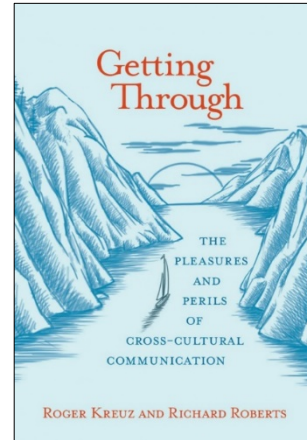Roger Kreuz and Richard Roberts, **Getting Through: The Pleasures and Perils of Cross-Cultural Communication**, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017, pp., $29.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Seif Sekalala
Fort Hays State University, USA

"Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?" This question (and the entire comical scene and context) asked by Chris Tucker in the movie *Rush Hour*, is an apt metaphor of the challenges of cross-cultural communication and pragmatics. How does, or how should, an individual clearly express themselves in any given context in their own language and culture, and how should they gain competency for ideal interactions in foreign countries, or with counterparts who speak a foreign language and/or are from a different culture?

This question more or less sums up Roger Kreuz and Richard Roberts' analysis in ***Getting Through: The Pleasures and Perils of Cross-Cultural Communication***. The authors tackle the challenge of cross-cultural communication "through the lens of pragmatics" (p. xiii). In other words, they "review the scientific work on how language is used socially around the world" (p. xiii).

This goal thus implies a somewhat inaccurate book title. Regardless, one could argue that their overarching research goal is a markedly ambitious attempt vis-à-vis the analysis of a myriad set of intra- and intercultural communication dynamics. These include but are not limited to concepts from the general (interdisciplinary) field of cross-cultural communication studies, and the general science(s) and art(s) of language and culture. Of course, it might impossible to execute an exhaustive applicable synthesis of these topics. In fairness to the authors, their stated goal cautions that theirs is indeed not an attempt "to cover every topic in this field but rather to highlight how people from different cultural backgrounds use language" (p. xiii). This is still a broad goal, but as the cliché suggests, one has to start somewhere.

The general interdisciplinary field of cross-cultural communication arose in the early 20th century in an attempt to provide a general set of answers to one of the questions posed earlier (i.e., How does, or how should, an individual gain competency in a foreign language and culture?; e.g., Rogers, Hart, & Miike, 2002). Gudykunst and Kim (2003) and other authors delineate several theories that address at least four problematics within the field, namely effective outcomes, identity, intra- and intercultural communication networks, and acculturation. Random examples of theories in this regard include communication accommodation theory (e.g., Giles & Ogay, 2007), face negotiation (e.g., Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003), communication acculturation (Kim, 1995), and anxiety/uncertainty management (e.g., Gudykunst, 2005). Other theories have been formulated and applied to problematics besides those listed here; genderlect theory (e.g., Tannen, 1990) is one relevant example.

The linguistics subdiscipline of pragmatics that Kreuz and Roberts utilize as their primary analytic tool is also interdisciplinary. In addition to various linguistics concepts, it encompasses topics from or related

to arts and science studies of culture (e.g., from anthropology). Introductory pragmatics texts list other disciplines as constituent knowledge sources, including philosophy and sociology (e.g., Mey, 1993). The authors indeed make use of this variety of theoretical and empirical research, stating that "as cognitive scientists, we . . . cast the net rather broadly," using studies "from anthropology, education, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and sociology" (p. xv).

Throughout the seven chapters of the book, Kreuz and Roberts apply some of the key concepts of pragmatics—including speech act theory, language structure, nonverbal norms, and perhaps most importantly, the role of situational context vis-à-vis appropriate behavior—to various intra- and intercultural communication problematics. Chapter 1 necessarily launches the discussion via a brief analysis of the key dilemma in human communication, namely the constant attempt or pursuit of empathy and message clarity. The common interactions or situations in which ambiguity causes problems range from random idiosyncratic interpersonal cases—including the authors' numerous experiences in countries such as Germany and Korea—and flashpoint incidents that pit countries or societies against each other, including the case of EgyptAir 990.

Some random questions for which the authors attempt to provide answers throughout the book include:

- In which situations in various societies, and how, should an individual tell a joke, apologize, or exchange (i.e., offer, and/or accept) compliments and gifts?

- What should a guest in various Asian societies bear in mind about the concept of facework as well as modesty (e.g., in the context of thanking an individual for a service, especially one that might have involved other contributors)?

- How close should you stand to a conversation partner in the United States versus Saudi Arabia?

Finally, the closing chapter addresses the challenges of applying pragmatics concepts to intra- and intercultural communication in the digital media age. For instance, how effective/appropriate are emojis, and how should online "trolls" be handled?

