



## LINGUISTIC AND VERNACULAR VARIATIONS IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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### ABSTRACT

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In any culture some features attract us, some elements influence us and some factors force us to do the deeds. People cannot have communication without culture and culture without communication. Our attitude, verbal and nonverbal cues, our behavior etc. show our cultural heritage. Our language or mother tongue may vary, our accent or slang may vary, but our communication reveals our culture. Our attire, hair style, our rituals, celebrations expose our cultural background. We should agree that communication and culture, both are interdependent. Then what is cross-cultural communication? It is another facet of study which tells about cultural diversity and multiplicity of languages. It tells about cultural differences and similarities, background of various customs and people's mindset. Is there any need to learn this cross-cultural communication? Yes, it is the need of the hour. Our world is a global village now. There are no barriers among countries. The establishment of multinational companies is encouraging the people to work at many places throughout the world. The job opportunities are not restricted to some particular areas. Another great thing happened in this computer age is migration of people from one region to another region. There may be many causes for the migration of the people but because of this migration, understanding of cross-culture communication becomes essential. In this paper variation in various cultures in language, pronunciation, aspects and behavior is discussed.

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As people's native languages vary from one another, they must have a common language to communicate. Millions of people have taken English as a common language and English is lingua franca

throughout the world. Fear of natural hazards also makes the people shift from their native places. Some countries are under stark poverty condition and the people in those countries want to migrate



from their countries. As people keep moving today for various reasons, they invariably face challenges to adapt to new cultures and different practices. They are forced to develop the ability to understand people in new surroundings combined with the ability to express oneself appropriately and fully. However not all succeed in developing these abilities. Their language, religion, locality, food habits, etc., act as barriers to cross cultural communication. Let us look at the major barriers and see how we can overcome them. Through some incidents faced by people, we can understand how one's cultural and linguistic encodings can impede one's appreciation and understand of a performance from an alien culture.

The use of different languages is often a sign of a distinct religious or political group – as in the cases of Basque, Latin, Welsh, the many official languages of the Indian sub-continent, and the pseudo-linguistic speech known as glossolalia. Switching from one language to another may also be a signal of distance or solidarity in everyday circumstances, as can be seen in strongly bilingual areas, such as Paraguay. Languages have developed a wide range of varieties for handling the different kinds and levels of relationship which identify the social structure of a community. In English, for example, forms such as *liveth* and *reigneth*, *givest*, *vouchsafe*, and *thine* have long been distinctive in one variety of religious language; but in the 1960s as proposals for the modernization of Christian liturgical language were debated, this variety came to be seen as a symbol of traditional practice with which people chose to identify or from which they dissociated themselves. The case is worth citing because the world-wide status of Christianity meant that many speech communities were involved, and over a quarter of the world's population raised such personal question of linguistic identity on such a global scale.

The question 'Where are you from?' which signals geographical identity, can be balanced by another locational question, 'Where are you now?' Many features of language correlate directly with the characteristics of the context, or situation, in which a communicative event takes place. Classifications vary, but most approaches recognize the central role

played by many factors. Telephone conversations provide one of the clearest examples of the influence of setting upon language, because of the lack of visual feedback, and the constraints of time and money. The opening and closing phases of such conversations are particularly distinctive, with rules governing sequences of acceptable and unacceptable utterances. Certain features of the language are universal, but there are also interesting cultural differences, which often make themselves felt whenever one attempts to telephone someone abroad.

In British English, for example, the normal sequence for a call to private residence is as follows:

1. Telephone rings.
2. Answerer gives number.
3. Caller asks for intended addressee.

By contrast, in French, the following practice seems to be more usual.

1. Telephone rings.
2. Answerer says 'Allo'
3. Caller verifies number.
4. Answerer says 'Oui'
5. Caller identifies self, apologizes, and asks for intended addressee.

The different conventions can have several consequences – not least, the possibility that French people have greater difficulty remembering their own telephone number, because they do not have to verify it themselves when they pick up their phone! An English caller in France could unintentionally offend, by using the British pattern, which lacks the caller's self-identification and apology for troubling the answerer. And, conversely, English answerers can be irritated when caller checks their number, when they themselves have just said it, or again, in trying to reach third party, a French caller would expect French answerers to reciprocate with a self-identification or some degree of small talk, before going to get the third party, whereas an English answerer would have no such expectation. The sequence:

1. Telephone rings.
2. Answerer gives number.
3. Caller asks for third party.
4. Answerer says, 'I'll get her' (leaves phone) is normal in England but abnormal in France,



where there would be further interaction before the answerer left the phone. Several such differences exist, which, if not correctly understood, can easily lead to unfortunate stereotypes about foreign attitudes.

#### MAORI GREETINGS

In some cultures, rituals of greeting or leave-taking are marked by elaborate and highly conventionalized forms of expression, often reflecting the social standing of the speakers. Among the Maori, for example, distinctive behavior and language identify the ritual encounter at the beginning of the ceremonial gathering (or hui) which takes place on such occasions as weddings, funerals, and visitations by dignitaries.

