Communication across Linguistic Boundaries: Variation and Universals in Language and Cognition

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1. Introduction

Language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. It is not just a means of communication, but is a tool for perceiving and organizing reality. Through all its verbal and non-verbal aspects, language embodies cultural reality. It has often been claimed that the operations of the human mind are reflected particularly clearly in the meaning of words. When language is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. When communication goes smoothly, we rarely think about the elements of its process. But when there is a breakdown, it is helpful to identify what the problem is. There are many ways that communication can go wrong, and sometimes it occurs even when we don't realize it has gone wrong. As expected, breakdowns may occur in any element of the communication process, or in any combination

Communication most often breaks down across cultural boundaries, i.e. between people who don't share the same nationality, social or ethnic origin, gender, age, occupation, or sexual preference. Presumably, the speaker and the listener have different background assumptions, the message is phrased in unexpected ways, and/or the channel (frequently two different languages) causes confusion. In addition, as recent development of anthropological linguistics has attested, every communication must simultaneously communicate two messages: the basic message and the metamessage, which tells the listener how to interpret the basic message. Complications often arise in regard to this second message, which is communicated through the speaker's tone of voice, accent, conversational style, etc.

Communication breakdown may also be attributed to non-verbal cultural differences, e.g. differences in the concept of time, gift-giving practices, body language, facial expression, touching. Silence too communicates anger, boredom, respect, embarrassment, or resentment. But we will not address these issues here.

Although languages are diverse and each language reflects the features of the culture associated with it, each language consists of the shared core of all languages (universals) and its own picture of the world (variation) (Wierzbicka 1991, 1992, 1998 inter alia). The present study focuses on the linguistic aspects of cross-linguistic communication and identifies varying hierarchies and combinations of ethno-cultural values reflected in language as the principal factors of communication breakdown across linguistic boundaries.

2. Universal Aspects of Communication

Human beings communicate with each other, by exchanging thoughts, messages, or information, by speech, signals, writing, or behavior. We produce and receive utterances in everyday lives. With the desire to communicate a certain meaning to others comes also the desire to be listened to, to be taken seriously, to be believed, and to influence in turn other peoples' beliefs and actions. Bertrand Russell (1980 [1940]: 204ff) discusses, within the framework of philosophical inquiry, the distinction and relation between three purposes that language serves, i.e. (1) indicating facts, (2) expressing the state of the speaker, (3) altering the state of the hearer. These three purposes are not always all present. For instance, in the case of the exclamation "ouch" uttered in solitude, only (2) is present. Imperative, interrogative, and optative sentences involve (2) and (3), but not (1). Lies involve (3), and in a sense, (1) but not (2). In some cases, however, the distinction between the three purposes seems to be nonexistent. Furthermore, in the light of the necessary presence of

a second message telling the listener how to interpret the basic message, languages may serve all these purposes at the same time, whether or not the speaker is conscious of it.

Wierzbicka (1998: 292) maintains that languages allow us to see and appreciate both the diversity of cultures and what Franz Boas and others have called 'the psychic unity of mankind'. This is in line with the following statement made by Leibniz (1981 [1703]: 333).

(1) Languages are the best mirror of the human mind, and (...) a precise analysis of the significations of words would tell us more than anything else, about the operations of the understanding.

Despite the colossal variation in language structures, there is also a common core of 'human understanding' relying not only on some shared or matching lexical items but also on some shared or matching grammatical patterns in which shared lexical items can be used. Arguably this common core defines a set of 'basic sentences' which can be said in any languages, and which can be matched across language boundaries, and the grammar of these basic sentences consists in the possible distribution patterns of the 'atomic elements'.

To study the universal aspects of human cognition (and this applies also to human emotion), we need to pay attention to linguistic universals; it is the shared rather than idiosyncratic features of languages which provide a guide to the workings of the generic human mind.

3. Variation

There is nowadays a recognition that language is not distinct from the way people think and behave, and that, as code, it reflects cultural preoccupations and constrains the way people think. In other words, language reflects the way how people understand what happens around them. The theory is known as Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (or Linguistic Relativity). The following is a quote from Sapir (1949 [1929]):

(2) Language is a guide to social reality, a guide to culture. It is also a guide to the human psyche as culturally constituted, that is, as shaped not only by innate and universal features of 'human nature' but also by the particular features of historically transmitted 'local' cultures.

