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Mixed Metamessages Across Cultures and Languages: Towards Inter-Cultural Linguistic Pragmatics

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0. Introduction

In the context of increasing globalization, we often come upon discussions on cultural differences across national boundaries and possible misunderstandings arising from them. This paper outlines broad research questions about culturally established conversational styles as potential barriers between people of different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. Because cultural difference necessarily implies different assumptions about natural and obvious ways to converse, the danger of misunderstanding is greatest among speakers who actually speak different native tongues, or people who come from different cultural backgrounds. The expression 'speaking the same language' means something more than what is usually assumed. Misunderstandings, however, do occur between people living in the same country, city, neighborhood and even within a family —still worse, between a husband and his wife.

1.1. What is a metamessage?

The field of cross-cultural communication within linguistics is a relatively new and rapidly developing field which has been supplied with its theoretical and methodological insights by pragmatics, discourse analysis, and areas of sociolinguistics. Drawing on the findings concerning this particular aspect of human mental activity over the past two decades, I would like to focus on the nature and function of metamessage. The concept of metamessage I am aware of originates in Bateson (1972). He claimed that every communication must simultaneously communicate two messages, the basic message and the metamessage[1]. Gumperz (1982), a decade later, showed how each successful message carries with it a second message (=metamessage) which tells the listener how to interpret the basic message. It was Tannen (1984) who went one step further, establishing a discourse-oriented study of metamessages. The following (1) summarizes her basic concept of metamessage.

(1) i. Our talk is saying something about our relationship. What is communicated about relationships —attitude toward each other, the occasion, and what we are saying—is the metamessage.

ii. Metamessages are not spelled out in words but signaled by the way words are spoken.

1.2. Related concepts

Metamessages are related to a number of other linguistic and pragmatic notions, such as pragmatic implication, which have been receiving much attention in the literature. Let us look at some of the examples by Smith and Wilson (1979)[2].

(2) A: Where's my box of chocolates?
B: Where are the snows of yesteryear?

(3) A: Your son's really taken to Annette.
B: He used to like playing with snails when he was a child.

(2B) is not a direct response to (2A)'s question. Under the right circumstances, however, it would convey an

indirect response: it would convey that his question was unanswerable, or less directly still, that his box of chocolates was gone. In the case of (3), on the assumption that B's remark was intended as relevant, the hearer must set about finding its relevant pragmatic implications. He might construct one as follows. B's remark suggests that his son has strange tastes. If liking Annette was also a strange taste, then B's remark would carry a further implication: a normal person would not like Annette. Therefore there must be something wrong with Annette.

This kind of pragmatic implication, being a tacit message, constitutes a special type of metamessage. There are other related concepts such as connotation, metaphoric images and irony. The first two are lexical -level concepts, which are independent of context. Once utilized in discourse, they all come to possess homologous functions under the superordinate concept of metamessage.

2.0. Different kinds of metamessage

Everything must be said in some way, and the way it is said sends metamessages—indirectly. Ostensible indirect expressions such as euphemisms and paradoxical phraseology carry metamessages by themselves. Indirectness in its broader sense, as will be shown below, is one of the major media of metamessages. It is a good way to express intentions without going on record. All sorts of different messages are actually sent out in one utterance. Layers of meaning is always at work in conversation. Anything you say or don't say sends metamessages that become part of the meaning of the conversation.

When we talk to one another, we are always monitoring our relationships to each other, and information about relationships is found in metamessages. Deployment of lexical-level devices like honorific expressions and use of titles instead of names, as is conventionally done in Japanese, convey metamessages to the effect that the speaker is conscious of the social relationships among interlocutors. He/she is telling everybody to behave in an expected proper manner. Similarly, as the idiom 'to be on first-name terms' in English indicates, to call somebody by his/her first name carries the metamessage of the speaker's a friendly informal relationships with that person.

