

## Socio-Cultural Aspect of Language

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Language is a guide to social reality, for there is no aspect of man's social life which is not reflected in his language. The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent built up on the language habits of the group. We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices and interpretations.<sup>1</sup>

Language is a way of directing the perceptions of its speakers, providing them habitual modes of analyzing experience into significant categories. To the extent that languages differ markedly from each other, we should expect to find significant barriers to cross-cultural communication and understanding. Inter-cultural communication, however, is not impossible. It is simply more or less difficult depending on the differences in the culture concerned.

### Linguistic Communication and Culture Patterns

The greatest obstacle to understanding other peoples lies in the failure to communicate effectively. For one may speak a foreign language with grammatical correctness and yet the thought content may still remain quite foreign. Effective communication involves much more than just learning to substitute one word for another and to master a few sounds.

Indeed there is a big difference between merely being able to speak and being able to speak and be understood at the same time. (At this point I would like to mention in passing that language study, and for that matter, language use, cuts across other fields of study).

Easily the study of language as part of human behaviour is a study in sociology; thus necessarily, language study is partly culture study for the language of any given social group is closely interwoven with their culture.

Therefore, real communication can only take place between two people when each understands the assumptions which lie behind the other's words and phrases. This can be approached through an intimate acquaintance with the feeling and thought patterns of the people which are virtually culturally loaded.

### Linguistic Diversity Culturally Conditioned

In language as well as in culture innumerable differences exist and these differences are not differences of better or worse. In talking about language, for instance, one has no more reason to say that language A is very simple because of the apparent facility of learning it while language B is just impossible because of the complexity of the system of declension (Finnish, for instance) or the tremendous number of clicking sounds (like the Bantu languages of Africa) or the confusing levels of tones (Chinese,

<sup>1</sup> Emy Pascasio, "Language: An aid to Cross-Cultural Understanding" *Philippine Sociological Review*, Vol. XII Nos. 1 & 2 (Jan/April, 1964).

Thai). On the other hand, a self styled linguist would say that language X is far superior to language Y because it has unlimited potentialities for expression.

But he is forgetting the fact that there are differences in the degree to which the language covers the total range of human culture. And if one language happens to have a relatively lower degree of meeting the total range of human culture, this should not be taken to mean that this language is inferior, for the differences existing among languages depend upon the complexity of their cultures. For an underdeveloped culture, for instance, the vocabulary though relatively simple can be expanded.

### Language Control, a Medium for Culture Contact

Control of the language is basic not only to furnish a means of communication but also to supply one of the best means of understanding the total culture of the people because language is the cultural system through which almost all of the activities and beliefs of the society are reflected and transmitted.

Thus it is hardly conceivable to expect that a person would understand the language without altogether grasping in its totality the culture of the people speaking that language. Somehow there should be some kind of cultural submersion. For effective communication, therefore, one must truly attain a good grasp of the language in its cultural setting. Conversely, when effective communication is lacking, there would be total failure of meaningful cultural contact. Indeed, there is mutual interdependence between language and culture for effective communication.

Cultural differences between peoples will pose some barriers to communication, but these could be minimized if there

were mutual agreement between the members of two or more different language and culture groups to understand the culture and the language. (In the Philippines, although there are several ethnolinguistic groupings, basically these groups fall or belong to the same culture group). Also, there must be acceptance and the sincere attempt to fit into the society on the people's terms.

It is common observation that much of the confusion, embarrassment and/or misunderstanding arising from the use of language is more often caused by one's false attitudes toward a particular culture; possibly not just false attitude but deliberate culture isolation. Cultural isolation could result from some feelings of superiority which in turn may develop into an apathy towards another people's pattern of behaviour, their customs, their value systems, their point of view.

Language, being an integral part and model of culture, would naturally suffer from use and perhaps eventually from misuse. It could even become an unwilling culprit (for it is an indispensable instrument for transmitting not only the outward forms but also the inner content and subjective evaluation of the different aspects of culture) that may foment some serious repercussions.

### Language an Instrument for Social Interaction

Language is an instrument for social interaction. The smooth flow of social interaction can only occur among members of the same social group. If in a social interaction some of the participants are not direct members (outsiders are welcome in so far as they are ready for cultural submersion in one way or another) there would be a considerable breakdown of communication resulting in various moods and reactions.

In other words, the possibility of conflicting interest will run high, eventually giving way to clashes.

