This is a book about how people understand each other. Like Simmel’s writings and works written by Foucault and Goffman toward the ends of their careers, this book depicts interactions as behavioral forms. Its novelty is that it grounds these forms in linguistic structure, particularly in the ubiquitous presence of modality in discourse within all mass societies. Its concluding argument is that all persons, situations, and cultures have mutual significance in accordance with four fundamental modal forms: ability (most common in the United States), necessity (most common in the socialist countries of Western Europe and Scandinavia), obligation (most common in ancient Chinese and Indic societies), and permission (most common in the Islamic world).

Carl W. Roberts
Ph.D. (1983) in Sociology, SUNY at Stony Brook, is Professor of Sociology and Statistics at Iowa State University. He has done much empirical research on cultural variations in language use, and has written extensively on linguistic structure, e.g., in his Text Analysis for the Social Sciences (Erlbaum, 1997).
PREFACE

There is no such thing as society “as such”; that is, there is no society in the sense that it is the condition for the emergence of all these particular phenomena. For there is no thing as interaction “as such”—there are only specific kinds of interaction.

—Georg Simmel (1959 [1908], p. 320)

The time is past when we can live comfortably within our social worlds, separated from others by oceans, languages, or scarcity of information. Not only have our communications increased by virtue of there being nearly four times as many people as there were a century ago, but technological advances now allow many of us—if we choose—to be transported (virtually or physically) to foreign social worlds. Although we may choose neither to travel to unfamiliar places, nor to communicate with the people there, we do so at our peril. As we deal with our economy, our ecology, and our politics, it is ingenuous to believe that each “our” in this list only refers to folks in our locality who think as we do. No matter how provincial our beliefs, we are all fundamentally linked into the world economy, a global ecology, and international politics—each of which is influenced by people whose motivations often differ radically from our own. As the United States loses its relative predominance within the world economy, as welfare nations strain to subsidize ever-increasing proportions of their citizens, as older generations of Asians seek harmony amidst materialism, and as democracy increasingly becomes a tool with which fundamentalist majorities oppress the minorities in their midst, we shall need to understand others’ various motivations if we are to grasp these world events and their impact on us.

This is a book about cultures, and about the motivations of those who participate in them. More precisely, my approach here is to differentiate among cultures solely in terms of how their members typically understand each other’s motivations. Such understanding is not problematic in tribal settings (within which everyone has opportunities to know everyone else) or between long-time acquaintances. However, when there are enough people in a society for most interactions to be between strangers, a “cultural default” is needed for them to understand
why people act as they do. For example, when approached by a stranger I might assume that she wants me either to do something for her or to stop what I am doing, that she wishes either to guide me or to have me guide her, etc. With no cultural default for understanding strangers, I will not know how to react to them (with friendliness, fear, embarrassment, hubris...).

Each culture’s default understanding of personhood is, in my view, maintained as people consistently use a language-of-motivation—or a modality—when referring to each other. The vast majority of people in any given society generally assume one of these cultural modalities to be universal. In the following chapters my objective is to make the grammars of these languages explicit. Beyond this, my position is that there are only four cultural modalities—a position that can only be taken from a more general language that incorporates them all. My hope is that this fifth, nonuniversalistic modality will be compelling enough for you to try reading others in accordance with its grammar.

When people use language, they do so in hopes that nobody will notice that they are speaking or writing. When one uses words in nontraditional ways, one runs the risk that others will stop striving to understand their experiences in accordance with your language, and simply dismiss your words as expressions not in accordance with theirs. (“Why can’t he just write in plain English?”) One’s hope is that the audience notices what one wishes to convey, not how one is conveying it. For example, think of the many times parents of sophomoric teenagers will have said, “Please pay attention to what I am saying, and stop commenting on how I am saying it!” Thus there is something sophomoric in this book’s commentary on modal languages, as I ask readers to pay attention to how people refer to their motivations. Yet “the” fifth modality differs from these other languages in its repudiation of its own universality—a repudiation that leaves it ever-open for people to adopt or refuse (but hopefully not dismiss) at will.