2.1. Verbal or nonverbal

There are metamessages signaled by the way words are spoken (verbal signals) and those sent by nonverbal means. Among the verbal signals are subtle linguistic signals and devices that send out metamessages, such as tone of voice, rate of speed, pacing and pausing, intonation, loudness and pitch. As elaborated by Tannen, these signals are used in linguistic devices, creating conversation by taking turns talking, showing how ideas are related to each other, and what we think we are doing when we talk; e.g. we are listening, interested, appreciative, friendly, seeking help, or offering it. They also reveal how we feel at the time we are talking.

Silence (vs talking) also sends out a strong metamessage in many cultures. There are also some cultures which dictate that we should not say things in so many words, and that certain things must be left unsaid. Even in those cultures where silence is not necessarily golden, we find family jokes or so-called 'our song' phenomenon—the existence of shared history and shared association that both attests to and enhance intimacy. Thus, abbreviation and ellipsis are sometimes used to note ever-increasing sense of understanding based on less and less talk. Use of contractions is frequent among members of an organization or a certain age group, young people in particular. The metamessage behind such practice is that of camaraderie; 'we' understand each other perfectly—'we' belong together, whereas 'they' do not—they are not one of 'us'.

Nonverbal metamessages are those which are sent out and read through gestures, facial expressions, etc. Here again we encounter cultural differences. Condon (1984) maintains that Japanese 'read' faces and postures and clothing to a much greater extent, and with more accuracy than do most Americans. Moreover, in many ways Japanese are said to prefer nonverbal messages to those expressed in words. Americans, on the other hands, place much more trust in words than on fleeting impressions. These are no mere quirks of behavior, but rather they arise out of two different value systems. In one, spoken words are not so highly

prized and are not necessarily to be taken at face value. In the other, verbal messages are central and people are held accountable for what they say.

2.2. Conscious or unconscious

Use of metamessages is like sending out feelers, in order to get a sense of others' ideas and their potential reactions to ours. We consciously consider how to speak when the situation is loaded, e.g. at a job interview, a public address, firing someone, or breaking off a personal relationship. In those situations, we consider how to speak and pay attention to such things as 'politeness'. As we shall see below, closely connected with politeness are notions of 'rapport' and 'self-defense', the coexisting and conflicting human needs that motivate our conversation. Most often though, metamessages are either unconsciously sent or interpreted against the speaker's intention.

2.3. Content of metamessages

What kinds of metamessage actually get across? We can think of such things as harmonious interpersonal relations, the speaker's needs of rapport and self-defense and his/her command of the situation. It has also been pointed out that the speaker's psychological state at the speech time, his/her personality (e.g. formal or casual; stuffy or scruffy), and attitudes, such as respect or lack of it are signaled by ways of talking. In some cultures the speaker's discernment of social relations of the discourse participants is also revealed by way of metamessage.

Sometimes, information such as the speaker's views, basic values and expectations is sent out, which he/she has no intention to communicate. The following (4) may serve as an example of a cross-cultural metamessage of unintentional variety[4].

(4) Most Japanese seem to regard their culture as one that is extremely difficult for anyone but a Japanese to understand, and certainly not one into which an outsider could ever fit completely. Japanese find it hard to accept that anyone could become Japanese. This is reflected, for example, in words of praise for the foreigner who can use chopsticks or speak a few words of Japanese. The newcomer is delighted by such compliments, but when the complements continue after twenty years, the outsider knows that they carry an unfavorable metamessage.

The Japanese mean well—to be polite and friendly. But their praise is interpreted with a metamessage which an outsider does not appreciate.

3.0. Conversational style

As Tannen (1984) pointed out, conversational style is comprised of several elements or aspects, such as indirectness, ways of using questions, polite refusals, speed of talking, loudness, intonation, choice of words, etc. These are linguistic gears, which are not usually seen, because we usually think in terms of intentions (rude, polite, interested, etc.)

