DISCOURSE ATtributions AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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1. Attributions in or outside communication?

Attribution has been a central concern in social psychology and, because of its nature, has also attracted considerable attention from cross-cultural communication researchers (e.g., Jaspers & Hewstone 1982; Gudykunst 1986; Bochner 1982; Detwiler 1986; Lalljee 1987). Attribution, quite simply put, refers to people’s understandings of why oneself or others do certain things or why certain events occur. As explanations of the workings of the social world, such thought structures are assumed to guide people’s perception and interpretation of actions and events (cf. Heider 1958; Kelley 1967). The notion of attribution is regarded as of great relevance to cross-cultural communication and relations: when members of different cultures come into contact, communicative difficulties may arise because of culturally different ways of explaining beliefs, behavior and events. In order to avoid communicative problems and thereby to improve relations between members of different cultural groups, therefore, it is considered as crucial to obtain scientific knowledge of culture-bound attributions, which can then be applied to the engineering of cross-cultural communication. On this account, in his ‘Attribution theory and intercultural communication’, Lalljee proposes that "understanding attributions is of crucial importance to understanding communication, particularly intercultural communication" (1987:37). In the applied field, training programs have been organized for members of one culture to learn the expectations, explanations and standpoints of those of another culture (Brislin 1979).

The logic behind this association of attribution and communication is a cognitive-causal account of the human nature and behavior: attributions are taken to be context-independent cognitive structures determining human activity. From the perspective of the present study, such a conception of attribution is problematical in at least two respects. Firstly, it neglects the role of language and interaction in constructing and orienting attributions. In such an approach, individuals are seen as passive bearers of psychological attributions and language is considered merely as a window onto underlying attributitional processes. The contextual requirements and

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2 Other discussions of the shortcomings of such a view are to be found in e.g., Semin & Manstead 1983; Antaki 1988; Billig 1982; and Edwards & Potter 1993.
functional motivations for linguistic activities are thus explained away. The fact of matter is that in their daily affairs, people do not perform attributions and explanations all the time. They do so usually when they are confronted with a disrupting and disconcerting belief or behavior (cf. Semin & Manstead 1983). In this case, they formulate an attributional version of reality in order to solve the situational problem. Since the discursive construction of attributions is primarily a goal-oriented activity, to conceive attribution as independent of language and communication is to ignore the contextual embedding of its use.

Secondly, using attribution as theoretical abstraction, i.e. as culturally shared cognition, in accounting for cross-cultural phenomena or in engineering cross-cultural communication, may run the risk of ethnocentrism. For one thing, a theoretical approach in which attributions as cognitive structures are assigned to a particular cultural group and then, as pre-existing 'cultural characteristics', are held responsible for communicative difficulties, necessarily implies a representation of the group in question as deficient and as deviant from other groups. For another, reducing attributions to a limited set of abstract categories (e.g., 'personal' vs 'situational') downgrades individual agency or creativity (Parker 1989) and smooths over the diversity and ambiguity of attributions within a culture (Billig 1982). Moreover, approaching attributions in terms of abstract categories and overlooking their goal-oriented use dismiss the social-constructive role of discourse and are thus not able to address questions about communicative practices related to power discrepancies: Reduction of social action to cognition may gloss over unequal social formations at work in communicative processes. Therefore, in accounting for failure or success in intercultural communication attributions should first and foremost be treated as resulting from interactants' practical resources and situated discursive engagements, rather than as decontextualized cognitive structures or conditions.

As an attempt to rectify the shortcomings just mentioned, I shall turn around the cognitivist proposition on attribution — as represented by the quote from Lalljee above — and say: 'Understanding cross-cultural communication is crucial to understanding attribution'. The point is that, because attributions take place only in the (cross-cultural) communicative process, they may profitably be explored as a culture's members' communicative and discursive practices. To substantiate this stance, I shall take an 'ethno-empirical' perspective on attributions by investigating them as members' practical devices in linguistic interaction. For this purpose, I shall examine some examples from interviews in which expatriate Chinese intellectuals in the Netherlands talk about their contacts and experiences with the Dutch.

More specifically, I shall be concerned to accomplish two practical tasks. In the first place, I shall identify some cultural attributions in the interview conversations. Here, it may be reminded that attributional representations are often not explicitly verbalized but only implied or alluded to. This means that we need to render explicit the underlying assumptions, presuppositions or associations that constitute attributional structures. As mentioned above, I shall treat conceptualizations about cultures and the social world in general as primarily goal-oriented. People formulate attributions in particular ways because it allows them to invoke some preferred perception and to avoid others. Thus, secondly, it is crucial to make transparent the (pro-)active motivations for discursive attributions. However, pragmatic orientations of this type are usually not directly available to the analyst. To tackle this problem, I shall illustrate a specific methodological strategy.
This consists in making plain the contextual, commonsensical rationality that result from the proffered attribution on the one hand and the problematization of a belief or behavior on the other. Thus, the discursive construction of attributions becomes an investigable phenomenon in itself, rather than being used as an unquestioned analytical resource for explaining cross-cultural communication. This kind of discourse-analytical approach to the social-psychological notion of attribution is, I feel, a prerequisite for understanding their role in intercultural communication.