For instance, it takes a good deal of knowledge of the Filipino culture as manifest in their language for an outsider or a foreigner not to react emotionally or otherwise to what may appear to him as offenses against linguistic and social conventions. For example, the technique of replying in the desired manner (usually giving an answer which is expected by the person who asks the Filipino) is more often than not disturbing according to other cultural standards.<sup>2</sup>

But this could be the most proper thing to do or say according to the Filipino way in a given situation. Or what is perfectly right in language or behavior in the Philippines may appear rude or condescending or levelling to an outsider. Consider: "Why you've grown fat (or thin)! Where did you get this beautiful outfit? How much did it cost you? Some such statements as these are to a Filipino, a way of striking up a conversation or of extending a greeting. But to the unoriented foreigner, these would sound like meddling or a personal affront. But the truth is, more often than not, the Filipino does not want to be mean. He is just being friendly, but what an odd way to be friendly, a foreigner might say.

The courteous and often euphemistic and at times equivocal speech is characteristic of the Filipino. But this is not supposed to be taken seriously all the time. Thus the excessive use of "sir" is a carry over from the Filipino's (Tagalog, particularly) use of *po* or *ho*. These are expressions of politeness and social distance.<sup>3</sup> Among other ethnolinguistic

<sup>2</sup> Frank Lynch, S. J. "Social Acceptance" *Four Readings on Philippine Values* (Ateneo de Manila: Institute of Philippine Culture 2nd rev. ed. 1963), 113 pp.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

groups, in the absence of *po* or *ho*, the tone of voice is used to carry the same feelings of respect.

### Language Symbols

Language symbols are used in an arbitrary and purely conventional way. Words are not fixed symbols which have exactly corresponding meanings in other languages. They are a part of culture which they help to symbolize and they can be understood only as an integral part of a particular culture. Thus literal translation of words in the Philippine languages may not be propitious at all times. Take *hiya* (Tagalog). This approximates the meaning of self-esteem, shyness or timidity and is invariably translated into English as "shame" which is really not quite right. *Maikog* (Cebuano) which somehow approximates the meaning of reserve or restraint coupled with the feelings of respect defies translation; or the very disturbing. "Yes, I have no etc." of our Filipino students. In the Philippine languages this is a valid reply.

The concept of time and distance in the rural Philippine setting is different and ignorance of it could result in some very awkward situation. Thus the Cebuano term *taudtaud*, *unya* and possibly also Tagalog *mamaya* could mean later, in a moment, or it may even be stretched to mean indefiniteness. (Could this be the reason for the oft-quoted "Filipino time" which actually is used to imply tardiness, or no sense of punctuality according to other standards?)

Then, too, when one is told that so and so lives just across the river or "over there" or "just around the corner" he can be almost sure that he will have to cross rivers and traverse hills, if not mountains, to reach the place after what could seem almost endless travel.

## Conclusion

I have mentioned only some of the instances, where, because of the lack of knowledge or total ignorance of the people's culture of which language is part and parcel, an outsider may blunder here and there linguistically and socially. Such linguistic and social trippings may unnecessarily develop animosity towards another people.

It is therefore important that in order to effect better communication between two cultural groups there should first be the readiness of each group to mutually meet each other by getting a good grasp of their culture and their language.

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# Cultural and Demographic Aspects of Economic Development

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Economic and political behavior, health and procreation are related aspects of popular culture. A fundamental change in any of these spheres tends to bring changes in the others.

It is fashionable today to refer to low-income countries as "the developing nations" but this may reflect an uncritical optimism. Ways of behavior are changing throughout the world, but in some countries the forces tending toward the deterioration of levels of living are stronger than those favorable to progress. The balance between retrogressive and progressive forces is precarious in many countries, including the Philippines. The factors affecting this balance are in large part cultural, demographic and social, rather than purely "economic" in a restricted sense.

The economic and social development of nations that have already achieved a clear "take-off" in this process took place in the context of demographic and social conditions that were generally quite different from those prevailing today in the Philippines. We need not deal in detail with obvious contrasts, both in ecology and in politics, between the Soviet Union and the Philippines, but will direct our attention to conditions in Europe and Japan in the early stages of their industrialization. We select Sweden as representative of European nations in this respect, because its development was relatively late and achieved without the advantages of imperial dominance.

The demographic contrast can be summarized on a few indices. We have mid-nineteenth century data for Sweden, but