Metamessages work well and bring about desired results between people with the same conversational style. However, they will not get across if the two conversationalists have different conversational styles. For instance, the speakers's objective and the addressee's comprehension will not match, if the speaker expresses intentions without going on record and the addressee expects to hear the information expressed outright, or expects different indirect signals and devices. What makes such misunderstanding hard to straighten out is that our ways of communication seem self-evidently natural to us. When this occurs between people from the same country, it is like speaking different languages, only worse, because they think they are speaking the same language.

We can recognize three types of conversational styles; conventionalized, individual and language specific types. Let us briefly discuss each type below.

3.1. Conventional type

Some cultures have institutionalized thoughtfulness—and it works. For instance, there are social rules such as (5) and (6).

(5) "You should not say such a thing"

(6) "That's not polite"

The social rule (5) prescribes a sense of appropriateness, which becomes a part of people's way of life. The social code (6) dictates politeness ethic, which is found in one form or another in most human societies. These features of conversational style, we may assume, are culturally imposed.

3.2. Individualized type

Individualized conversational style is regarded as a part of one's personality, ever so often unconscious to oneself. There are talkative vs quiet people, outspoken vs soft-spoken people, and sociable vs unsociable people in most societies. There may be a good number of conceivable conversationalist types around in our community. In fact, we may even say that everyone has a conversational style unique to himself/herself.

3.3. Language specific type

There are conversational styles that are considered to be language specific. Systematic use of honorific expressions in many Asian languages is one such example. Some languages in the world are noted for their cryptic style of expressions. Hinds (1986) observes, in Japanese, the presence of minimal number of verbal clues with elaborated scenario behind:

(7) The Japanese does not say very much at all overtly. In terms of the meaning actually conveyed, however, the Japanese expression is as expressive as the corresponding English. Japanese communication may seem somewhat mysterious to the non-Japanese because so many times little is actually said.

Japanese language thus abounds in such little expressions like *domo, onegai-shimasu, yoroshiku*, etc. They are utilized to communicate a variety of messages. *Domo* is an adverb meaning 'quite', 'somehow', or 'indeed'. In daily conversation, it may be used to convey such various messages as 'How do you do?', 'How are you?', 'Thank you', etc., depending on the situation. Similarly, *onegai-shimasu*, meaning 'I'm making a request', is usually all you need to say to get the hearer to go ahead and do a certain specific service for you. *Yoroshiku* literally means 'properly' but by itself it conveys such various messages as 'I leave it to your discretion', 'Nice to meet you', 'Give my best regards', etc.

Hawaiian is somewhat like Japanese in this respect. For example, *aloha* 'love' is often used to convey diverse messages such as 'Hello', 'Welcome!'and 'Good-by!'

4.0 Misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication

In her work on conversational style, Tannen holds that the fate of the earth depends on cross-cultural communication. Nations must reach agreements, and agreements are made by individual representatives of nations sitting down and talking to each other—public analogues of private conversations. The processes are the same, and so are the pitfalls. Only the possible consequences are more extreme.

It is easy to point out various potential factors of misunderstanding in cross-cultural communication. For one thing, each culture has its own expected ways of saying things, and culture may at times differ in what they emphasize. Hence, culturally established conversational styles have potential of becoming a barrier in international communication. We may put our trust in words to understand and be understood, or we may look for meanings in the *context* within which the words are spoken; such as who utters the words, where and how they are uttered, etc. In many cases, it is not only the content but the ways of saying things that bring about miscommunication or conflict. Where it occurs, goodwill is not always met with gratitude. Imposing one's

own values on others may have an adverse effect. Here traditional aphorisms like "See yourself as the others see you", or "Look at others as they look at themselves" will not help. Then there is the danger of indirectness, which is liable to cause vagueness or send out unintentional metamessages.

4.1. Different systems of politeness at work

People have different assumptions about natural and obvious ways to be polite. For example, many Americans tend to associate indirectness with dishonesty and directness with honesty, while many Japanese associate indirectness with politeness. Cultural boundaries, however, do not coincide with national or language boundaries. Cases of misunderstanding are not limited to international communication scenes. They do occur among people in the same country, or speaking the same language. Let us look at two cases discussed by Tannen (1984).