There may be as many as seven stages in the encounter ritual, all but two involving language. In each case, accuracy of expression is essential, otherwise evil will result.

1. The WERO is a ritual challenge, involving noise and actions, but no language. If we don't understand their norms and use our language there, the people feel insulting.
2. The KARANGA is an exchange of high, changed calls of greeting, and invocations to the dead, between the old women of the local and visiting parties.
3. The POOWHIRL is an action chant of welcome, using rhythmical actions and loud shouts.
4. The TANGI is high wailing and sobbing, on a single vowel, uttered for the dead.
5. The WHAIKOORERO is the oratory that is the main part of the ritual. The locals and each group of visitors have a 'team' of orators. Speeches alternate, each speech beginning with a warning shout, and being followed by an archaic chant, greetings for the dead and living, perhaps a topic for discussion, and concluding with a traditional song by the group as a whole.
6. The HONGI, or pressing of noses, concludes the ritual.

When high-ranking foreigners make an official visit to New Zealand, they are usually greeted by the elaborate leaping and grimacing of Maori ceremonial challenge (Wero). Such ritual displays of strength

were always customary on the first encounter with strangers – though early settlers often took them for displays of real belligerence, with deadly results.

#### LISTENERSHIP

Listening also plays a pivotal role in cross-cultural communication. One way is through gaze. Frederick Erickson, a great scholar found that white participants in his study maintained eye gaze when listening and frequently broke their gaze when speaking. Blacks in the study did the opposite. They maintained steady-eye contact when speaking and frequently broke their gaze when listening.

This meant that when a white speaker talked to a black listener, s/he had the feeling that the black wasn't paying attention because the gaze wasn't there. When the white speaker sent a small signal, asking for confirmation of comprehension, the black often missed it because s/he was looking away. So the-speaker then said the same thing again, in simpler terms talking down. When the white-was the listener; the black speaker's steady gaze seemed overbearing.

New Yorkers had an enthusiastic way of showing listenership -- for example, shouting "WOW!" or "NO KIDDING!" --which frightened, and confused the Californians and stopped them dead in their vocal tracks. If our speaking habits create a strange reaction in someone we're speaking to, we don't realize that they're reacting to us. We think, instead, that they have strange speaking habits -- and are strange people. The New Yorkers never suspected why the Californians stopped. All they could see was that they kept hesitating and not getting on with their talk

#### INTONATION

Another level of difference is intonation; here I will borrow an example from the work of John Gumperz, a famous analyst. There were complaints about rudeness by cafeteria employees from India and Pakistan who had been hired for jobs traditionally held by British women in London's Heathrow Airport employee cafeteria. The Asian women felt they were the object of discrimination.

When a customer coming through the cafeteria line requested meat, the employee had to find out if he wanted gravy on it. The British women asked, "Gravy?" The Asian women also said "Gravy,"



but instead of going up, their intonation went down at the end. During a workshop session, the Indian women said they couldn't see why they were getting negative reactions since they were saying the same thing as the British women. But the British Women pointed out that although they were saying the same word, they weren't saying the same thing. "Gravy?" -- with the question intonation means "Would you like gravy?" The same word spoken with falling intonation seems to mean, "This is gravy. Take it or leave it."

Tiny differences in intonation can throw an interaction completely off without the speaker knowing that something s/he said caused the problem. Intonation is made up of differences in pitch, loudness, and rhythm -- features of talk 'we use both to show how we mean what we say, and to express special meanings. Cultures differ in how they use these little signals both to do conversational business as usual, and also to express special meanings or emotions.

Gumperz has shown, for example, that whereas speakers of British English use loudness only when they are angry, speakers of Indian English use it to get the floor. So when an Indian speaker is trying to get the floor, the British speaker thinks s/he is getting angry -- and, gets angry in return. The result, both agree, is a heated inter-change, but each thinks the other introduced the emotional tone into the conversation.

#### **SOME HUMOROUS CROSS-CULTURAL ADVERTISING GAFFES**

- When Kentucky Fried Chicken entered the Chinese market, to their horror they discovered that their slogan "finger lickin' good" came out as "eat your fingers off"
- Chinese avoided Coca-Cola at first because the pronunciation of Coca-Cola gives the meaning "bite the tadpole" or "female horse stuffed with wax". Then Coke came up with "ko-kou-ko-le" which translates more appropriate "happiness in the mouth".
- The slogan of Pepsi "Pepsi brings you back to life" meant in Chinese language as "Pepsi brings your ancestors back from the grave".
- General Motors had a perplexing problem when they introduced the Chevy Nova in South America. Despite their best efforts,

they weren't selling many cars. They finally realized that in Spanish, 'nova' means 'it won't go'. Sales improved dramatically after the car was renamed as 'Caribe'.

There are many levels of differences on which cross-cultural communication can falter. When to talk, what to say, pacing and pausing, showing listenership, intonation, indirectness, and cohesion and coherence etc. are some of the points we observe in cross-cultural communication. This list also describes the linguistic ways that meaning is communicated in talk. This is no coincidence; Communication is by its very nature, culturally relative.

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