The book’s first chapter spells out the conditions under which discourse is persuasive. Consistent with the vast body of research on persuasion, I argue that one person’s success in persuading another depends both upon an emergent sense of who is more credible than whom, and upon the types of (operational versus relational) knowledge each has regarding the position under discussion. Chapter 2 focuses on cases in which this position is the very “personhood” of someone involved in the persuading. Starting with four universalistic depictions of personhood—depictions predominant in the social sciences, and labeled
here as agent, collaborator, persona, and follower—I introduce a more
general theoretical language for distinguishing among them. Rather
than debate which single depiction might be universal, I suggest that
each is better understood as being universal only among adherents to
a specific type of world culture.

Chapter 3 is the theoretical prism through which all other chapters
refract. It is the place where ambiguity-reduction is introduced as an
overarching principle of motivation, and is shown not only to account
for the motivations of each of the four personhood types, but also to
explain how a person’s motivations are manipulated by those who (pur-
portedly independently of their own motivations) interpret or observe
what this person says and does. The idea here is that our words and
actions serve to persuade us of the type of people we are. Long-term
patterned behaviors, indeed societies, are sustained by mutually rein-
forcing persuasive behaviors in which one person persuades others of
her or his personhood while the latter persuade the former that they
have or have not been so persuaded.

Each remaining chapter illustrates a modality. Chapters 4–7 deal
respectively with the universalistic modal narratives of individualism,
mutualism, essentialism, and doctrinism. When interactants persuade
each other in terms of a particular modality, they may use polite or
familiar strategies for initiating or refusing interaction, and they may
debate whether or not to take seriously what has been said or done.
After distinguishing among serious, playful, polite, and familiar episodes
within a chapter’s modal narrative, an illustration is provided of how
these types of episodes might emerge. Each illustration allows the reader
to eavesdrop on “discourse in an art shop” within the United States, the
Netherlands, China, or Morocco—a location where the default modal
narrative typically corresponds to the modality discussed in the chapter
at hand. Each chapter then explains the myth underlying the modal
narrative’s discourse. Each myth is a rationale for why one participant,
independent of her or his personal motivations, may not be persuaded
by another participant’s personhood. Interactions will break down unless
statements to this effect are believed to be fair or natural, and unless
corrective actions are understood to be responsible or righteous. The
content of each chapter is then linked back to the ambiguity-reduction
principle, and concludes by noting whether a serious, playful, polite,
or familiar episode is the default modal narrative when discourse is
between a person and her- or himself.
The final chapter draws four sets of conclusions. If there are four personhood types, it seemed fitting to write conclusions that address each of these types of person among my readers. As developed in Chapter 8, “the” fifth modality is a language of motivation that posits neither universals nor its own universality. Unlike the previous four chapters, no illustration is provided here of “choice” as a modality. Once modality is a matter of choice, it becomes possible to communicate with those who think solely in terms of a modal narrative different from one’s own. It becomes possible to persuade others that their modality is one of many. And it becomes possible to opt out of a modal narrative at will. “Choice” is a modality for changing one’s modal narrative. As such, it is a modality without a narrative.

Most of this book was written in Amsterdam, while on sabbatical leave from Iowa State University, amidst a score of warmly hospitable colleagues at the Free University’s Department of Communication Sciences. Many friends and colleagues from these institutions and elsewhere kindly provided me with encouragement and critical feedback as this book’s ideas and text were coming into being. First and foremost, my deepest thanks go to my student and colleague Yong Wang for being a steadfast soundboard and insightful critic throughout the past decade. Then there are my Dutch colleagues (Gábor Péli, Ivar Vermuelen, and Jaap Kamps) whose expertise in first-order logic contributed fundamentally to the formalization provided in the book’s appendix. Thoughtful feedback on one or another of the first three chapters was provided by Alicia Cast, Randall Collins, Cornelia Flora, André Goddu, Willis Goudy, Horst Helle, James Hollander, Jan Kleinnijenhuis, Roel Popping, David Schweingruber, Rafael Wittek, and many cohorts of Iowa State University graduate students who have participated in my sociological theory courses over the years. I gladly include them all as contributors to what one might find of value in my words. Of course, all opinions, errors, and misinterpretations are attributable to me alone.