First, think of a situation in which someone you know have suffered a misfortune—failed in an exam, lost a job or contracted a disease. You may show sympathy by expressing your concern in words, or by deliberately not mentioning it in order to avoid causing pain by bringing it up. White Americans try to be considerate by paying attention to the person's misfortune. African-Americans' way of being considerate, in contrast, is not to pay any attention and by not imposing let the person decide whether or not to mention it. This is an unfortunate case of potential cultural misunderstandings between the two groups of people living and working in the same country.

The second example concerns an American woman who was repeatedly offended when British people ignored her in settings in which she thought they should pay attention. At one time she was sitting at a booth in a railroad station cafeteria in England. A couple came and settled into the opposite seat in the same booth, but they showed no sign of having noticed that someone was already sitting in the booth. The fact was that they knew that someone else was sitting in the booth but were not inclined to disturb her. To the American, politeness requires talk between strangers happened to share a booth in a cafeteria, but she could not see that another system of politeness was at work on the others' side. By not acknowledging her presence, the British couple freed her from the obligation to acknowledge theirs. The American expected a show of involvement; while they were being polite by not imposing.

4.2. Japanese and American conversational style differences

We have seen about how different people and cultures, either consciously or unconsciously, send out various metamessages unknown to outsiders. Of the differences between Japanese and American communicative styles, examples abound in the literature. Take the case of different behavioral patterns concerning eye contact. The Japanese tend to avoid a person's gaze for politeness reasons, being totally unaware of the fact that Americans so treated may feel alienated. Likewise, the behavior of the British couple noted in the previous section, is just what most Japanese would approve. Japanese, too, tend not to acknowledge a stranger's presence in a public place.

The following schema illustrates four opposing values, which I postulate as basic factors affecting a person's conversational style.

(8)

Japanese		Americans
homogeneity	←----------	----------→pluralism
interdependence	←----------	----------→individualism
involvement	←----------	----------→independence
indirectness	←----------	----------→directness

As shown in the schema, the Japanese tends to be conscious of their homogeneity. They value interdependence and involvement with one another. They like indirect ways of talking. Americans, on the other hand, are conscious of their pluralistic society. They tend to be individualistic and independent. They are more likely to be outspoken. They need to talk directly. Hence, the placement of the Japanese and Americans toward the opposite ends of the scale of these four qualities.

The above schema does not take note of the difference between white Americans and African-Americans. I also hasten to add that what I am proposing here is not a dichotomous division. The difference is simply a matter of degree. I am not proposing a division of people and cultures into two camps. Many cultures are presumed to be located in-between the Japanese and Americans. It is also perfectly possible that some cultures may be found to the left of the Japanese or to the right of Americans. Speakers of Israeli Hebrew, for instance, are said to be 'more direct' than Americans[4].

Schema (8) appears to be a rather simplistic generalization of nations/cultures, but it is not intended to deny individual differences among people of the same country. There are Japanese who are more American -like in being individualistic and outspoken, and there are also some Americans who are more Japanese-like and value interdependence and indirect ways of talking.

Nevertheless, we can recognize undeniable general tendencies, and misunderstandings do occur. Condon (1984) reports of a top American executive based in Tokyo, who discovered after working in Japan for several years that he had been misjudging Japanese associates by evaluating them largely on the basis of their conversational styles. He said, "I just didn't realize that I had been taking quick, clear, direct questions as a sign of an alert listener and a good staff member. I wonder how many Japanese I have misjudged, in and out of the office, simply because they didn't realize that I had been taking quick, clear, direct questions as a sign of an alert listener and a good staff member. I wonder if I hired the worst—least typically Japanese—and dismissed some of the best".

Depending on the situation, Japanese are still more direct about some things than Americans who retain some Victorian language habits. Americans can be just as indirect as the Japanese, but they are indirect about different things, and being indirect carries a different meaning. Americans are usually indirect when something very sensitive is being discussed or when they are nervous about how the other person might react. A clear metamessage is detectable. Japanese indirectness, on the other hand, is more or less a part of their way of life—it is conventionalized. It is not because the Japanese are such kind and considerate people that they worry so much about the other's reactions. It is just that they know that their own fates and fortunes are always bound up with others.