2. Analytical preliminaries

In this section, I shall first sketch a basic view of language and communication in everyday life, as it will be central to the understanding of discursive attributions. This view consists of a number of inter-related components such as language, discourse and the language user. Then, I shall defend a conception of attributions as communicative acts. Finally, I shall make explicit the operational procedures and outline an interpretative method for making sense of the data at hand.

2.1. Language and its user

Any theory of linguistic communication entails some kind of model of the language user. In the theoretical framework for the present study, the language user is seen primarily as a socially accountable and creative person (Garfinkel 1967; Shotter 1993; Billig 1987; Pearce et al. 1984). Accountable because s/he is conscious of, and reflexive upon the ‘moral’ and ‘rational’ social order, and, when this order is threatened or actually breached, s/he will attempt to maintain or re-establish it by re-orienting her/his actions. Creative because s/he is not a passive information processor but is able to produce new meanings and realities serving new purposes.

It is now widely recognized that language may be profitably explored as culturally and historically defined discourses, rather than as a self-contained system of signs and rules. Language is thus seen as consisting, at a general level, in e.g. political discourse, scientific discourse, everyday discourse, or, at a more local level, in parliamentary debate, medical consultation, conversation among friends, etc. (cf. van Dijk 1993; Fairclough 1989). Consider, alternatively, the fact that we do not have so much of the English language as of specific uses in various social domains, which are abstractly construed as English.

Discourses have a content dimension and a consequence dimension. The former dimension refers to the sets of symbolic — rhetorical and linguistic — resources and devices which provide for communication and interaction. For example, in the educational discourse of a particular society, at a particular historical time, particular ‘world views’ and ‘ways of speaking’ may be identified along with concepts and conceptions about teachers’ and students’ positions, duties, privileges, goals, and so forth. Similarly, symbols, beliefs, assumptions, etc. about cultural groups in verbal interaction form the basis of cross-cultural discourse. The second dimension refers to the creative and purposeful character of language and discourse. This idea may be traced back to the early writings of cultural anthropology and linguistic philosophy (Malinowski 1923; Wittgenstein 1968; Austin
According to this view, language is not merely words but also deeds; it is formative of social relations and actions. In critical linguistics and critical discourse studies, for example, it has been demonstrated that discursive formulations of the socio-cultural world have ideological consequences (e.g., Fairclough 1989; van Dijk 1987, 1993; Shi-xu 1994).

2.2. Cultural attributions as communicative acts

A discourse-constructionist view of socio-cultural and social psychological reality has now been expounded in several quarters of communication studies and the discourse-oriented social sciences (e.g., Pearce et al. 1984; Jones 1984; Shotter 1993; Harré 1986; Gergen 1982; Edwards & Potter 1992; Gilbert & Mulkay 1984; Billig 1987; Coulter 1989). This view critiques the practice of dismissing human communication as an epiphenomenon and as a window onto the truth of the individual mind, and draws attention to the discursive role in the construction of psychology. It is argued that since linguistic communication is the repository of the social and cognitive world, it is a legitimate ‘third sphere’ of social scientific research (Shotter 1993: 7).

On the empirical front, it has been demonstrated that representations of the social world are not constant parameters, but are contextually variable. In particular, an ethnomethodological perspective has been taken to examine in detail intersituational and interpersonal variation in representations of such notions as society (e.g., Bowers & Iwi 1993), identity (e.g., Shotter & Gergen, 1989), Self (e.g., Gergen 1989), gender (e.g., Radtke & Stam 1993), ageing (e.g., Coupland et al. 1991), sub-culture (e.g., Widdicombe & Wooffitt 1990) and scientific knowledge (Gilbert & Mulkay 1984). Results show that such ‘realities’ tend to be flexible and conducive to specific socio-cultural functions (cf. Potter & Wetherell 1987).

It is necessary, therefore, to examine people’s formulations of cultural and social psychological knowledge with regard to the functional uses to which they are put in everyday life. As part of practical socio-cultural knowledge, attributions involving cultural groups cannot be mere products of inner processes (cf. Semin & Manstead 1983; Antaki 1988; Edwards & Potter 1993). They are formed and formulated in situ, with respect to specific problematics and contingent rules for (re)producing attributions. Constructions of cultural attributions have the effect of meeting specific needs and requirements of the speech event. Failure to meet such requirements will make people socially unacceptable or undesirable. To understand the nature of cultural attributions, therefore, we must perforce take into account this communicative action dimension.

