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Crosstalk and Communication Breakdown in Professional Interactions in English

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Abstract

This paper emphasizes the kinds of problems or crosstalk which arise in professional communication among non-native English users. It is assumed that professional type of discourse differs from talk in the private domain. This is because in the professional domain there is common knowledge and experience about a specific profession and mutual comprehension among members of a profession is based on shared concepts and terms. The concept of *crosstalk* [Harnisch, 2008] is used here to refer to the types of obstacles and communication breakdown when English is used by non-native speakers of the language. Three types of crosstalk in professional interactions are discussed. These arise from (1) mispronunciation; (2) conceptual misinterpretations and (3) semiotic interference.

Keywords: professional discourse, crosstalk, communication breakdown

1. Background to the study

Since the end of the Second World War, English has become widely used all over the world. Today it is the most functional working world language and is used in a wide number of professional sectors. About between 600,000 and one million people use English as a link language for communication in business and professional negotiations all over the world. This dominance of English is due to its dominance in various fields such as politics, technology and science in English speaking countries like the United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia. Globalization and technological advancement has also resulted in greater demand for English. The expansion of English to various parts of the world has resulted in many varieties of English and this has in turn resulted in crosstalk.

Each variety creates its own standard. For example American English has the General American (GE) as the standard while British English considers the Received Pronunciation (RP) as the standard. Other varieties have also developed their own standard English like standard Singapore English (SSE), standard Philippine English (PE) etc. These many varieties of Englishes have their own distinct linguistic and pragmatic features. Since every English variety is distinct in lexical, structural, prosodic and pragmatic features, problems in miscommunication and misunderstanding occur. Non-native speakers of English display L1 influence in the L2 English that they use. Apart from L1 influence cultural norms also affect the forms of certain speech acts. Typologically, different languages impose certain types of interference. In short, such use of regional varieties of English can lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation when people using different varieties of English communicate. Misuse of English by non-native English speakers can be considered as crosstalk.

Misunderstanding can occur because of LI interference which influences the speaker's pronunciation, syntax, grammar and even pragmatics. Crosstalk may also arise due to variations in accent, intonation, pause, volume and timbre. Typologically grounded peculiarities of accent and influence of native languages can produce misunderstanding among non-native speakers of English. Misunderstanding may also arise due to non-verbal codes in one culture being understood differently by another culture.

To overcome the barriers in communication among professionals for whom English is not the first language, communicative strategies are used (see David, 1992 on communicative strategies in courts and David and Govindasamy 2002 on communicative strategies and cross-cultural awareness for Business English). One effective communicative strategy is the use of code switching and shifting. Jacobson (1990) discusses overt models of shifts and discusses their reasons, aims and effects on comprehension of a communicative act (see also David 2003 for existence and reasons for code switching in law courts in Malaysia). Verbal discourse amongst professional can display two models of code switching: the *overt* – in the case of multilinguals as they shift from one language or dialect to another (see McLellan and David, 2007) and *covert* – as a result of interference of a native language into a second language.

Professional discourse tends to be less obscure than private talk due to (1) common professional concepts; (2) shared thesaurus; (3) general basic professional competence and (4) professional practical experience of communicants as members of the same profession. Mutual understanding among communicants is argued to be higher in the case of professional discourse than in private discourse within a common link of a one-language speaking community.

This study aims to determine the nature of the problems that arise in professional communication when English is used by professionals for whom English is a foreign or second language.

1.1 The concept of crosstalk

The concept of *crosstalk* (Harnisch, 2008) is here used to encompass different types of obstacles in communication in the English used by non-native speakers of the language. *Crosstalk* is used here as a metaphor to define obstacles in talk which lead to misunderstanding.

The hypotheses concerning possible linguistic, social, cognitive and communicative grounds of crosstalk resulting in variability of meanings and their interpretations that occur in professional talks can occur as a result of:

- i. mispronunciation and/or spoken mistakes at phonetic/phonemic levels due to language interference;
- ii. conceptual misinterpretations of the same terms due to knowledge interference at the semantic level and
- iii. semiotic interference due to ethno-cultural values of a sign's meaning.

2. Methodology

The goal of the study is to analyze talk in a professional sphere when English is used by

interlocutors for whom English is not a native language.