Kreuz and Roberts provide various good answers to these questions—or, to the intercultural communication "paradox," as they call it in chapter 1 (p. 1) and throughout the book's seven chapters. Moreover, the analyses are written in a conversational tone with witty and comical overtones—both based on theoretical and empirical research studies, as well as the authors' own, and their families' and friends' experiences around the world. For instance, in chapter 3, "How Speech Acts," the authors explicate the American linguist John Searle's five types of speech acts. However, they caution and demonstrate that whereas the five speech act categories might be the same worldwide, their actual execution will vary from culture to culture. Some societies/languages generally value indirectness (e.g., in parts of Asia), whereas others (e.g., in Germany) value directness, yet others fall somewhere in between on that continuum.

The comical overtones mentioned above are at times used meta-analytically, and the best example in this regard is in chapter 4, as the authors explicitly discuss the transcultural dynamics of humor, profanity, and other nonessential or secondary and tertiary roles of language. Similar to the reference to different cultures' preferences vis-à-vis direct and indirect language, different types of humor are appreciated in different parts of the world. And of course, some jokes are universally appreciated, such as the one voted as the world's funniest in a study by Richard Wiseman (2002), retranscribed:

> Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy whips out his phone and calls emergency services. He gasps, "My friend is dead! What can I do?" The operator says, "Calm down. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence; then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says, "OK, now what?" (p. 81)

Two other particularly insightful exemplars can be listed in this regard. In chapter 2, the authors recount an anecdote about Roberts and his Japanese friend, in reference to the concept of "reading the air" in Japanese, which is roughly equivalent to that of emotional intelligence in English (pp. 40–43). And at the end of chapter 3, they demonstrate how creativity and sincerity regarding learning professional counterparts' language and culture can be useful, via the anecdote of the 1975 joint USA–USSR *Apollo-Soyuz* Test Project (pp. 76–79).

Unfortunately, one can argue that beyond such exemplary anecdotes and research syntheses, the book is in the same proverbial boat as all similar intercultural texts and supplementary books about intercultural communication. Yes, pragmatics can be a useful analytical tool in the search for better intercultural relations, but (to state the obvious), it necessarily has to be used with other analytical tools in establishing the general principles of avoiding cross-cultural miscommunication. Another weakness—also applicable to many of the competing titles referenced here—is the application of theoretical and research analysis to general intercultural contexts, versus selective problem solving regarding particular social, professional, and/or other isolated contexts.

Nevertheless, *Getting Through*—particularly because of its aforementioned reader-friendly tone, is a potentially useful supplementary intercultural communication pop-academic genre book for a wide range of scholars at all levels. Some random potential competitors include *Global Dexterity: How to Adapt Your Behavior Across Cultures without Losing Yourself in the Process* by Andy Molinsky (2013), *Leading with Cultural Intelligence: The Real Secret to Success* by David Livermore (2010), and *Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting in Around the World* by Duane Elmer (2002).

References

Elmer, D. (2002). *Cross-cultural connections: Stepping out and fitting in around the world.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Giles, H., & Ogay, T. (2007). Communication accommodation theory. In B. B. Whaley & W. Samter (Eds.), *Explaining communication: Contemporary theories and exemplars* (pp. 293–310). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Gudykunst, W., & Kim, Y. Y. (2003). *Communicating with strangers: An approach to intercultural communication* (4th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw Hill.

Gudykunst, W. B. (2005). *Theorizing about intercultural communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Kim, Y. Y. (1995). Cross-cultural adaptation: An integrative theory. In R. L. Wiseman (Ed.), *International and intercultural communication annual,* Vol. 19*. Intercultural communication theory* (pp. 170–193). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Livermore, D. A. (2010). *Leading with cultural intelligence: The new secret to success*. New York, NY: American Management Association.

Mey, J. L. (1993). *Pragmatics: An introduction* (2nd ed). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Molinsky, A. (2013). *Global dexterity: How to adapt your behavior across cultures without losing yourself in the process*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

Oetzel, J. G., & Ting-Toomey, S. (2003). Face concerns in interpersonal conflict: A cross-cultural empirical test of the face negotiation theory. *Communication Research, 30*(6), 599–624. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650203257841

Rogers, E., Hart, W., & Miike, Y. (2002). Edward T. Hall and the history of intercultural communication: The United States and Japan. *Keio Communication Review, 24*, 2002.

Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. New York, NY: Ballantine.

Wiseman, R. (2002). *Laughlab: The scientific search for the world's funniest joke.* London, UK: Random House.