would have different customs, while Japanese customs would diverge even more in the direction of greater formality. He distinguished between those countries which had had colonial rule and had adapted some British customs from societies that had not. In Hong Kong, weddings, for example, could be formal and traditional in style involving a "lot of bowing" but few formal speeches, or they might be more modern - something that could be categorised as a "conspicuous demonstration of wealth" involving much "drinking of cognac out of tall glasses" and few speeches. More usually though, the couple would make the rounds of the tables and engage in conversation or dialogue with groups of guests rather than set up a system involving a series of speakers giving a speech as is the typical Australian custom.

He said "In a very traditional Chinese wedding, speeches would be quite unusual. However, most Hong Kong weddings these days contain both Chinese and Western customs. For example, a bride will arrive at a banquet wearing a white gown but will then change into a red Chinese gown prior to



the tea ceremony". Our informant believed that speeches are used more frequently in a Western style wedding in which guests are invited to a reception rather than a banquet.

If speeches were involved a modern Hong Kong woman (Hong Kong women being known for their independence, forthrightness and career drive) would be as likely to speak at her wedding as her new husband. Our informant felt that while there would be a range of behaviour within Hong Kong there seem to be fewer traditional impediments against the bride giving a speech at a wedding. Indeed, at his parents' wedding in the mid-1960s his mother gave a speech.

A Korean academic explained that in Korea weddings are conducted by priests if the couple is religious but otherwise by a notable person such as a minister of government or a high ranking lawyer and speeches are not generally made. The father of the bride might briefly thank everyone for coming, but would say little more than that. In work situations senior, rather than younger people, would make public addresses and give presentations.

These informants reinforced the findings of the survey in the way that they described how different patterns of public communication, both between Asian countries and within them, were based on degree of adherence to tradition. Both the survey and the informants reinforce Bakhtin's observation that a public speaking genre is both interactive with its culture and open to change as that culture adapts to new circumstances.

#### A GLOBAL PODIUM?

Our teaching of public speech to members of Asian cultures would not seem to be justified by descriptions of their cultures as collectivist and hierarchal because in those cases public speeches are not as common as in Australian culture, nor is it expected that the young will express their individuality by being asked to speak in public if there are older people present. We justify the exercise of encouraging people to speak in public with our expectations that people who travel outside their own country to study will probably continue to operate in a global society where Western notions of appropriate ways of speaking at present hold sway. We reason that part of speaking a language is to learn the appropriate genres of the language. Our research does not lead us to advocate abandoning the teaching of public speaking, but instead points to the need to teach it within an understanding of cultural differences and changes. While we see differences between Australians, the Americans, the British, the Taiwanese, the Singaporeans, the Japanese, the Indonesians and the people of Hong Kong we hope to communicate with them all. In addition, our analysis of this research leads us to expect increasingly to find such differences within cultures that inhibit us from labelling any style of speaking as specific to so diverse a group as "Asians". As teachers of public speaking we should take time to explore the individual meanings that our students have constructed about the act of speaking in public and recognise that, along with experience and personality, culture helped construct that meaning.

Our research has led us to believe that students come with a variety of cultural expectations about public speaking styles and genres and that it would be wise to alert students to the non-universality of their own expectations. It may be that Australians choose speakers for their personal involvement in the formal event rather than for their expertise as public speakers and it may also be that speakers chosen for their "importance" as public figures in Australia and in Asia may also not demonstrate high skills in public speaking. We would agree with Giles Auty that if Australian culture values public speaking then training in public speaking ought to be more widespread. An awareness of social constructionist views of communication should alert students to the ways that the meanings of their messages will differ depending on the previous cultural experiences of their audience. Consequently, where possible, all forms of public speaking should allow for some interaction between speaker and listeners. If these considerations are taken into account the teaching of public speaking is justified as

a multicultural experience even though it will probably not fit precisely into the culture of any particular group.

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