The principles and methods of collection and analysis of spoken data can be called integrative. This is because various methods encompassing discourse analysis, psychological testing known as associative analyses and linguistic methods of description and comparison of factual data have been used so as to represent data in the forms of oppositions at various levels of language. We collected the factual data that led to crosstalk, for instance, crosstalk due to mispronunciation and crosstalk due to misinterpretation of terms and words borrowed from different languages.

3. Findings

From the interviews it was found that there are three forms of crosstalk:

- i. *lingual interference* (being influenced by one's native language);
- ii. *the conceptual interference* (under some influence of education and professional knowledge);
- iii. *semiotic or cognitive interference* (due to various socio-cultural backgrounds).

3. 1 Linguistic interference is the interference of the native language on English at the level of pronunciation. A linguistic interference due to mispronunciation could lead to misunderstanding. See Example 1.

Example 1. A Japanese M., a student, 22, called **walt** [borotu]

M.: It is hundered tuenity borotu

This is due to Japanese phonetic interference. In the Japanese language consonants [w], [v] and [b] have no semantic value and can be used as substitutes for each other in a word. The same is true of Japanese consonants [r] and [l]. Since Japanese avoid the consonants junctures there is a vowel between the last two consonants.

When this lexical item was tested only the Japanese could recognize the word **[BOROTU]** as the English **Walt**.

Example 2. An Azeri S. (34, male, an operator) mispronounced an English word screw as **[esekerevu]** in a talk with a German operator **F.** (23, male). S. pronounced the English word ice-cream as **[aijsekerim]**.

S: I have two screws **[esekerevvu]** here. Do you see it?

F.: I do not know. What does your **esekerevu** look like? Is it Russian ice-cream?

S.: I know ice-cream **[aijasekerim]**. It is sweet. I eat it. Nobody can eat screw **[esekerevu]**. It is metal. Ha-ha! It is a good joke.

Example 3: Filipino-Malaysian encounters in a professional setting

A Filipino engineer was asked by his Malaysian colleague to check if his car keys were in the office.

ME- Can you check my car key (kaki) in the drawer?

FE-What kaki?

ME- Car key (kaki) - it's in the drawer

FE-I'm sorry there is no kaki
ME- (opened the drawer and showed him the car key) It's here.
FE- You mean car key and not kaki!

Miscommunication between the two speakers for whom English is not a first language is evident. Mispronunciation of words like "kaki" for car key could not be understood by the Filipino hearer. The immediate understanding of any Filipino of the word as it was pronounced is a color which is "khaki".

Example 4 shows that mispronunciation of words may result in misunderstanding or miscommunication between the two interlocutors like saying "clandestin" instead of "clandestine".

Example 4

In Malaysia, the head of security when informing university staff says "clandestin" instead of "clandestine"

3.2. Semantic interference may occur mainly in cases when two languages share the same international term or a word (a) that has different meanings in these languages (see Example 2) and/or in a case when semantic fields of one and the same word do not coincide in these languages (Examples 5 and 6):

Example 5. Russian word *конкретный* [kon'kretnyj] means 'actual', 'urgent'. The English word **concrete** means 'material for building.' A Russian idiom *конкретные проблемы* when translated into English becomes '*some actual problems*' but not '*some concrete problems.*'

Example 6. An English sentence *He has good command of English* means '*He has good knowledge of English*'. Its correct Russian translation is *Он хорошо знает английский язык.* [*On horosho znajet anglijskij jazyk*].

Semantic fields of English *command* and Russian *команда* do not coincide. The English lexical item *command* has several meanings including 'possession' which is not presented in the semantic field of the Russian noun *команда* [komanda]. A native speaker of Russian who knows only two meanings of the word *command* (a) 'a team' and (b) *order* could mistranslate the English sentence *He has good command of English* into Russian as *У него хорошая английская команда* [*u nego horoshaja anglijskaja komanda*] which means *He has a good trained English team of players.*

3.3. Interference of cognition can occur due to one's interpretation of concepts and terminology used in various professions. A transfer of a term from one branch of science to another can lead to cognitive terminological or/and conceptual interference (Example 7):

Example 7. The biological term **tolerance** has been introduced into (1) the economy to mean 'certain limits of deviations in size and weight of a coin'; (2) social science to mean 'understanding attitudes to variables in behavior of aliens', etc.

