Emerging Paradigms in Language Communication in India and Their Impact on the Corporate Competencies

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Regional Varieties of English in India

With the changing contours of the corporate culture, language barriers also need to be checked. The Indian corporate now has to interact with the global players. There is no dearth of highly capable managers in India but communication plays a major role in negotiations and finalizing deals with international companies. We need to view the use of regional varieties of English in this context.

The Indian subcontinent has several regional varieties of English, each different from the other in certain ways and retaining, to some extent, the phonetic patterns of the Indian language spoken in that particular region. These regional varieties are sometimes not even mutually intelligible. We cannot, however, dismiss the reality that there are people who are successful in shaking off their regional accent and speak a more 'neutral' form of English. We can decipher 'good' and 'bad' English speakers depending on the degree of approximation to the native and Standard Indian English. It also refers to the qualities of clarity, effectiveness and intelligibility.

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Participation in a Communication Process

As communication is a dynamic and collaborative process, both communicator and communicate invariably contribute to any break through or slowdown. There are many roadblocks that make our communication slow and inefficient. There are seven major barriers that hinder a productive communication:

- Difference in perspective
- Differences in knowledge level
- Lack of common language
- Adoption of stereotypes
- Strong emotions
- Self- centeredness
- Laziness

Difference in Perspective

Several factors contribute to one's perspective: the socio- cultural milieu has its strong influence on one's perspective, interpersonal experiences, temperament, personality, values, and position in life, religious and political beliefs. This perspective works as a two-way filter. Our perception towards people and things are shaped by our personal and cultural experiences.

We can explain this with the help of an illustration. Parents have difficulty in understanding their own children, especially teenagers. In a way this is strange because the parents have been through the same stages. The perception of the parents change, they evaluate them with parental eyes. They expect to see their offspring displaying wisdom at that age which they themselves lacked but which they acquired later. They disapprove of several things that their children do. And the children, instead of listening to their parents as well wishers, respond by regarding them as people who are totally out of touch with reality. A huge gap grows between them - this is called generation gap.

Differences in perspectives are probably the most treacherous of all communication roadblocks for they are difficult to detect. Everyone is convinced about their own world view. Scientists are supposed to be rational and are guided by their rationale which is based in hard facts. Thomas Kuhn in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1962-1970) documented how even the leading scientists tend to cling to their paradigms.

Difference in Knowledge

Learning is always an ongoing process and it is virtually limitless, an amorphous thing. It is said that it is impossible to learn everything but it is possible to learn something from everyone for everyone knows something.

If we evaluate the knowledge which is made available to us under the varied branches- take medicine for instance - Ayurveda, Allopathy, Homeopathy, Unani - all impart knowledge towards curing diseases, but there is contradiction in all of them. This is so because there are different levels and schools in each branch of medicine.

If we talk about communication, the difference in knowledge level does pose a hindrance for comprehension and application of thought process of an expert and average person. The problem may grow out of proportion if the communicator is unable to put across the concept within the limits of the comprehension level of the listener. If we talk from the corporate point of view, the company will also look for an expert who has a fair amount of knowledge on the deal that has to be finalized. If for any reason there is difference in knowledge level the whole project can run into trouble.

Failure in Vertical Communication

It is not only in scientific or technical fields that wide variation in knowledge levels causes communication problems. In an organization, vertical communication in both directions may get distorted because of serious differences in knowledge levels. The employees may not make sense of the statements of vision and mission emanating from the top management. Workers may disappoint the top management with their lack of response to something that, in the opinion of the management, deserves their enthusiastic acceptance. This lack of interest was purely because of lack of understanding.

Lack of Common Language

The Indian subcontinent has numerous languages and dialects. The language, accent and dialect change after every 100 miles or so. People who speak the same language may experience difficulty when faced with different varieties associated with different knowledge systems. For instance, if a South Indian is made to listen to a discourse in Hindi, which happens to be an alien language for him since he has never been made to learn, there are bright chances that he may not pick up a single syllable, and hence understanding the concept is definitely a far cry. If we take up the case of the Indian Corporate, if a Spanish or Latin American company is the client and it deals in IT equipment, the company will have to arrange for either an interpreter or look for an in-house expert in the Spanish language.

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In addition to the fact that even the same people who speak the same language may experience difficulty when faced with different knowledge systems, the language of law, the language of computer software, the language of commerce, etc. - all have common words but they acquire new meanings if they are used as part of a particular profession or trade. Such words form a stumbling block in communication.

Tendency to Adopt Stereotypes and Jump to Conclusions

By birth an individual is unique in many ways. Later his environment, his friends, his caste, his profession, social status and experiences classify him in a category. This categorization helps others to understand him and treat him accordingly. Our notions of these categories guide at least our initial behavior. In the long run these categories turn into stereotypes. For instance, politicians are stereotyped to be manipulative, calculative and cold blooded; we somewhere deny the space to the people who are "unclean" as far as image goes, and yet we declare our willingness to work for the betterment of the people. We can categorically say that stereotypes simplify complexities of social life.

Such notions do affect the communication with the individuals we meet. Once our notions are built around stereotypes, we jump to conclusions fast. Such conclusions may not do justice with the individual who has been stereotyped.