5.0. Indirectness

Space limitation does not allow me to elaborate on each of the opposing values in (8). Of these, the indirect/direct opposition is probably the factor most frequently discussed in literature on communicative styles. What is noteworthy in the context of the present discussion is that in the sense of metamessages, indirectness is basic to communication. It is a humankind's ubiquitous practice. We do no always say what we mean in so many words. As Tannen (1984) elaborates, we keep trying to balance the conflicting needs for involvement and independence by not saying exactly what we mean in our messages, while at the same time negotiating what we mean in metamessages. There are two big payoffs to being understood without saying explicitly what we mean: i.e. payoffs in rapport and in self-defense. We can avoid confrontation, and both the speaker and the hearer can save face, no matter what happens. Then, there is an aesthetic pleasure in communicating cryptically.

There are two notions 'tatemae' and 'honne', which are essential for a correct understanding of Japanese indirect way of communication. These terms describe double standards which work in parallel, not in conflict. 'Tatemae' is literally the outward structure of a building: the term refers to what is outwardly expected, what appears on the surface. 'Honne' is literally one's 'true voice', and it refers to what one really thinks or feels, which is sent out as a part of metamessage. Thus, we keep hinting and picking up hints, by refraining from saying some things and surmising what other people mean from what they refrain from saying.

Pre-questions such as "*Are you busy tonight?*" protect us from rejection by refusal. Joking, such as irony, has both rapport and defensive payoffs. The rapport benefit lies in the sensual pleasure of shared laughter as well as the evidence of rapport in having matching sense of humor. The defensive benefit is in the ability to retreat saying, "I was only joking". Euphemism, the substitution of a less distasteful phrase or word for a more accurate but more offensive one, sends out the metamessage of the speaker being polite, discreet and proper.

Notorious Japanese indirect speech codes sometimes cause international political problems. Thus, expressions like "Kangaet-okimasho" (Well, I'll see what I can do)" or "Zensho shimasu" (I will do my best) are often used in formal encounters, when the speaker has no intention of fulfilling the addressee's request. The metamessage here is rejection plus the speaker's goodwill. Another example is a tacit idiom like *Kyoto no chazuke* (rice soup in Kyoto). When you visit a home in Kyoto and are urged to stay for dinner or at least for a bowl of chazuke, you should decline at any cost, since the metamessage is, "It is high time you left".

6.0. Mixed Metamessages of Politeness

Politeness is a broad concept of the social goal which we serve when we talk. Thus, we attempt to take into account the effect of what we say on the other people. Robin Lakoff (1973) devised a set of rules that describe the motivations behind politeness:

(9) Motivation, rules or senses behind politeness
1. Don't impose; keep your distance. (Rule 1)
2. Give options; let the other person have a say. (Rule 2)
3. Be friendly; maintain camaraderie. (Rule 3)

Thus, when someone offers you a drink, you may respond with any of the following:

(10) a. No thanks.
b. I'll have whatever you're having.
c. Yes, some apple juice, please.

If you respond with (10a), you are following Rule 1. Or, if you opt for (10b), you are being polite in the sense of Rule 2. Similarly, if you say (10c), you are exercising Rule 3-style politeness.

Tannen (1984) goes one step further, drawing attention to what she calls 'two-edged sword of politeness':

(11) a. Respecting other's independence may be taken as indifference—not caring at all, or a lack of involvement
b. Ways of showing caring and indifference are inherently ambiguous.

The problem is that we often do not see that another system of politeness was at work, as we have seen in section 4 above.

We are now in a position where we can make more informed speculations about our concept of metamessage. We know that underlying our daily conversation are universal human needs that motivate communication: the needs to be connected to others and to be left alone. Investigation into the linguistic concept of politeness is thus a fruitful line of study pursued by a number of scholars including Brown and Levinson (1987). They will account for the way we serve these needs and react to the double bind—through metamessages in our talk.

