



Language Shock: Understanding The Culture Of Conversation

By Michael H., PhD Agar

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The key to communication, says linguistic anthropologist Michael Agar, is understanding the context and culture of conversation. In *Language Shock*, Agar reveals how deeply our language and cultural values intertwine to define who we are and how we relate to one another. From paying an electric bill in Austria to opening a bank account in Mexico to handling a parking ticket in the United States, he shows how routine tasks become lessons in the subtleties of conversation when we venture outside our cultural sphere. With humorous, insightful stories from his extensive travels, Agar engages us in a lively study of "languaculture" and enriches our view of the world.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Agar, an anthropologist and ethnographer, wants Americans to break out of their cultural superiority complex and to join "the growing global conversation" embracing multicultural voices. Leaning on linguist Benjamin Whorf's theory that each language shapes its speakers' ways of seeing, acting, thinking and feeling, Agar relates personal encounters with language and cultural differences, drawing on his stay in Austria during the Kurt Waldheim Nazi scandal in 1986, his work as a public health official treating heroin addicts in Kentucky in 1968, travels in Mexico and Greece and village kinship systems in India. The informal, highly anecdotal narrative sketches a theory of "languaculture," Agar's coinage emphasizing the inextricable links between language and culture and the way we build mental "frames" to organize our expectations. Agar, who teaches anthropology at the University of Maryland, serves a smorgasbord with tasty tidbits instead of a full meal.

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From Kirkus Reviews

Perceptive anecdotes from Austria, India, and Mexico, from heroin-addict treatment centers, scuba dives, and linguistics conferences pepper this primer on the intricacies of cross-cultural discourse and ordinary conversation. Coining the term "languaculture" to merge two somewhat ambiguous concepts into one slightly less uncertain term, Agar, a professor of linguistic anthropology (Univ. of Maryland, College Park), argues that language is not simply grammar and vocabulary (never mind phonology); that culture is as tangible and fluid as daily life; and that the two are intertwined--and often get snarled up. In his astute informal gloss of converging concepts in linguistics and cultural anthropology, Agar takes exception to the Berlitz notion of standardized phrases for generic situations as a means of getting along in foreign countries, as though communication merely involved set responses to set frames of reference. In his search for ethnographic "rich points" (where native and non-native speakers are likely to trip themselves up), Agar sometimes fixes on commonplace words that have particular cultural significance but slippery definitions. In one instance, while working in Vienna, he spent some free time trying to find the meaning of *Schm,* a sort of defensive irony, or sly black humor, or slick equivocation. One student gave the example of Austrian-born Marie Antoinette's infamous "Let them eat cake" as typical *Schm,*; but though Marie's French was perfect grammatically, the *sans-culottes* still did not catch on to her intention, which was not to mock the lower classes but to deflect the tension of the situation through humor. Speech acts--more general forms of social discourse like joking or lying--can be more slippery still for both speakers and society, as Agar demonstrates in an analysis of Kurt Waldheim's rationalizations of his Nazi collaboration. If his discussion of scholarship tends to skim over important figures and ideas (such as Wittgenstein and anthropologist Harold Garfinkel) and his original insights are slight by comparison, his presentation is readable and his observations engaging. A stimulating personal reflection on the complexities of communication between people, in whatever language or culture. -- *Copyright ©1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Review

"Friendly, wry, and clever . . . Agar takes us with him to India, Austria, and Mexico--with junkies and truckers--introducing us to languaculture, the inextricable interrelation between language and culture." -- Deborah Tannen, Ph.D., author of "You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation;" "University Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University" "An engaging summary of important studies in linguistic anthropology." -- "The Washington Post Book World" "Perceptive . . . A stimulating personal reflection on the complexities of communication between people, in whatever language or culture" --

"Kirkus Reviews""If you have no time to read more than one book on a linguistic topic a year, try this one."
-- "The Times" (London)"Agar offers a really useful new way of thinking about how we human beings
'communicate.'" -- Linda Schele, author of "A Forest of Kings""Michael Agar's book allows much insight
into the very complex relationship of language culture, and society. It is exciting to read!" -- Ruth Wodak,
University Professor, The Linguistics Institute, University of Vienna, Austria

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