2.3. Data selection

The empirical data of attributions analyzed in this study are randomly selected from some 40 interviews made by the present writer between 1991 and 1993. The interviewees are Chinese expatriate scholars living in the Netherlands, like the interviewer. Some of the interviewees have been on one to two year exchange schemes between the Chinese and Dutch governments, but most of them are funded.
by some Dutch educational or research institution. At the time of the interview, the respondents had already stayed in the Netherlands for one to five years. The interviews are non-questionnaire and informal: first a general request was made to the respondent to provide impressions about the Dutch, and in the interview process, follow-up questions were asked about, e.g., the way the Dutch live, work, and associate with each other. The interviewees were encouraged beforehand to talk freely, and anonymity was guaranteed. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, tape-recorded, transcribed and translated into English. Each lasted about half-an-hour to one hour.

Operationally, there are a number of criteria for the identification of attributional data. These are designed largely to limit and circumscribe the scope of data selection. In ordinary texts and talk, attributions can be identified at various levels of abstraction: for example, within the sentence, between sentences, and across larger discourse units. In this study, we focus on attributional relationships between propositions, hence sentences, because, presumably, formulations of cultural properties are most explicit at this level. Thus, the first criterion is that an attributional representation is present, implicitly or explicitly, in more than one clause or some such structure. Second, the attributional discourse denotes or connotes a belief, a type of behavior or a state of affairs relevant to the target group, and a cause, agent or some other factor functionally related to the belief, behavior or state. Third, the latter part contains the cultural attribution proper: involving a cultural/national group or a significant part thereof, it describes, refers to, or hints at an aspect or characteristic of the cultural/national group.

2.4. Principles of interpretation

Having looked at how language in general and attributional discourse in particular work, and having sketched the structure of the analytical unit, we now need to make clear the interpretative procedures.

Squaring with the account of language above, we shall be concerned to do two types of meaning-interpretation of attributional discourse: 1) the contextual semantics at the descriptive level, the 'saying' of the discourse — to use a metaphor from speech act theory, and 2) the cultural pragmatics at the performative level, the 'doing' of discourse. As to the first level, we are supposed to render explicit the textually and contextually implied attributions — the representations of the causal or other functional relationships that are being offered. This means that we shall be involved in specifying the situated assumptions, presuppositions, commonsense or other background knowledge featuring such a relationship.

Since the action-function dimension of linguistic constructions is only indirectly related to various aspects of the 'larger' and often 'vague' speech context, interpretation at the second, pragmatic level is by definition problematical. To be sure, discourse analysts do not in principle have any more privileged access to the truth of the word than the layman. However, there are perhaps more systematic and

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3 Most members of this second group, however, went through the afore-mentioned exchange scheme in the first phase.
more explicit ways of making sense of texts and talk. In this regard, I would like to propose a specific strategy for pragmatic interpretation as a way of methodological justification. This strategy consists in making explicit the commonsense, practical relationship between the linguistic construction in question (in this case the attribution) and the situated problematic.

People do not invoke attributions in an innocuous context, but do so usually when states, events or acts are at variance with their desires or expectations, i.e. when 'things go wrong' (cf. Antaki 1988; Semin & Manstead 1983; Billig 1987). The problematical ingredients of everyday life become, then, the motivating factors for mobilizing attributional discourse. Such problematics refer broadly to two types: 1) disagreement where there are explicit or implicit differences of opinion about a claim or action; 2) puzzlement where there is expressed or implied unexpectedness, abnormality, or surprise about a belief or a conduct. Most important for the interpretation, the specific nature of the problematic will give a clue to the nature of the construction of the attribution. For, when a particular construction of reality is offered vis-à-vis the problematic, some ordinary-rational contextual change will ensue: given a disagreement or puzzlement, the constructed attribution in question may in effect have an argumentative or explanatory function (Shi-xu 1994; cf. van Eemeren et al. 1993). This problematological view of discursive attributions allows for a methodology that not only literally practises the discourse-analytical principle of understanding meaning in context, but also justifies interpretation on the basis of publicly verifiable evidence.

3. Empirical analysis of attributions

3.1. Neutralizing the cultural Other’s underestimation

The following fragment is taken from an interview with a senior medical scientist. The interviewee explicates that Dutch academics have a low opinion about their Chinese colleagues and that this opinion is in conflict with his own. He relates the Dutch view and his own to the academic level of Chinese scholars in general.

001 9: perhaps they tend to underestimate our/the developing 002 003 countries in the academic field. So when they try to help, 004 they think... Because science and technology advance pretty 005 fast, don't they? In fact, many of our Chinese scholars are, 006 of course, not of the same level, when they come here. They 007 are not really inferior in scholarship. Only our working 008 condition, the facilities, cannot be compared with theirs. 009 So it seems that they sometimes underestimate you. But there 010 is something else here, sometimes in academic discussions, we 011 Chinese scholars seldom speak. We seldom raise questions, 012 There is a reason for this. Mainly because of the language 013 problem. [...] But the major problem is that many Chinese

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4 See appendix for the transcription conventions used in the following transcripts.
students have this language problem when they come here. So because of this, you cannot express yourself well, you cannot let others know about your level. On the other hand, because the apparatuses are not the same, the routines are not the same. So in doing experiments you need a long time to adapt. So inevitably sometimes you... might give them the impression that the Chinese level is a bit lower. So it is very hard to say whether this is a question of discrimination. Perhaps that is.. is a misunderstanding. Because we have the language problem. We don't speak English fluently as they do. Most people are like this. So, if you could actively participate in their discussions, then perhaps.. this/the kind of distance would... then this kind of feeling... might be reduced. So the... in this respect, I think the difference between the Dutch and the Chinese lies mainly in the economy and financing.