7.0. New vistas

Occurrence of misunderstanding is a natural and normal thing. The problem is that old wisdom, common sense and goodwill will not always help us. It is no use asking for clarification sometimes: some people feel challenged if their meaning is questioned and become uncomfortable.

Works conducted in the field of pragmatics over the past three decades have basically been following the theories and frameworks of Austin (1962) and Grice (1975). The cooperative principles of Grice, if we put them into the simplest forms, would look like the following.

(12) Grice (1975)'s Cooperative Principles:
Say as much as necessary and no more.
Tell the truth.
Be relevant.
Be clear.

However, as we have seen above, being direct and honest wouldn't always aid us in achieving our communicative goals. For example, it is no good at all telling people what you want if what you want is for them to know

without your telling them. Moreover one man's honesty can be another man's rudeness.

Reconsidered in the light of our present discussion on cross-cultural communication, it becomes apparent that principles in (12) are conceived within the context of Western individualistic culture. They may not apply to other cultures in the world. These maxims are clearly in need of revision and extension. The following are their problems discussed by Clyne (1994).

(13) Clyne (1994: 191)

i. Different expectations may lead not only to inter-cultural communication breakdown, but also to inter-cultural communication conflict, stereotypes, and prejudice; and

ii. Austin's notion of 'felicity conditions' and the Gricean truth maxim do not apply in the Southeast Asian context.

(14) Clyne (1994: 192)

> Grice's Cooperative Principle needs to be applied differently across cultures. It is actually culture-bound or 'monocentric'. Several of the maxims are not always observed in discourse contributions that are, nevertheless, clearly appropriate in the culture of the speaker.

Austin's 'felicity conditions' are certain minimum requirements that must be met if an utterance is to be successful. The following is Grice's fourth principle "Be clear" in its original form.

(15) Grice's original Maxims of Manner:

Be perspicuous; ie

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly.

The following is the revised maxims proposed by Clyne (1994: 195) to suit the needs of cross-cultural communication.

(16) Revised maxims to suit the needs of *inter*-cultural communication

i. The second maxim of Manner:

'Make clear your communicative intent unless this is against the interests of politeness or of maintaining a dignity-driven cultural core values, such as harmony, charity or respect.'

ii. A fifth maxim of Manner:

'In your contribution, take into account anything you know or can predict about the interlocutor's communication expectations.'

Clyne's proposals are based on his extensive study of communicative interactions between individuals from twenty different ethnic groups living and working in Australia. Elaboration of the details must be left to future work. But his findings illuminate one avenue of research that could be quite fruitful; research toward universally valid maxims of communication across cultures, in local, national and global settings.

8.0. Concluding remarks

In this paper I have outlined actuality of mixed metamessages as natural discourse features. We incessantly keep sending and receiving such implicit messages in our daily encounters. I have also briefly discussed the prospect of expanded concept of cross-cultural discourse strategies and speech acts to accommodate the needs of global and fulfilling societies.

When we face a danger of misunderstanding or communication breakdown, we can at least try to alter our conversational style—the definition or the tone of what is going on—not by talking about it directly but by speaking in a different way, exhibiting different assumptions, and hence triggering different responses in the person we are talking to. We can also learn to stop and remind ourselves that others may not mean what we heard them say.

I have not addressed myself to the definition of 'culture'. The concept of 'national culture' is useful, but open to question. Misunderstandings arising from cultural differences can be found even among individuals of the same nationality. The notion of 'ethnic culture' is useful, too, but there is always a danger of stereotypes

and prejudices.

Notes

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1 Bateson's actual terminology was 'metacommunication' and 'metainformation'.

2 Grice (1975) refers to the same concept as *conversational implicature.*

3 The point made here is related to the observation made by Condon (1984).

4 Cf. Wierzbicka (1991), and Clyne (1994).

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