According to the theory, different words denote reality by cutting it up in different ways. Put in a more plain terms, different people speak differently because they think differently, and they think differently because their language offers them different ways of expressing the world around them.

Hinds and Iwasaki (1995) pointed out the utility of this hypothesis by comparing simple expressions in English and Japanese. Consider the following English sentence:

(3) My sister went to Tokyo.

To translate (3) into Japanese is not a simple task. There is no Japanese equivalent for the word *sister*: you have to choose between *ane* (big sister) and *imoto* (little sister). While English speakers perceive and categorize siblings as being male or female, Japanese speakers, not only perceive and categorize siblings as being male or female, but also perceive them as being younger or older.[1] Strictly speaking, then, it is not possible to translate sentences like (3) without distorting the original meaning. The person who utters (3) is apparently indifferent to the relative seniority of his/her female sibling, whereas Japanese version must make her either older or younger than the speaker.

Another point that Hinds and Iwasaki (1995) make with regard to the Japanese version of (3) concerns the obligatory choice between formal and informal verbal endings: you have to choose between *itta* ('went' informal) or *ikimashita* ('went' formal). Japanese speakers are thus always aware of the distinction between friends and strangers, while English speakers are not.

The theory of linguistic relativity does not claim that linguistic structure constrains what people can think or perceive, but only that it tends to influence what they routinely do think. What is important is a distinction

between what is normally done (unmarked) and what can be done (marked). As is often pointed out, Inuit has many words for snow, Arabic has many words for camel, Japanese has many words for rice, English has many words for livestock, etc. When there is something in our environment that is very important, we tend to make distinctions. Other peoples may not usually have to differentiate diverse forms, types or conditions of snow, camel, rice, livestock, etc. Again it is not a matter of being able to distinguish, it is a matter of systematically doing this.

Language and cognition thus may change from one speech community to another. Two people from two different communities may have more chances of communication breakdown than people who belong to a same social group that shares knowledge of one linguistic code and knowledge also of its patterns of use. Let us compare American and French verbal responses to compliment. Americans have been socialized into responding 'Thank you' to any compliment, as if they were acknowledging a friendly gift: 'I like your sweater!' —'Oh, thank you!' The French, who tend to perceive such a compliment as an intrusion into their privacy, would rather downplay the compliment and minimize its value: 'Oh really? It's already quite old!' The reactions of both groups are based on the differing values given to compliments in both cultures, and on the differing degree of embarrassment caused by personal comments. To the extent that two or more cultures share beliefs, values, or attitudes, communication is easier. When two cultures have very different beliefs, values, or attitudes, communication between the peoples of those cultures is made more difficult.

Communication breakdown may also occur between people who belong to different 'discourse communities' within a speech community. A discourse community, in the words of Kramsch (1998), is a social group that has a broadly agreed set of common public goals and purposes in its use of language. Members of the same discourse community share the ways of thinking, behaving and valuing. The negotiation accomplished in verbal encounters among members of a given social group gives rise to group-specific discourse styles. There may be a speaking or writing style that bears the mark of a discourse community. Words might have different semantic values for people from different discourse communities. There may be common ways in which members of a discourse community use language to meet their social needs, e.g. teenage talk, professional jargon, political rhetoric. They share specific grammatical, lexical and phonological features as well as topics they choose to talk about, the way they present information, and the style with which they interact.

Hence, communication between people from different ethnic, social, gendered cultures within the boundaries of the same national languages is categorized as cross-linguistic communication. What is important is that communication between people from different discourse communities creates an unconscious gap. The participants usually do not see the language barriers, since they believe that they are speaking the same language.

4. Language Barriers

It is expected that 'language shock' takes place upon crossing linguistic boundaries. Hard linguistic realities, i.e. conspicuous linguistic differences (when the speakers speak different languages and do not understand each other) are responsible for the barriers between different languages in the world. The following is an observation made by Reischauer (1978), an American historian and a former ambassador to Japan.

(4) Language is a fundamental tool in international relations, and the Japanese language is also a major subject in itself. It is what defines the Japanese more distinctly than any other feature in their culture. At the same time it is a major problem in their relationship with the outside world. ... Few people in Japan or elsewhere fully realize how great the language barrier is in Japan's international contacts.

