

DISCOURSE AT THE ‘LC SALON’: FRENCH AND AUSTRALIAN CONVERSATIONAL STYLES— A STUDY IN CROSS-CULTURAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS¹

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A comparison of French and Australian conversational styles was the theme of the meeting organised by the ‘LC Salons Association’ in Sydney on 2 December 2009. There were over seventy participants, which shows how much interest the topic elicited.

Launched in 2008 by Kerryn Boland, an Australian captivated by accounts of Sophie Condorcet’s *salon* in eighteenth century France, ‘LC Salons’ (‘LC’ for Lycée Condorcet, Sydney’s International French School) aims at providing a meeting place for those interested in French-Australian cultural exchange and in discussing topics connected with education, the economy, literature, etc. The participation of highly qualified specialists ensures that the discussion goes beyond clichés and the debate has some depth.

Dr Kerry Mullan, coordinator of the French programme at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, is a specialist in intercultural communication and the different modes of conversational interaction between people of different cultural backgrounds—such as the French and Australians—her doctoral thesis deals with this topic.

The second speaker was Sarah Turnbull, author and journalist, whose book *Almost French—a New Life in Paris* (North Sydney, Bantam/Random House, 2002, reviewed in *Explorations* n^{os} 36 and 46) has been widely read and discussed in recent years.

Kerry Mullan argued that the core of mutual misunderstandings is to be found in the differences and indeed contrasts in the styles of interaction and in their conversational strategies or modes. Whilst for the French it is important to express their opinions and feelings in both form and substance and to explore the implications of both, Australians are often more at ease stating facts rather than discussing personal opinions and emotions.

What is the cultural rationale behind these patterns of behaviour?

For the French, expressing an opinion, even if it is controversial or if it displeases, is a question of honesty, and it also demonstrates the interest one

takes in the views of the Other. Expressing opinions is a matter of duty: too much courtesy amounts to a lack of sincerity. The Australian listener might well perceive this behaviour as opinionated, arrogant and overbearing.

Australians, on the contrary, will be anxious not to shock, not to hurt the feelings of the Other and not to upset the harmony of the encounter. They will express their point of view more softly, in a tentative way, as can be seen in phrases such as *possibly, maybe, I think, um...* or the wonderful *I couldn't agree more*, as if to say 'I express an opinion but I don't want you to think that I wish to impose it on you'. The French interlocutor, used to more lively exchanges, might perceive this behaviour as wishy washy or hypocritical, which explains why a French person confided in Kerry Mullan that 'I have never had a real discussion with an Australian in the thirty-five years I have lived here'.

Kerry Mullan then played some selected excerpts from recorded conversations which illustrated admirably the differences in the styles of interaction. They were drawn from conversations between two people who have only known each other for two days, namely Ken and Nathalie, two Australian students, and Irène and Guillaume, both French, working for the same organisation.

In his dialogue with Nathalie, Ken speaks slowly with frequent and long pauses, in a low and smooth tone, and his speech contains phrases showing his hesitation in expressing his opinions, almost apologising when making a politically sensitive point. The two interlocutors rarely interrupt each other: each has a turn and they take a relatively long time to express their points of view.

The exchange between Irène and Guillaume is more dynamic: it is generally faster, each is quick to take over from the other at the risk of interrupting the other, the pitch is higher and the tone more varied.

While interrupting one's interlocutor might be perceived as inappropriate for an Australian, it is seen by the French person as a sign of one's interest and involvement in the exchange. That sign of engagement can also apply to finishing off their sentences.

The French have a predilection for debates, confrontation and negotiation. Not agreeing and being prepared to discuss the differences of opinion shows that the relationship is sound enough to withstand the tension created by the exchange: it is a sign of sociability, a dynamic balance between

competition and cooperation. It is the motor of the exchange, a motor that deserves to be fed.

Australians may see themselves personally threatened when there is a disagreement. The debate is perceived as a confrontation and they feel that for the sake of both partners the relationship must be protected.