A number of semi-official terms are introduced as a metaphor that can be either shared or not by

experts; R&Ds and professionals with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Example 8).

Example 8. A military term is used to mean certain type of microphone, as e.g., Russian **пушка** [pushka] means ‘cannon, gun’ has become a semi-professional term for a huge type of microphone.

Example 9: An interaction between two colleagues a Filipino and a Malaysian Chinese (MC).

MC-Would you like to follow?

F- Yes, sure.

MC-Then come and we will go

F-But you told me to just follow, so I am thinking of going into the next car.

MC-(laugh) No lah, follow me means you go with me.

The occurrence of crosstalk in professional discourse between the two interlocutors who come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds is evident. Although, English is used this does not guarantee mutual comprehension between the interlocutors. The same lexical item has a different meaning for one of the speakers. In the Malaysian context when a person says “You follow me” it means you should accompany the speaker but it has a different meaning in the Philippine context “You follow me” means someone should go first then the other follows (Example 10).

Example 10. An interaction between the HR (Malaysian) who is the Dean of the faculty and the head of the department HOD (Filipino) about the use of a cubicle.

HR – If I am not mistaken you have provided Mr. P a cubicle in your office.

HOD- Yeah, actually he is already occupying one of the cubicles in the office.

Dean- Why are you giving that cubicle to the lecturer when in fact our senior lecturers do not even have their own cubicles?

HOD-I’m sorry but we have a lot of available cubicles in our department. The cubicles are outside my office.

HR- Do you mean an open space?

HOD-Those are cubicles, that’s how we call it in the Philippines.

Dean-We call it in Malaysia an open space and not a cubicle.

In the conversation, crosstalk occurs due to linguistic interference. The word “cubicle” has different meanings in Malaysia and the Philippines. In Malaysia, a cubicle is a very small room. However, in the Philippines it refers to any small space which in Malaysia is called an open space. It is evident that due to different linguistic terms miscommunication occurs.

3.4. Cognitive or socio-cultural interference in a professional sphere can occur due to different origins of special terms as used by non-native speakers of English. One can meet **duplets** (Example 11) **and triplets** (Example 12) of the same term which are the result of different origins of a term.

Example 11. Duplets: In Europe the words **benzene** and/or **petroleum** is in Russian [benzin] and English **oil**. Americans call it **gas**. There is a well known story how German spies were caught in the USA during the Second World War merely because they asked for **BENZENE** and not **GAS** at the petrol station.

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Example 12. Triplets in Azeri: *tezlik /chastota / frekvinsi* for “frequencies”.
Tezlik is Azeri. **Chastota** comes from Russian. **Frekvinsi** is borrowed from English.

Other causes of misunderstanding arise due to cultural misunderstanding. In Example 13, misunderstanding between the caller and the receiver occurs because of cultural misunderstanding. In the Philippine context it is considered unprofessional and impolite if a caller asks for the name of the person who picks up the phone. It is understood that once you make a call you already know who you are calling. In the eventuality that the person whom the caller intended to talk is not around only then can he or she ask the person’s name. However, in the Malaysian context when a caller asks the name of the person he or she calls this is acceptable. In this example, the occurrence of misunderstanding between the caller and the receiver is rooted in the interlocutors’ cultural backgrounds. Due to different cultural practices problems in communication occur.

Example 13

A phone call was received by a Filipino lecturer from a Malaysian office staff (M)

J- Hello, English department, this is Jane, may I help you?

M- Who’s this?

J-I’m sorry, by the way who are you? Could you please state your name? You are not supposed to ask me who I am because you are the caller.

Different Englishes have different lexical items as shown in Example 14. The lexical items and phrases like “blow out, comfort room, happy room and for your information” are only understood in a specific culture. Some English lexis in the outer and expanding circles can only be understood by members of a specific speech community. When these words are used in cross-cultural encounters crosstalk may occur.

Example 14

The word “blow out” in the Philippines means “treat” and “comfort room” refers to “toilet”.
The word “happy room” in Thailand means “toilet.”

The phrase “want to have a word with you” in British English has the connotation of having something not so pleasant to talk about which however is literally understood in the Malaysian context.

