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Language: An Aid to Cross-Cultural Understanding

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This paper will attempt to show how language functions to achieve cross-cultural understanding. We will restrict ourselves to two aims of cross-cultural understanding: (1) to promote a more effective communication and (2) to be able to participate in the target society as a welcome outsider.

First, we must have a clear understanding of the nature and function of language. Secondly, culture should be clearly defined. Thirdly, a knowledge of the interrelationship between language and culture is needed.

Language does not consist merely of words or sentences. It is a system, a pattern, a structure of communication. Language develops in a social situation and functions to spread information through a group. Social control is impossible without a signalling system. Henry Lee Smith, Jr. defines language "as a system of arbitrary symbols by means of which the members of a speech community or subcultural group interact and hence communicate with each other in terms of common values, attitudes, as-

sumptions, and common experiences."¹ Thus language is primarily a mode of action and interaction for a group that has a common cultural experience.

Culture has attributes similar to language. As defined by Kluckhohn and Kelly, culture is a historically derived system of explicit and implicit designs for living, which tends to be shared by all or specially designated by members of a group. What man learns during acculturation is an organized set of behavioral patterns which he abstracts from and applies to situations of his daily experience as these arise. When new situations arise there emerge in the social group new patterns of living and modification of old patterns, abstracted consciously or unconsciously, from the situations and faced by the members of the group. It is this feature of cumulated patterns of living that characterizes human culture.²

¹ Henry Lee Smith, Jr., "Language and Culture, *Culture in Language Learning*, Supplementary Report of the 1960 Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, eds. C. Reginald Bishop, Jr. and Jack Undank (New Brunswick, N.J.: The State University, 1960), p. 21.

² Clyde Kluckhohn and William Kelly, "The Concept of Culture," *The Science of Man in the World Crisis*, ed. Ralph Linton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945), p. 98.

Thus language is an essential part of culture in that it enables men not only to make their own experiences and learning continuous but also to participate vicariously in the experiences and learning of others, past and present, who are or have been members of the group. To the extent that a culture as a whole is made up of common understandings, its linguistic aspect is its most vital and indispensable part.

Since a considerable part of our knowledge about reality is given to us vicariously, through language, through other people, our perspective on reality is therefore culturally defined. Even when we think by ourselves, we think in the ways we have learned as members of a culture. The only way to know a certain culture is to observe the people's reaction to everyday situations, the way they describe and reason about things, what things they talk about, with whom, and what things they do not or cannot talk about.

One culture has different emphasis — let us say, strong points that another culture does not have — Culture A has strong points and Culture B has strong points but these are different. For instance, if Culture A operates in an industrialized system then the values of time and efficiency are ranked higher than friendliness and in-group loyalty. On the other hand, Culture B operating in a

personalistic system would rank the latter values higher. This hierarchical ordering of values in a particular culture is reflected in the daily activities of the members of the group and often expressed through language. To illustrate this, take the concept of time. Members of Culture A will tend to be very apologetic in case they are not on time for their appointments while members of Culture B operate differently in that even when one is a half hour late this is an acceptable behavioral pattern. How is this time value manifested in the use of language? In a conversation between members of Culture A the greeting is brief and the topic or purpose follows immediately. Whether the persons conversing are of equal social status or unequal they go direct to the point because each one is conscious of not wanting to waste the other person's time. This is not true in Culture B. The greeting is longer and a long exchange of pleasantries is made first before the main topic of the conversation is introduced.

Language has a culture setting. Vocabulary items are clearly linked with many features of non-linguistic culture. A group that emphasizes kinship as a means of social control has a large and complicated vocabulary of kinship terms. For instance, in the Philippine culture system, kinship terminology is rather complex, as shown in this particular example in contrast to English.

FILIPINO						ENGLISH
TAGALOG			ILOKO			
Chronological Age	Sister	Brother	Chronological Age	Sister	Brother	
1. Eldest	Ate	Kúya	1. Older ones	Manang	Manong	The only distinction made is between sisters and brothers.
2. Second to the eldest	Díko	Dítse				
3. Third to eldest	Sanse	Sankó	2. Younger ones	Ading	Ading	
4. Youngest	Néne	Tóto				

The above examples indicate that systems of kinship terminology denote socially and culturally determined relationships peculiar to a given society.

Another example to indicate that the language used by the members of a certain social group affects to a considerable degree both their sensory perceptions and their habitual modes of thought is the color spectrum. In Tagalog the color terms we find are: *putí* (white), *ítim* (black), *pulá* (red), *diláw* (yellow). Spanish loan words such as *bérde* (green), *asúl* (blue), *chokoláte* (brown), *rósa* (pink) are now used. For a color like gray, however, it is expressed by referring to the object which has the quality of grayness such as ash, so that the term used to denote gray color is *kúláy abó* or *abuhin*. There are no corresponding Tagalog terms for English colors such as beige, tangerine, turquoise, purple, and cream. However, despite the absence of some color terms in the Tagalog system as compared to the English system, the Tagalog speaker can still discern the difference between gray and beige, tangerine and turquoise. It is not that linguistic patterns limit sensory perceptions and thought, but simply that, together with other cultural patterns, they direct perception and thinking into certain habitual channels. A Tagalog farmer distinguishes several varieties of rice which an American businessman does not do.

Tagalog Farmer	American Businessmen
<i>pálay</i> (unhusked rice) <i>ilík</i> (husked rice) <i>bigás</i> (polished rice) <i>kánin</i> (cooked rice)	rice

We, therefore, see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose us to certain choices of interpretation. Our behavioral patterns are unconsciously built up on the language habits of our social group.