There is a chaining of complex relationships between actions and states. Within these relationships, a broad attribution with respect to a Dutch attitude may be teased out as follows. On the one hand, the Dutch scholars are perceived to underestimate the academics from China (and other developing countries) (001-003). On the other hand, three types of cause of this Dutch attitude are proffered: 1) different working conditions in China (e.g., 'working conditions' and 'the facilities' [006-007], 'the apparatuses' and '[experimental] routines' [015-017, 017]); 2) little participation in academic discussions and few academic presentations on the part of Chinese scholars (009-010, 014-015); and, as a cause of the former, 3) inadequate command of the English language (011-013, 021-023).

Since, as I argued above, a discursive construction is functional and purposeful, the major question is how to comprehend the pragmatics of the attribution at hand. In this regard, I have proposed to examine the constructed attribution in relation to the situated problematic. In that connection, it may be noted that the attribution in the above excerpt is invoked in the context of an explicit disagreement and contradiction between the Dutch scholars and the present speaker. For, on the one side, the Dutch are said to underestimate Chinese scholars (001-003, 008). On the other, the speaker puts forward an antagonistic claim that the Chinese academics are not really inferior (005-006), plus the remark that the difference lies elsewhere (025-027). A further indicator of the dispute is the speaker's remark, 'So it is very hard to say whether this is a question of discrimination. Perhaps that is .. is a misunderstanding' (019-021). In other words, according to the speaker, there is deviation from 'what is really the case' in the Dutch estimation of the academic level of Chinese scholars. In this sense, the present speaker openly disagrees with the Dutch academics and perhaps other Chinese as well.

The question then becomes what the attribution does specifically to the situated dispute. To clarify this issue, it is necessary to consider the practical rationality evolving from the relationship between the problematized situation and the proffered attribution. To begin with, the proffered attribution preemptively rules out other plausible causes (e.g., the actual academic competence and performance of the Chinese scholars). Secondly, the causes adduced are assumed to be irrelevant to and misleading for a proper assessment of the level of the Chinese scholars. This reading may be derived from three textual facts: to the speaker, 1) 'working
conditions’, ‘the facilities’, etc. have nothing to do with academics’ quality as such; 2) because of their language problem, Chinese scholars fail to express their competence, and 3) the Dutch attitude is misled and misplaced (note terms like ‘underestimate’ and ‘misunderstanding’). Now that the causes are irrelevant and misleading, the cultural Other’s attitude towards the ‘Us’ is effectively rendered groundless. In so doing, the constructed attribution achieves the function of warranting among in-group members an antagonistic claim, against the out-group’s degrading attitude, that Chinese scholars are not different from, nor inferior to, their Dutch colleagues. At the same time, since the agency of the problematized attitude is located outside the Other, the attribution is also conducive to neutralizing a ‘bad feeling’ with the Other: for their underestimation is now diagnosed not as ‘discrimination’, but merely as an innocent ‘misunderstanding’.

In sum, a many-fold attribution is constructed in a context of disagreement and dispute. Given the commonsense and implicit relationship between the Dutch disagreeable attitude and the construction of the causes thereof, the attribution can be interpreted as an argumentative attempt to neutralize the cultural Other’s negative opinion of the cultural Self.

3.2. Dodging the cultural Other’s negative evaluation

In the above example, we saw that the speaker rejects the cultural Other’s unfavorable representation, thereby regaining the well-being of the cultural Self. In the following extract, we shall see how respondents accept a cultural Other’s unfavorable representation but explain it away through an attribution. First, a self-report by the Dutch is presented on the dimension of one’s attitude towards authority. Then, a supposed representation by the Dutch colleagues of the Chinese on the same dimension is suggested. The Dutch representation of the Us is taken by the speakers as true and this reality is being causally rationalized.

In this extract, a cultural attribution of the Chinese attitude towards authority can be identified. At first, it seems that speaker 1 just projects a plausible Dutch perception of the Chinese attitude (003-006). Speaker 2 agrees with the first speaker
that their Dutch colleagues might indeed hold that view (007). However, the moves in 008-009, the one in 014, and the acknowledging move in 015 show that both speakers actually affirm and ratify the reality of the attitude as perceived by the Dutch. They may be seen to acknowledge this attitude as reality: without disagreeing with the Dutch opinion, speaker 1 proceeds to explain why the Chinese come to be what the Dutch think. In providing the cause, these conversational moves presuppose its consequence.