“For your information” is literally translated from Malay “untuk maklumat anda” which sounds rude in English especially when used to a superior

3.5. Non-verbal and Verbal Symbols

In order to indicate toilet rooms two types of symbols are used: verbal and nonverbal. In England, Europe and Russia of the 19th century verbal symbols were used since toilets rooms were made for genteel and rich persons who were expected to be literal. In the 20th century nonverbal symbols came into usage. This was because there was an increase of international contacts in business, trade and tourism. Nowadays more often both types of signs, i.e. verbal and non-verbal are used.

In the English speaking countries the words “Ladies” and “Gentlemen” are used as lexical items to signal toilets for females and males. Sometimes abbreviations like “He” or ‘She’ are used in contemporary India. In the Philippines, the term *comfort room* is used. A foreign language can cause difficulties cross-culturally. For example, in German speaking countries a German word “Herren” is used to mean ‘toilet for men’. However, it seems close in appearance to ‘Her’ in English. The word “Damen” is used to mean ‘toilet for ladies’ in Germany. It can also be confusing for English speakers when this is sometimes presented with its abbreviation as a Latin letter i.e. “D” An Australian student Peter and his German friend Oscar make a joke about German abbreviations of H and D for toilets in the University Campus (Example 15).

Example 15. Peter: When I first come to your Campus I was shocked to see boys coming out of the toilet room with a letter H. I thought it is for HER.

Oscar: Really? Did you take them to a letter D for gentlemen [dzentlemen] and visit it? It could be dangerous.

Peter: Does D mean “danger” in German?

Oscar: Ha-ha-ha! It means Damen... I mean that our Damen could break your head if you go there.

In Example 15 a German word Damen is used in an English sentence. This is an example of code switching, i.e. the introduction of a foreign word in order to explain meaning. Oscar’s joke is based on the sound of the English word gentlemen [dzhentlmen] starting with [d].

In Russia the Russian letters M [m] and Ж [zh] are used as abbreviations to symbolise gender. The letter M is for мужской [muzhskoj] to mean ‘man or male’ and the Russian letter Ж is for женский [zhensky] to mean ‘female, lady’. A Russian student recalled the following which she experienced in Moscow (Example 7):-

Example 16. Olga S. from Tula (Russia) told to her American friend: “Russian letter **M** posted in the streets of Moscow has two meanings. One is for Metro, a subway. The other is for males’ toilet. Be careful. Once I was looking for Metro station and there was a letter M. So I follow people going there. Can you imagine how I was shocked when I saw that it is toilet for men? Shame!

4. The results of finding (Statistics data)

From the corpus of 400 examples of crosstalk by non-native speakers of English who use English in their work place it was found that there are four forms of crosstalk: (1) lingual (e.g., one’s accent in English); (2) conceptual; (3) semiotic; and (4) pragmatic. Among 400 cases of crosstalk in professional talk in English used by nonnative speakers, the number of conceptual examples of crosstalk is minimal (2%) and the number of examples of semiotic crosstalk is 8%. Pragmatic crosstalk (30%) is due to many types of communicative behavior (60%) and/or various interpretations of a message (40%). Lingual crosstalk (60%) is due to accent (70%), lexical and semantic interference (20%), grammar and syntax (10%) misuse of English.

Labor migration, an increase in the number of international organizations and transnational corporations has resulted in many workers from different countries working together. It is argued that English for professional purposes may overcome the lingual diversity of an international team. Results of the survey show that communication breakdown occurs due to misuse of

English by its nonnative speakers. Four forms of crosstalk: conceptual, semiotic, pragmatic and lingual are noted in the analysis. It can be summarized that crosstalk in English for professional purposes occur mainly due to lingual (60%) and pragmatic (30%) interference. Semiotic (8%) and conceptual (2%) crosstalk seldom occur when English is used as a working language by non-native speakers (Harnisch, 2008).

5. Conclusion

The development of different varieties of English known as being used in the inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle lead to differences in pronunciation, meaning and cultural interpretation. The differences in English can sometimes result in crosstalk in professional communication in situations where English is spoken as second or foreign language. In professional discourse, crosstalk occurs either at the lexical, semantic and cultural aspects of the language. It can be summarized that crosstalk could be influenced by linguistic features like (1) *lingual interference* (being influenced by one's native language); (2) *conceptual interference* (under some influence of education and professional knowledge); and (3) *semiotic or cognitive interference* (due to various socio-cultural backgrounds).

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