Due to the continuous intermingling of one person from one culture with others in another culture, each has to understand his own cultural patterns and at the same time develop awareness of the others' cultural patterns. A knowledge that we cannot always expect other peoples to adopt our language and our own behavioral patterns will be of great help to us to overcome the shock and annoyances of cultural clash.

The main objective of cross-cultural understanding is to promote effective communication. Language and communication are interrelated processes taking place in a structured social situation. Only when the society in which the members live has definite and commonly accepted patterns can they interact effectively.

One of the functions of communication is the transference of information. This means that something is being transferred from one person to another such as opinions, thoughts, ideas, experiences, emotions, feelings, and moods. It covers all deliberate uses of language by human beings as well as movements and gestures in so far as they are informative. Thus I can communicate to you my annoyance regarding a particular incident by telling you about it in the form of a statement or by a gesture. You can acquire the same information either way.

In short, there are ways of conveying information other than by the use of language, though the use of language is the most important and one of the most interesting to investigate.

In the communication process there is participation. We have the person who makes the communication and the person who receives it, the thought or feeling which is communicated, the encoding of that thought or feeling in some set of symbols, and the meaning or reference which these symbols have.

In the transmission of messages we use language. When we use language we either use *indexical signs* or the *non-indexical signs*. By indexical signs we mean those that cannot be understood apart from the context in which they are produced. When they are verbal their presence in a sentence makes it necessary to know the occasion of their utterance before they can be interpreted. e.g. "I am sorry I forgot all about." On the other hand, a sentence such as that which states that the freezing point of water is 32° fahrenheit is entirely non-indexical. It contains no indication of the personality or social status of the speaker, or of his spatio-temporal position; it tells nothing about his opportunity for verifying the statement which it is intended to express.³

The use of indexical expressions have obvious practical advantages—they serve as pointers which save one the trouble of formulating descriptions, or in the case of an audience, of searching for the object to which a description refers. Words are not reflections of thoughts but are expressions of thoughts. Of course, in the expression we are concerned with the arrangement of the signs themselves, the

manner in which they are produced, the general attitude of the speaker.

We are in a position to understand one another's reports because the things to which they refer are things to which we all have access. This pen that I see is the same as that which my neighbor sees. In describing it to him I am telling him something which he could, in principle, find out directly for himself. But he does not, in this direct way, have access to my thoughts and feelings. Our experiences are private unless we decide to share them, which sharing is possible through the use of language or other overt behavioral patterns. However, we cannot be sure we could communicate them successfully. All that we know is that we systematically apply the same words on the same occasion — e.g. green color. The speaker can make statements about his experiences which the listener is capable of understanding.

The ability to communicate effectively therefore depends primarily upon how well the individuals concerned know and accept a common, multi-leveled, complex, integrated bundle of cultural norms and values. The more they share a common culture, the closer their views and evaluations, the more effective will be the interaction.

Unless a set of structured mutual expectations is established there will be a breakdown of communication. For instance, a foreigner and a Filipino are engaged in a conversation. The language used as their medium of communication is Tagalog. For the foreigner to be considered as a welcome outsider, he must be aware of and try to understand the cultural patterns interrelated with the Tagalog language then can there be established a stable system of relations in which each can assist one another to avoid cultural conflicts. e.g. The value of efficiency as illustrated in meeting

³ A. J. Ayer, "What is Communication?," *Studies in Communication* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1955), p. 21.

deadlines. An American boss cannot keep on firing his Filipino secretary because of failure to submit the necessary reports on time. Instead, an advanced deadline may have to be set to offset delays caused by fiestas, birthday parties, or any other activity which the Filipino secretary is expected, by her cultural group, to consider highly important.

In the Ateneo Language Center, other values and attitudes are incorporated in the language materials prepared for both English and Tagalog programs of instruc-

tion. In these two language programs, the context of situation approach, which integrates linguistic patterns and non-linguistic behavioral patterns, is used. Linguistic patterns include phonology, vocabulary, morphology and syntax, whereas non-linguistic behavioral patterns include the use of space and time patterns, gestures, values and attitudes, and implied social institutions. An awareness of the interdependence of all these patterns is important for better cross-cultural understanding.

Whither Social Changes

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The significant question of our era is: "Where are we going?" We are faced, so constantly, with the fact and the prospects of rapid social change that we do not know what to expect of tomorrow. Viewed from the perspective of history, this is not the normal human condition. In the historical periods previous to our age, societies manifested a degree of stability which made it possible for them to modify the impact of change through surrounding it with traditional forms. This seems possible no longer. Changes in the conditions of our social life occur at so rapid a rate that we fear their unanticipated consequences may destroy us. Like men carried along by rushing flood waters we have given up any hope for slowing our pace. Our current concern is, not how to stop our progress, but how to control it so as to either reach the type of society we would have, or, at the very least, to avoid a social order which would prevent the realization of our human desires.

Thesis

While we cannot predict the future, we do know that what we do today will bear fruit tomorrow. We know that we can control our destiny to a significant extent if we know how the future is shaped by the past and, more important, if we know what we should want from the future. Thus, the possible solution to our problem is seen increasingly in an understanding of the bases of human behavior. Consequently, the social sciences are challenged, with ever increasing frequency, to offer a better understanding of that behavior.

Social Changes

Social change may be best considered under two heads: Institutional and ideological. Institutional changes are objective modifications in the legal, political, economic, educational, and technological organization of modern society. It may be admitted that these institutional changes are not as rapid in the