We must however heed Kerry Mullan's warning at the end of her talk and refrain from generalising.

No conversation is typical of the practice of all members of a culture. We are looking at norms, trends and frameworks which shed light on patterns of behaviour and provide keys to them, in a non-judgemental way. They help us to focus on, and be open to, cultural differences. It is precisely the differences that are fascinating.

Sarah Turnbull's talk provided a perfect illustration of Kerry Mullan's argument. When she first arrived in France, she was surprised by a style of interaction more confronting than she had expected. She soon realised that if her French was good enough to buy a baguette at the baker's or stamps at the post office, it was not quite adequate to take part in a Paris dinner party. In her words, 'in an Australian dinner party I would turn to my neighbour and ask him or her some questions on everyday life, to try to find some common ground, whilst in France the conversation quickly becomes general and the whole table participates in exchanges which tend to be fast, lively and intimidating'. They might be intimidating for the French themselves as not all possess the ease and assurance which are so characteristic of verbal exchanges in France. Some will remain silent: this might well be due to the French educational system which does not foster the building of self-assurance in students.

The French phrase '*prendre la parole*', to take one's turn in a conversation, means what it says: if you don't take your turn, no one will give it to you. And when you have taken it, you have to fight to keep it: hence, as Kerry Mullan pointed out, all those conversational fillers whose aim is to 'fill' any pauses which might be exploited by others to take their turn and for you to lose yours.

With hindsight, Sarah Turnbull realised that it is in such circumstances—like at the French dinner party—that the foreigner misjudges the situation, precisely because he or she fails to understand the value system of the Other. Slowly she learnt not to take things personally, not to be so vulnerable. She also found a film, Patrice Leconte's *Ridicule* (a film about seventeenth century

France), very useful to understand the nature of interaction in contemporary France: 'when you live in another country, you remove layer after layer until you reach the core'.

Today Sarah Turnbull thinks that the French have a better understanding of human complexity: 'for Australians it tends to be black and white'. The longer she stayed in France, the less she thought the French were arrogant and judgemental.

Her experience in France also made her realise how deeply Australian she was, and these days she tends to use one or the other language according to the feelings she wishes to express: 'when I am cross, I speak French!'

Kerry Mullan agreed: she tends to express thoughts in a more assertive way in French than in English.

In the second part of the meeting the audience was invited to participate in the discussion, chaired by Christophe Hoareau, a Frenchman who has lived in Australia for five years and who started the Sydney-based discussion group 'Café Philo' a couple of years ago.

This second part of the meeting illustrated and confirmed some of the points made by Kerry Mullan and Sarah Turnbull, such as the importance in France always to have a reply or a point to make if one wants to be taken seriously, the differences between Parisians and the French from the provinces, the importance of a self-denigrating sense of humour for the British—it is at the core of all personal interaction (whilst with the French the main purpose of humour is to amuse the audience), the tentative nature in which Anglo-Celtic Australians give orders (always thinking of equality), etc.

Towards the end of the discussion, one of the participants explained how much he admired the importance of intellectual debate in France. Kerry Mullan suggested that for an Anglo-Celtic Australian it is more difficult to get involved in a discussion in the French way, i.e. to be both emotional and rational at the same time.

General discussion also raised the question of the extent to which Australian assumptions about the French were derived from British models, or, like some aspects of their interaction, were actually culturally very different.

Echoing the reflections of Sarah Turnbull on the subject of Australians discovering their self and their culture through being in France, a French participant remarked on how being in Australia had made him understand more about France and his own culture.

After an hour and a half of lively exchanges, including the new theme of non-verbal communication, champagne and wood-fired Corsican pizza were served and this ensured that all, French and Australians alike, were in full agreement, and all were grateful to Kerry Mullan, Sarah Turnbull and Christophe Hoareau for their contributions.

Sydney

Note

- 1 Translated into English by the *Explorations* editorial team.