Kramsch (1998: 17) points out a variety of instances of semantically encoded culture in the language itself and instances of cultural associations evoked by different words, as potential barriers across linguistic boundaries. Some of her examples follow:

(5) The English word *table* denotes all tables. Polish encodes dining tables as *stol*, coffee tables or telephone tables as *stolik*.

(6) British English encodes anything below the diaphragm as *stomach*, whereas in American English a *stomach ache* denotes something different than a *bellyache*.

(7) Bavarian German encodes the whole leg from the hip to the toes through one word, *das Bein*, so that 'Mine Bein tut weh' might mean 'My foot hurts', whereas English needs at least three words *hip*, *leg*, or *foot*.

(8) Although the words *soul* or *mind* are usually seen as the English equivalents of the Russian word *dusha*, each of these words is differently associated with their respective objects. For a Russian, not only is *dusha* used more frequently than *soul* or *mind* in English, but through its association with religion, goodness, and the mystical essence of thing it connotes quite a different concepts than the English words.

Speakers and writers use those linguistic signs that are most readily available in their environment, without generally putting them into question, or being aware, that other signifying relations might be available. The way in which people use the language itself creates meanings that are understandable to the group they belong to, but not to others. Kramsch (1998) also points out that cultural encodings can change over time in the same language. Examples abound in any language. For example, English word *girl* was used to refer to both 'boy' and 'girl' in Middle English, and *silly* formerly meant 'happy' or 'blessed'. Unexpected misinterpretations may occur between people speaking different languages as well as between people living at different times in the history.

Wierzbicka (1998: 309) points out that usually more than 99% of sentences in any text that comes up for translation into many other languages do present problems and do require addition or subtraction of meaning. Reischauer (1978) writes:

(9) Even assuming a perfect knowledge of both languages on the part of the interpreter, which is rarely the case, English and Japanese both suffer a radical transformation in being converted into the other. Word order is in large part reversed; clear statements become obscure; polite phrases become insulting; and a remark, even though accurately translated in a literal sense, may take on an entirely different thrust. ... I have often observed an inquiry by an American slightly mistranslated into Japanese and the Japanese answer then in turn mistranslated. Surprised at the probably irrelevant answer he has got, the American may conclude that Japanese mental processes are different from his own.

5. Ethno-cultural Values Reflected in Languages

We have seen in the previous section that each language is like a pair of glasses that gives its speakers a unique perspective on events. Every natural language embodies its own 'native picture of the world', and this includes its own ethnopsychology. People have not generally been aware of how local their common sense systems are. The use of any 'local' language is bound to lead to ethnocentric bias.

Jackendoff (1993: 207) argues that any description of another culture is unavoidably ethnocentric, an imposition of your own cultural and theoretical prejudices. But what about language? Any description of another language is unavoidably ethnocentric too, an imposition of our own linguistic and theoretical prejudices, since any description of anything is inevitably tainted by the point of view of the describer. All the same, native speakers do not feel in their body that words are arbitrary signs. For them, words are part of the natural, physical fabric of their lives. Socialization into a given discourse community includes making its signifying practices seem totally natural. Typical is an anecdote of one Swiss-German peasant woman who asked why the French used *fromage* for 'Käse'. She is reported to say, '*Käse* is so much more natural!' Also, anyone brought up in a French household will swear that there is a certain natural masculinity about the sun (*le* soleil) and femininity about the moon (*la* lune) (Kramsch, 1998: 21).

Even when our primary purpose is to indicate facts, we can be ethnocentric in presenting the facts. We present them as we see it, as we analyze it through our own language. We are in fact expressing the ethnocentric conception of the action/event/state. Ethnocentric cognition of the world is, first of all,

embedded in lexical items, though the speaker is usually unconscious of their culture-specific aspects. Few people are aware, for example, that English emotion terms such as *anger*, *fear* and *sadness* represent cognitive artifacts of Anglo culture rather than universal human concepts. Wierzbicka (1998: 292-293) illustrate this point as follows:

(10) We get trapped in words such as, for example, *mind*, *emotion*, *self*, and so on—words which are continuously used in the literatures as if they were culture-free analytical tools, whereas in fact they are cultural artifacts of one particular language and the intellectual tradition associated with it. English *mind* does not mean the same as the French *esprit* or the German *Geist*, or that the English *emotion* does not mean the same as the French *sentiment* or the German *Gefühl* ... important aspects of Freud's doctrine were misunderstood in America, despite his tremendous success and popularity there, simply because his key word *Seele* was rendered in the English translations of his writings as *mind*[2].