Let us lay the cause-consequence attribution out more explicitly. On the one hand, Chinese have an attitude of passively complying with authority. This may be read from the psychological terms like ‘like’ (004), ‘the sense of self-mastery’ and ‘the sense of self-reliance’ (010-011), ‘want’ (012), and ‘such an idea’ (013). On the other hand, this attitude is nurtured by the Chinese authoritarian milieu (008 and 014).

Then we come to the analyst’s account of why such an attribution is employed. From the first turn, it may be seen that speaker 1suspects that the Dutch have an unfavorable belief about the Chinese attitude towards authority. That is, for the speaker, ‘our’ attitude is being negatively evaluated by the cultural Other. This problematical situation may be inferred from the fact that the speaker reports that the Dutch hold back their belief about the Us (003-004), though they express openly it about a cultural third (004-005). Needless to say, the participants’ problem is also clear from the sheer semantic contrasts between ‘they don’t like authority’ and ‘me like being told what to do’. In this light, the speakers sense a negative opinion by the cultural Other about the Chinese attitude.

Against this backdrop of the cultural Other’s negative evaluation of the Us, the attributions constructed here have specific cross-cultural effects. Since the Chinese attitude is caused by forces beyond personal control, i.e. the causal factors and facts are cultural-‘environmental’ (008-009) and organizational-structural (014), the individuals, including the current speakers, are ‘protected’ from the negative evaluation by the cultural Other towards the Us. In this sense, the construction of the cultural attribution serves to fence off a cultural Other’s castigatory act and, consequently, to safeguard the well-being of the in-group individuals.

### 3.3. Expressing admiration for the cultural Other

In the following extract, Dutch professors are shown to take good concern for their Chinese students. The interviewee resorts to an example in which a Dutch professor tries to help Chinese students with going to a third country. To facilitate comprehension of the text, the background has to be made explicit here. The Dutch professor in question is cooperating with some professors in China. One of his obligations is to supervise Chinese students at his institution. Upon finishing their studies, however, the students would like to go to a third country instead of returning to where they were sent from. In the fragment, the speaker is apparently describing what the Dutch professor does and, in the process, also furnishing a cultural attribution for his deeds.
care of our Chinese exchange students, I am also-also really
moved, especially in the biology department, there is a
professor called P. in the department [...] now he [a Chinese
student] ‘s gone to Canada. However, in this case, he also
helped him. Many, many-the/Chinese students--want to extend
their stay or would like to go to other countries. In this
respect, he/in the Western thinking, the mentality, because
they are democratic, individuals have personal freedom, they
can't force you to be in one place or in some other place.
However, since he has to coordinate with the [Chinese]
professors with whom he is cooperating, he is not too positive
though to your going to a third country. But he
never opposes. So, when a student succeeds in getting to a
third country, he would write to the student’s professor,
explaining the circumstances to him.

A cultural attribution may be identified and reconstructed from the speaker’s
count of an individual Dutch professor’s conduct. The professor’s action is
described and defined as cooperating with and helping Chinese students (006-007,
014-017). The Western mentality and principle of individual freedom are brought
forth as code of conduct, and hence as the cause of the professor’s behavior
(009-011). The causal link between the professor’s behavior and the Western moral
principle emerges from the textual formulations. For one thing, what the professor
is depicted as doing (viz. assisting his students) coheres with the perceived and
pronounced Western norm of social action. For another, terms like ‘because they
[the Westerners] are [...]’ (009-011) and ‘So [...] he would [...]’ (016) signal such
causality.

In constructing the cultural attribution of the Dutch professor’s action, the
speaker assigns social and cultural significance to it. Again, this performative aspect
of the attribution can be grasped by taking into consideration the situated context
in which the attribution is embedded. The attribution is provided amidst a context
of conflict between a course of action and its obvious negative consequence: the
conflict is that the professor’s action runs counter to his own interest as an
individual and to his accountability as co-supervisor. Note the implicit contradictions
to the professor’s wish and interest: 1) he helps a student, who will, however, leave
him (005-007); 2) he helps that student, whilst it is against his personal wish and
responsibility (012-014).

The important thing to notice about this conflict is that the professor’s action
is presented as unexpected and unsettling. Unexpected because he chooses not to
do something in conformity to his interest; unsettling because he makes himself
liable to criticism from his colleagues in China. This element of surprise and
abnormality can be seen in the contrasts of expectation: ‘However, in this case, he
also helped him’ (006-007), ‘he is not too positive though to your going to third
country. But he never opposes’ (013-015).

In the light of this unusual abandonment of personal interest and professional
accountability, the proffered cultural attribution may then be seen to be charged
with specific cross-cultural motivations. In the choice and struggle between the
personal and the cultural, the culturally enjoined rule of conduct gets the upper
hand. Consequently, as the Dutch professor opts for the cultural at the expense of
the personal in the melodrama, the cultural attribution achieves the effect of
praising the Dutch (scholars), the cultural Other, for their devotion to democracy and individual freedom. In parenthesis, this cross-cultural concern is also discernible in the speaker’s statement, at the beginning of the extract, that he is moved by Dutch professors (003-004).

