

## COMMUNICATION (I)

THE LANGUAGE BEYOND THE WORDS:  
A Suggestion for Fieldwork Training

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## INTRODUCTION

In many ways, fieldwork in anthropology is like watching a movie with the sound off. In fieldwork, the anthropologist is often in a situation where s/he understands neither the language nor the local customs. Non-verbal communication, and the anthropologist's interpretation of it, becomes the first route to understanding the culture. Viewing a motion picture with the sound off can give a glimpse of the value of non-verbal communication and how one's cultural background can affect one's interpretation.

Two issues have been chosen for an analysis of how they are communicated non-verbally in the film *The Year of Living Dangerously*; interpersonal ranking, and cultural use of space. Each will be illustrated by one scene from the film. The analysis and interpretation will be from my own perspective; that is, that of a modern North American woman.

## THE POOL SCENE

## I: THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

Throughout this sequence of scenes, the behaviour of three principle characters was observed: the Short Man, the Reporter, and the Older Man. Peripheral to, but perhaps affecting, the behaviours of these three characters is the presence of the Young Woman. Almost incidental to the behaviours of the three principle characters is the Waiter.

## II: THE BEHAVIOURS

At the beginning of this sequence, the Short Man, preceding the Reporter, approaches the Older Man, who is seated. The Short Man has his hand outstretched. The Older Man is tanned, sixty-ish, with a clipped mustache and excellent posture. He stands and is seen to be tall. He shakes the Short Man's hand. The Short Man gestures to the Older Man and turns to the Reporter. The Reporter immediately holds out his hand in a gesture to precede a handshake. The Older Man takes off his sunglasses with his right hand, places them in his left hand and then shakes the Reporter's hand that is still outstretched.

After the Young Woman arrives, the Older Man waves four fingers at the Waiter standing behind an outdoor bar. The Waiter nods.

The Waiter later arrives with a tray of four drinks that appear the same. The Waiter puts the first one down in front of the Young Woman. The Older Man takes it, raises it, brings it down in front of himself, looks down at it and frowns. The Older Man remains seated and raises his head to look at the Waiter, frowns and says something. The Waiter appears to protest: raises his eyebrows and says something quickly. The Older Man puts the drink on the tray and waves his hand.

The Reporter, who has been uninvolved since the drinks arrive, now reaches out and takes the drink off the tray. He smiles nervously. He carefully places the drink in front of himself and then moves it slightly. He smiles stiffly again. He sets his shoulders, stiffens his back, places the palms of his hands down on the table and leans back in his chair. The Older Man then frowns, folds his arms across his chest and grinds his teeth.

## III: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Handshaking is a 'Western' cultural behaviour. It usually takes place prior to any other business at the beginning and end of a meeting. It occurs not only amongst strangers but also between people who may have business with each other fairly frequently. It may occur amongst kinship groups formed through marriage, but rarely occurs amongst kinship groups based on blood relationships. On that basis, these three men are probably not related by blood kinship ties and quite likely not even by marriage kinship ties.

How a handshake occurs, and if it occurs at all, may indicate interpersonal ranking. Indeed, handshaking may be used by one party to alter, or attempt to alter, that ranking in their own favour. Generally, it is the prerogative of the older or higher ranking person to initiate a handshake.

The Older Man appears to be an archetypal 'British Colonial'. This is indicated by his age, his style of mustache and by his bearing, which is almost military. The Short Man appears to be a native Indonesian. The Reporter is young and his clothes are American in cut. One would expect, under these circumstances, that the Older Man would consider himself the highest ranking. The Short Man, in approaching with his hand stretched out, attempts to alter this and succeeds: the Older Man shakes his hand. The Reporter, too, attempts to alter this by being the first to offer his hand. The Older Man counters this by removing his sunglasses as if to say "I'll shake hands with you when I'm good and ready!" By shaking hands on his own terms, the Older Man reasserts his rank.

Eye contact is also an important concept to the 'Westerner'. Failure to "look one in the eye" indicates a lack of trustworthiness and honesty. The Older Man did not take off his sunglasses to look at the Short Man but did to look at the Reporter. The Older Man, by doing this, showed he thought the Reporter more worthy of being looked in the eye and thereby granted the Reporter higher rank than the Short Man.

The Older Man and the Waiter communicate non-verbally. The Older Man's casual order indicates a higher rank: the Waiter does not question the order given and accepts the Older Man's right to give it, thereby admitting his higher rank. The Waiter then brings what he thought was ordered; four drinks.

In 'Western' culture, it is the custom for women to be served first. The Waiter, apparently a native Indonesian, is obviously familiar with this custom when he serves the Young Woman first. By ordering the drinks, the Older Man has implied that he is paying for them. In general, the person who is offering hospitality by paying for the drinks gains the rank of host and has the responsibility to ensure their quality and accept or reject them. Usually that person would examine their own serving. It would appear, by taking the Young Woman's drink and rejecting it, that the Older Man was anxious to establish his rank and wanted to leave no doubt about it.