The same thing can be said with regards to the Japanese language. English word *mind* does not have a Japanese equivalent. It is translated variously as *kokoro*, *seishin*, *chisei*, etc. but none of these is an exact match. Conversely, Japanese word *kokoro*, for instance, do not have an equivalent in English. *Spirit*, *soul*, *heart* or *mind* do not refer to the same concept as *kokoro*. Lexical mismatch is, thus, often the cause of minor complications or irritation in the context of cross-linguistic communication.

We have seen above that different words may mean different world. The recent development of psycholinguistics attests that basic linguistic notions are learned by children at an early age, much earlier than they learn proper behavior (or culture) in society. These can be culturally transmitted notions, including lexical and structural features. Hinds and Iwasaki (1995: 68) report of a game played with young children both in Japanese and in English, which involves presenting a child with an object like a rattle, and then hiding it. They suggest that what we say in the two language conditions the baby's outlook. In Japanese, the person who hides the object usually says, "Nai, Nai." (It's not here. It's not here.) This language feature helps condition the Japanese baby to accept things as they are. The object is simply not present. It will either come back, or it won't. English speakers, on the other hand, are apt to say, "Where did it go?", which forces the child, if it is old enough to speak, to answer. It builds a curiosity into the child, training the child to seek answers rather than accept what is.

Another point that Hinds and Iwasaki (1995: 69) makes concern the use of passive construction in Japanese. Compare the following sentence and its literal translation in English·

(11) a. Kino ani ni uchi made okurareta.
      yesterday big-brother by home to escort-PAST
    b. I was escorted home yesterday by my older brother.

What is missing in the English translation is the emotional connotation present in the Japanese. There is usually some sense of embarrassment being expressed in (11a). This emotional overtone is completely missing in (11b). It is not that English speakers are incapable of having emotional overtone, only that it is not the unmarked or normal way to perceive events.

6. Conversational Style and Rhetorical Differences

Conversational style is a person's way of talking in the management of conversations. Different context of situation (e.g. interview, conversation among friends) calls for different conversational styles. In formal situations such as at interviews, the interviewer tends to employ controlled, non-overlapping sequence of turns, attempting at professional, detached objectivity. The interviewee, on the other hand, makes cautious responses, desiring to appear competent and confident. Both the interviewer and the interviewee will use different styles in a conversation among friends.

People from different ethno-cultural background or social group tend to use different conversational

styles. For example, as discussed in Tannen (1984b, 1985), New York Jewish paralinguistic signs signal empathy, their heavy use of personal pronouns indexes both ego involvement and involvement with the listener, and frequent interruptions and overlaps index a high degree of conversational co-operation. Interlocutors from another culture with a more reserved conversational style, marked by brevity, conciseness, and a concern for exactitude, might interpret the overlaps, the frequent backchannel signals and the interjections not as co -operation, but as so many violations of their conversational space. They may, in fact, consider them as intolerable blubberers and might in turn be perceived by them as being standoffish and unsociable (Kramsch: 47-48).

No doubt people are able to display a variety of conversational styles in various situations, and one should avoid equating one person or one culture with one discourse style. However, by temperament and upbringing, people do tend to prefer one or the other style in a given situation. It was Tannen (1984a, 1984b, 1985, 1990 inter alia) that made extensive inquiries into the workings of conversational style and metamessages which signals how speakers mean what they say: She discussed the problems caused by difference in conversational style in Tannen (1985)[3] and addressed the problems caused by gender barriers in Tannen (1990).