3.4. Blaming the cultural Self's social pressure

The respondent of the following dialog is one of a group of researchers in physics who have been approached with the interview request but most of whom have declined it. This latter incident is taken up in the talk. The staple of the present response, though, is that there is a difference between the Dutch and Chinese on the issue of freedom, as the beginning and the end of the extract make clear.

001 4: In terms of life-style, probably, this is where the
002 difference lies. That is, the general trend of the development
003 of Western society is a kind of, in my opinion, essentially,
004 it's a kind of emancipation of humanity. That is, it is not
005 like, our, in that society of ours there are many constraints,
006 and many oppressions on man. You see, what happened just
007 now is in fact just this. They dare not speak. Why dare they
008 not speak? This--/to be frank, you come here and we are all
009 fellow expatriates studying in the Netherlands, right?
010 4: Yes.
011 4: If you need my help, just a little help, as long as I can do
012 it, of course I should help you. But just now, this kind of
013 hesitation is not completely incomprehensible. They have
014 lived like that for tens of years. !!Simply dare not speak.
015 If you are a human being, why can you not speak?!! And so, the
016 Dutch people don't have this problem like us, from our
017 perspective, this is just the difference.

Here, two contrary cultural images are projected, viz. Western society is moving towards emancipation of the humanity whereas Chinese society imposes constraints on the people. Various moves are then deployed to illuminate this difference, especially on the part of Chinese society. The most straightforward move is the speaker's effort to validate his claim on the cultural difference by referring to an incident: 'You see, what happened just now is in fact just this. They dare not speak' (006-007). Here, 'what happened just now' refers exophorically to the incident prior to the present interview in which several other researchers declined the interview request. This statement conveys that their conduct is a manifestation of the social constraints of Chinese society, and the conduct is in the following sentence defined as 'not daring to speak'. This leads to the next, focal point.

A cultural attribution is offered about the Chinese researchers’ course of action. The ensuing statements (011-013) and the rhetorical question (015) are so formulated that they assume some cause of that behavior and moreover herald its specification. In these moves, an ideal, normative, and universal version of what people would do and ought to do under the same circumstances is constructed to foreground a supposed cause: Because there is discrepancy in behavior between the human beings in general and the Chinese as a particular group, there must be a
cultural factor answerable to that behavior. (A different function of this constructed ideal situation will be discussed below.) Crucial as it may be just to verbalize that factor, it has become unnecessary nevertheless. For the ‘many constraints, and many oppressions on man’ have been mentioned previously, and now the emergent (con)text makes it clear that the constraints and oppressions are the causal factor. In this way, an implicit attribution is pressed on to the interlocutor.

Having made the attribution explicit, I shall specify how this attribution constitutes a cultural critique of Chinese society. It may be noticed that more is being done than merely describing an act and providing its cause. The Chinese conduct is problematized (see also 016). For, the construction of a normal and ideal situation makes the Chinese behavior abnormal, lamentable, and deplorable. The rhetorical question ‘why can you not speak’ (015) brings this effect home through its humanistic appeal. Given the problematical nature of the Chinese conduct, and the projected attribution of its cause, the contextual rationality is inescapable: the Chinese societal constraints are taken to task. (At a higher level of the interaction, the assumed cultural attribution also stakes a claim to the reality of the cultural differences between Western and Chinese societies as an overall concern of the interview response.)

3.5. **Grounding and depriving cultural sub-groups’ identities**

The following extract is part of a larger discussion by two scholars in computer science on the quality of their Dutch colleagues. The respondents make a contrastive account of the Dutch and Chinese professors, apparently to enlighten the interviewer on their qualification as professors. Then they explain the contrast of their identities as professors as a consequence of cultural differences.

001 1: What do you think about those specialists, professors, um those scholars that you have had contact with? (What is your impression?)

002 1: I think, the qualifications of the professors, that is, take the professors for example, in comparison with take just the ordinary professors here, in comparison with the ordinary professors in our country, I think these professors, here, (how to say it, a little, that is) are genuine, but the professors in our country, they snatch a professorship according to the number of years they’ve spent on the job, (then they get it). But here, HERE, it seems, because they don’t have such a rule. Once you have made achievements, then, then, then you can obtain a professorship.

012 2: Otherwise, you’ll never have it.

016 1: Right if not, you’ll never become a professor. But in our country, you may, even if you are not qualified, once you have spent a certain amount of years on the job, finally, prior to your retirement, (they give you a professorship).