The Reporter's physical actions and expressions as he takes the rejected drink indicate that he is aware that he has challenged the Older Man's position. The Older Man's frown, crossed arms and teeth grinding indicate that he feels a lowering in personal ranking -- and he does not like it!

The presence of the Young Woman makes it difficult to assess the Reporter's rank-climbing behaviour. Does the Reporter react to a slight given verbally to the Waiter? Is he posturing for the benefit of his relationship with the Young Woman? Is it a combination of the two?

## THE STREET SCENE

### I: THE BEHAVIOURS

The Reporter and the Short Man are walking along a street after dark. The first group they pass consists of six adults, male and female, squatting around a small fire on which something appears to be cooking.

More views of the street follow as the Short Man and Reporter walk through a group of armed young men. Two of the young men have guns and several have long billy sticks. One of the young men drops his billy stick in front of the Reporter and backs away quickly, picking it up after the Reporter steps over it. After this, they follow the Reporter and the Short Man a short distance and are shown no more.

The Short Man and the Reporter come up to a group of seven people, male and female. The Short Man talks earnestly with one of the men who responds with no facial expression and no energy in his speech. All seven are dressed in ragged clothing. The man the Short Man talks to is sitting on the ground with a tray in front of him. On this tray are displayed two combs, two whistles, four cigarettes, two toy guns, photographs and money. Another man lies beside the first on a mat on the pavement with a cloth bundle under his head. On the other side are two women and a man. The man is looking at the women enviously, wide-eyed. The two women are eating, carefully putting each morsel in their mouths and looking all around. Beside them, and part of this group, is a woman sitting on the pavement with a woman (older child?) sleeping with her head in the older woman's lap.

The Reporter and the Short Man continue to walk past other individuals and small groups. One woman has six balloons beside her, another pair have a small brazier in front of them and a man and woman have a small pile of what appear to be bricks in front of them.

There is no interaction between these groups and they totally ignore the Reporter and the Short Man walking behind them. Their faces are all apathetic and expressionless. Their clothing appears worn and ragged.

### II: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The areas on the street do not appear to be divided on the basis of sex. The larger groups are a mixture of male and female. The smaller groups and individuals do not seem to be grouped on the basis of sex, but interspersed evenly.

These groups of people appear to be street vendors. The tray of goods in front of one man, the woman's balloons, and the pile of bricks are probably items to sell. One wonders why, if these people are street

vendors, they ignore the Reporter since he is well dressed in American fashion and could be presumed to be rich.

The sparsity of goods for sale, the ragged clothing and apathetic faces indicate a poverty few middle class North Americans could understand. The mat one man is lying on and the other girl asleep on the pavement would indicate that this is a usual pattern for them. The bundle of cloth under the man's head may well contain all his worldly possessions. Eating seems to be done with particular care not to spill a drop and to keep an eye all around while doing so.

If the people work, eat and sleep on the street, one can conclude that they live there. The area around them is their 'home'. With the lack of interaction between groups it is almost as if there are 'invisible walls' between the groups. This could explain why, except when approached by the Short Man, they ignore the Reporter and the Short Man.

There is no obvious negotiation for the spaces on the street shown in the film. However, one purpose of the armed young men might be to enforce the division of space on the street. Another purpose of the armed young men could be protection of these particular street people from outsiders. Outsiders could be other street people or the authorities.

When one of the armed young men throws his billy stick in front of the Reporter, it could be a challenge to find out the Reporter's intentions. When the Reporter steps over it and continues talking to the Short Man, he denies the threat and subsequently the armed young men make no more approaches and fade out of the scene.

## CONCLUSIONS

Two scenes from the movie *The Year of Living Dangerously* have been analyzed and interpreted. The jostling that often accompanies the establishment of interpersonal ranking was seen clearly in the pool scene through the actions and expressions of the characters. Because of this jostling, one can conclude that these characters have just met and are settling their ranking for future encounters.

In the street scene, it was shown that these people obtain their private space on the street by establishing 'invisible walls' and can, potentially, protect it. In this instance the sexes share the space: it is not used exclusively by one sex.

The most fascinating result of watching the entire film with the sound off was the conclusion, by this viewer, of the importance of non-verbal communication. Through only visual clues, I was able to follow the plot of the story and felt I missed only subtle nuances in the relationships

between characters. While I am curious about these nuances, I feel they were probably only incidental to the plot.

My ability to follow the plot through the visual activity is based, in large part, on my knowledge of technology, geography, modern history and, especially, 'western' culture. Having been raised in a 'Western' culture and having received a liberal education has given me the knowledge base to draw assumptions about the actions and relationships of the characters.

The utility of this exercise as a heuristic device for the training of anthropologists should be stressed. The experience of novelty and communicative disorientation can serve to sharpen observational skills while at the same time undermining the comfort of cultural presumptions.