Rhetoric is yet another source of communication breakdown between speakers and writers of different languages. Each culture will have its own convention about what is effective or persuasive language. For instance, three-part structure for presenting information is preferred in English: (1) the introduction, (2) the body, and (3) the conclusion. This structure is not necessarily the most effective rhetorical structure in the areas of the world under the influence of Classical Chinese writing. In these cultures, a more effective method of presenting information is to (1) introduce it, (2) develop it, (3) provide a tangentially related point, and (4) conclude it[4].

Evidently, a major stumbling block for communication between Japanese and Americans involves rhetorical techniques: Japanese tend to give all the justifications and background before the answer, while Americans expect the answer to come first and any justifications and explanations will follow. This difference suggests that Americans prefer to present information in a deductive manner. They begin with a generalization and then go on to discuss particulars. Japanese, on the other hand, prefer to present information in an inductive manner. They present specifics first and then state the generalization at the end.

7. Generalization and stereotyping

Talking about ethno-cultural behavior patterns, people tend to make generalizations, such as the following:

(12) a. Americans are inquisitive.
 b. Japanese are accepting: accepting of nature; accepting of the way things are.
 c. Australians are loud.

Some of these may be regarded as legitimate generalizations, i.e. they are statements that infers from specifics which have been observed. Generalizations do admit exceptions and can be useful. But there is always the risk of over-generalizing or stereotyping.

The stereotype, which is an oversimplified conception of a group of people, often with negative characteristic, will get in the way of reality and makes it difficult to communicate effectively with members of that group. The following are some examples of malevolent stereotype:

(13) a. Chinese are dishonest.
 b. Mexicans are dirty.
 c. American Blacks are argumentative, aggressive, defiant, and hostile.
 d. American Whites are evasive, boastful, aggressive, and arrogant.

For an effective communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries, it is of vital importance to eliminate

any stereotype thinking and to see each person as a unique individual.

8. Listenership and the lack of incentive to understand

Tannen (1984b) observes eight levels of differences on which cross-cultural communication can falter: when to speak; what to say; pacing and pausing; listenership; intonation; formality; indirectness; and cohesion and coherence. Here, we will not go into details of all eight levels, but will address one of them, which is listenership.

Communication indeed depends a lot on the receiver's sensibility and viewpoint. Each person has his own way of interpreting the world around him/her. People tend to believe that everybody share the same points of view. It is a great surprise for them to find that not everyone share the same way of viewing things. Even people living in the same community may have different views. It is difficult to explain one's own view of the world to others. It is even more difficult to explain that one's way is the right way.

Yoroh (2003) calls our attention to the existence of another barrier to the communication. He names it *baka no kabe* ('foolish barrier' or 'insensitive barrier'). It is the lack of incentive (not ability) to listen and to understand other people. There are occasions when people stop listening or refuse to listen to other people, and choose to remain behind their self-made mental barriers. Knowledge can change people's world view, but some would refuse to understand what are happening beyond their own small world and cannot understand beliefs, values and viewpoints other than his own. If the hearer does not listen, the message does not get across. The possible consequence in the extreme cases will be war, terrorism, ethnic conflict or religious conflict.

9. Conclusion

Communication is, by its very nature, culturally relative. It may be true that any description of anything is inevitably colored by the point of view of the describer, but we do not need to become unnecessarily relativist. We only need to acknowledge the danger of ethnocentrism, but in confronting these dangers we need more than just good will and, as Jackendoff (1993: 208) puts it, 'sensitivity and an awareness of our own fallibility'.

Many issues on the international scene involve misunderstandings based on a different way of looking at the world. Still, there is universal common sense that is shared by everybody, though the idiosyncratic differences are far greater than the shared core. It is the belief that everybody shares the same world view that causes misinterpretation. Sensitivity to possible misunderstanding is mandatory if we wish to have effective cross-linguistic communication. Further empirical studies are in order of communication involving languages conceived of as immensely complex, culturally-shaped and constantly changing tools for creating and expressing meaning.

Notes

1. It is not that English speakers are incapable of recognizing the difference between older and younger, only that it is not an important distinction to make most of the time.
2. Weirzbicka continues to argue that it was not that there was a better word to translate *Seele*; but this does not change the fact that the substitution of the English word *mind* for the German *Seele* in the English version of Freud's writings led to distortion of his ideas.
3. The book became a national bestseller, and has many readers worldwide.
4. This convention is known under the name of *ki-sho-ten-ketsu*.

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