The central plank of this stretch of talk is an evaluative adjudication of the identity of the two groups of professors: Dutch professors are genuine whereas, Chinese professors are not (006-009, i.e. genuine vs counterfeit professorships). However,
what is of interest is the fact that culturally differential attributions are offered for their professorships. That is, although the two sub-cultural groups are both professors, they are characterized by different causal explanations. More specifically, on the Chinese side, a 'temporal-causal' rule is constructed: Teachers will be conferred a professorship once they have spent a certain amount of time on the job (008-011, 016-019). That the speaker is constructing a cultural rule is evidenced by the actual reference to it, followed by a rule specification (013). On the Dutch side, a 'qualitative-causal' rule is constructed: teachers are given a professorship only when they present enough academic achievements (013, 015).

The claim I wish to make here is that these two sets of contrastive cultural attribution are consequential for the identities of the Dutch and Chinese scholars as professors. This performative effect may be derived from the rationalization of the problematic that the participants project. For in the process of the speech event, the speakers find the identity of Chinese professors false and faulty: their professorship is devoid of any proper qualification. This is not literally expressed but the implied and proffered image is clearly signaled through semantic contrasts: '[Dutch] professors [...] are genuine but the professors in our country [...]’ (007-009).

Since the speakers predicate the genuineness of professorship on an attribution of academic achievements (007 and 013-015), this cultural attribution also becomes the criterion for judging professorship in general. As the assumed standard for evaluation, the attribution serves both a cross-cultural and an in-group purpose. On the one hand, it is Other-serving: The attribution characterizing the Dutch culture effectively grounds the true identity and quality of Dutch professors. On the other, it is Self-undermining: The attribution formulated of the Dutch professorship as the correct rule makes the attributed Chinese rule deviant, as the latter is said simply to violate the assumed norm (017-019). In so doing, the Dutch attribution, together with the discredited and deviant Chinese attribution, deprives Chinese professors of their identity as professors.

3.6. Re-orienting cultural actions

In the following extract, speaker 5 expresses his opinion about the Dutch youth's understanding of the social world, especially the mass media. In contrast to their Chinese counterparts, he says, they are naïve. He also tries to back up this experience by providing culturally contrastive symptoms. The symptom on the part of the Chinese is taken over by a second speaker and reworked into an attribution.

001 5: Sometimes, I say to myself that the Dutch seem a bit stupid,
002 or, at least the young people, I feel, when they look at social
003 phenomena or things of that sort, the younger Dutch seem, when
004 compared with similar Chinese, may be a little naïve. That is,
005 in viewing interpersonal relations or international relations
006 or other things, the Gulf War, and what not. I feel they tend
007 to be naïve... They/although they sometimes seem to be
008 independent in thinking or in other matters, they are I think
009 very much influenced by, for example, the newspapers, the
010 television, the commentaries or what they say on the
011 television. And then they would generally take it for their
In order to strengthen his negative judgment about the Dutch youth (001, 004), speaker 5 provides a counter-example of the attitude of the Chinese youth: The Chinese do not believe their official mass media (012-014). At this juncture, the exemplification of the Chinese action sets up an attributional move by the next speaker (015-016). At the same time as the second speaker ratifies the preceding speaker’s description of the Chinese attitude as a factual representation — ‘consequently’ presupposes the factuality of the cause —, he draws out the consequence of that attitude, thereby furnishing a cultural attribution. That is, according to the second speaker, the attitude of the Chinese towards their own official mass media gives rise to a higher-level attitude towards the mass media in general.

In order to make sense of the attribution properly, we have to look at the interactive process in which it is embedded. It should be noted that the attribution is the work of the second speaker, and not of the first. Moreover, the first speaker’s account of the Chinese attitude is meant as an example of the sensibility and maturity of the Chinese. However, the second contribution not just changes the topic (‘our’ official media is different from ‘any’ media), but, more importantly, also comes into conflict with the original design of the previous speaker. Not believing any mass media is no longer a sensible thing to do: Not believing any mass media just because of one’s own country’s mass media sounds cynical. This cynicism may be read from speaker 6’s laughter. (Though the first speaker laughs first, the first speaker’s laughter does not carry the same implication because he has been trying to use the Chinese case as a positive example of looking at the mass media. Rather, the first speaker’s laughter may convey other implications, for example: 1) ‘the government controlled mass media are not taken seriously’; 2) ‘we all share that cultural experience’; and 3) ‘however the Dutch do not understand the nature of the mass media’.)

However, what is at stake here does not come to full light until the third turn. At this turn, it becomes clearer that there is a disagreement between the two speakers’ orientations: The original speaker quenches the laughter, accepts the proposition about the Chinese attitude towards the mass media in general, but, in reformulating the proposition, significantly erases the causal link: ‘*Yeh, /of course/ we don’t believe our own [media], nor the Western [media]’ (017-018). In this way, speaker 6’s attributional attempt to exercise cultural-Self-handicapping is dismissed, so that the original speaker is able to head for his original direction. In this sense, the attribution also functions as an argumentative element which re-orient each other’s cultural actions.
4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested to study cultural attributions as discursively constructed communicative phenomena. Proceeding from this discursive perspective, I have proposed to understand attributions in their rhetorical-interactional context of problematics and chart the pragmatic meanings in terms of the practical-rational relationships between the situated problematic and the proffered attribution. The purpose has been to examine qualitatively some of the uses of cultural attributions and to illustrate my method of analysis along the way. In conclusion, let me summarize some of the analytical results, with special reference to the benefits of such an approach for cross-cultural research.

A first observation that may be made is that, when treated as discursive work, attributions appear to be much more dynamic than traditional, cognitively-oriented, attribution theory has painted them to be. For example, not only may the attitude held by members of one culture towards another culture be misled by the absence of self-presentation on the part of the latter group; that absence is further caused by the inability of that target group to execute self-presentation (3.1). We may refer to this as chaining of causes. Also, a same phenomenon (e.g., professorship) may come into existence because of culturally divergent rules (3.5). Here, we have variation of causes. In addition, one general attitude (e.g., towards the mass media) may be brought about by a particular attitude (e.g., towards the national mass media) (3.6). This is expansion of causes. Such dynamic complexities of people's attributions, i.e. chaining, variation, and expansion of causes, are dealt with neither in attribution theory nor in cross-cultural communication research.

Secondly, the discourse-analytical approach shows that as social-linguistic constructions of reality, discursive attributions may be triggered by specific interactive problematics and may be acted upon by other communicative acts. For example, the attribution in 3.2 is set up by a plausible cultural Other's pejorative evaluation. The attribution in 3.4 is itself rationalized by a construction of an idealized normal situation. In the fragment in 3.6, it is the topic of a Chinese attitude which prompts an attribution by the next speaker; this attribution is however resisted by the original speaker in the following turn. Such dynamic, interactive processes in which attributions are embedded are dismissed as mere epiphenomena in social psychology in general and in the social psychology of cross-cultural communication in particular: these fields are primarily concerned with describing the structures of attributions themselves, rather than with the ways they get started and closed in interactive processes.

Thirdly, attributional explanations have specific purposeful orientations in the broader argumentative and explanatory contexts. The analyses show that cultural attributions are rhetorical legerdemain which is employed and deployed, for example, to counter the cultural Other's underestimation (3.1), to ward off the cultural Other's negative evaluation (3.2), to praise the cultural Other (3.3), to impute abnormality to in-group social forces (3.4), to (dis)credit the identity of cultural groups (3.5), and to re-orient cultural actions (3.6). To assume in principle that discursive attributions have social functions is one thing, to analyze in detail those functions is another. The claim that I wish to stake through these qualitative-empirical analyses is that they specify the contextual functions and effects
of the situated attributions, which, together with the motivating problematics, explain and account for their production in real time.

Finally, by treating traditionally conceived attributions as conversational acts, we avoid the perils of ethnocentrism in theory building and educational practices. First of all, the range of possible structures of attributions is no longer preformulated by the researcher. Nor are they represented as decontextualized characteristics of cultural groups. Rather than as explanatory concepts that are pre-given, attributions are looked at in their own right, and their content, complexity, and contradictions are documented. In this way, lay individuals’ own accounts are considered equally interesting topic of study, and the question whether members of a given culture typically make the same kind of attribution or not is deferred to further empirical investigation. Further, a thorough-going pragmatic understanding of attributions brings us closer to the situated meanings of members’ attributions and actions. Understanding and engineering intercultural communication cannot rely upon studying, in an abstract way, the underlying cognitive attributions members may have. It is more basic to understand the contextual goals, wishes, orientations, and resulting social relationships involved in the construction of attributions. For critical as well as practical purposes, to know that in performing attributions members are being culturally apologetic, evasive, unhappy, aggressive, etc., is more important and useful than to construct which pre-existing and decontextualized cognitive structures might have led to particular discursive acts. Such an understanding also makes it possible to approach (attributional) communication as social praxis. Revealing the discursive and goal-oriented dimensions of attributions allows us to make explicit their possible power effects and ideological consequences, and, hence, to act upon them critically.

Appendix: Transcription notations

The transcripts maintain no more than the major conversational and suprasegmental features, such as clause juncture, pause, repair, laughter, angry tone. Any ‘I’ on the middle column represents the interviewer, and the italicized numerals (sometimes preceded by alphabets) in the middle column refer to the interviewees. For the sake of reading, the attribution part is presented in bold type.

. sentence final falling intonation
, clause-final intonation
! exclamation
? question
. . pause of less than 2 seconds
. . . pause of 2 seconds or more
" stress on the following syllable
CAPITALS stress on the entire word or phrase
{ } overlapping by the first speaker
{ { } } overlapping by the second speaker
// repair
-- lengthening of the preceding syllable
' ' quotation of other conversational sources
/ / uncertain transcription
xxxx inaudible syllables
( ) "parenthetical" intonation: lower amplitude and pitch plus flattened
Discursive attributions

- intonation contour
- laughter
- laughter of more than 2 seconds
- utterances in laughter
- utterances in ironic tone
- utterances in angry tone
- speech originally produced in English or Dutch within an otherwise Chinese utterance
- omission by the transcriber

References