Strong Emotions

Man is an emotional being and emotions can play havoc in our lives if unchecked. Strong emotions can make us turn blind eye towards things and situations that exist. They can affect the verbal and nonverbal symbols. We may use right words, but due to our strong emotions we may contradict through non verbal communication-the person to whom we are supposed to convey, will get mixed reactions. He will not be in a position to understand the meaning of the confused communication. Those who know us may learn to ignore these gestures but people, who are new to us, might be in a dilemma to understand what is being said to them. This situation is very common in corporate world where work pressure is high and time is less, stakes are high and brand value is at stake. Communication, if hampered, can be harmful to the company and the individual as well.

Self-centeredness

Man is emotional and egocentric being. There is nothing unusual in thinking about oneself and looking out for one's self interest. But, here too, certain limits need to be taken care of. We accept the fact that we cannot keep our interests at bay and look at the world objectively. The problem starts when we start thinking and protecting our own self interest and forget that it is not possible to promote our interests in isolation. We need to believe that man is social animal also.

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Enlightened self interest clearly perceives the need for appreciating and protecting others' interests. Crude self interestedness will not think this way. Unbridled self interestedness makes us blind just as strong emotions do. Self-centeredness makes us believe that others enjoy what we enjoy, others attach the same value to things we things we treasure and if they disagree with us they show their foolishness. Such measures distorts the communication that is about to take place. We are unable to see things impartially and it makes us myopic. On the other hand, some of us can see the speck in others eyes but cannot see beam in their own eyes. Varying degree of self centeredness can seriously weaken our role as communicator and communicatee.

Plain Laziness

To be a communicator is a tough job. It requires a lot of hard work. Even passive work of listening requires active work. Communication is hard work because of its inferential nature, because of the uncertainty about the meaning of the symbols, and because of the various constellations of symbols employed in each act of communication. But most of us allow the laziness to creep in. While preparing a speech we take little care as to find out the intellectual bent of mind of the audience, what kind of illustrations will be suitable to be quoted in the speech to make it lively.

In fact, it is laziness at the root of our general reluctance to write as well. We find it difficult to write down and elaborate the language symbols to make up for the inevitable absence of several helpful non-verbal symbols and instance feedback- the characteristics of face - to -face communication. Our choice of an inappropriate channel or our failure to display stems largely from our laziness. We may display the symbols that come naturally to us rather than seek out the ones that will make sense to the communicatee.

Emerging Paradigms to Overcome the Road Blocks

Oscar Wilde once said, "I can resist everything except temptation" has relevance in terms of temptation for sloppiness in communication. It may be business communication, verbal communication, drafting of business letters, memos, minutes or inter office communication, we usually display a cavalier approach in our communication. Though we do agree that no one can be perfect communicator or communicatee but there are paradigms that can be employed to overcome the sloppy mode of communication.

If we talk from the Indian perspective, we are a nation with diverse cultures, rituals, language, castes and creed. Communication is definitely a stumbling block for us, but still there are measures that can enhance the linguistic competencies.

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Get to Know People We Communicate With

Sometimes statements or symbols do not have a fixed meaning. For example, if we give cash to someone and he says, "I will return the money on the first of the following month." He may mean that I will get back the money in a few days or that I should forget about the money. In this situation it may be advisable to have certain knowledge about the speaker. It is the same type of knowledge about the communicatee that helps us to determine what kind of symbols should be put forth to have a reasonable amount of chance to infer roughly what we actually want.

If we talk from the corporate point of view, it is paramount for us to identify what kind of person is our boss. Is he a verbal person or visual person? Would he act faster on a memo or a phone call? Would a colleague like to work alone or in a group? Would he require detailed written instructions or just the goals to be achieved?

If we understand the nuances of communication, we will be able to strike a balance and communication will become easy. We are too engrossed in our own world and there is little time to understand the people around us. The practical question that comes to our mind is: There are billion people in our country, leave alone the world – Is it practical to know so many people? How can we understand them? How will we know about their interests, likes and dislikes?

The answer to this question is affirmative. We need not know billion people but we need to communicate in a meaningful way with people like - friends, relations, neighbours, co-workers, superiors, subordinates, customers and so on. We should not have superficial knowledge but instead have deeper knowledge of the dreams, ambitions and aspirations of those people.

Are there any risks in doing so? The answer is yes. We may be influenced by the information. Our orientation towards the communicatee might change. That might be uncomfortable and unsettling. It is surprising but true that we know very little about the people we work with us. Our communication with them is shallow. That is why occasionally our calculations about them go wrong giving us both pleasant surprises and rude shocks.

Knowing the people we communicate with is a slow continuous process because everyone is undergoing continual change. Their perceptions change, values change, knowledge also changes. We have to keep up with these possibilities.

Looking through Other's Perspective

Looking through other's perspective is the hardest thing. Though it is against our instincts, this is a mantra that good communicator and communicatee use. We do agree that our perceptions grow from our roles and experiences. Getting into somebody's shoes is not easy - when a fifty year old

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man says he cannot understand his teenage daughter, the problem is not of language but that of perception. The man is unable to put aside the baggage he has acquired in the last five decades. His concerns and anxieties are no more those of a teenager. His wisdom has grown over fifty years. She cannot accept his wisdom. She is convinced that his wisdom is old fashioned, irrelevant. She is sure that he does not possess any idea of what is a teenager now. With neither side unwilling to see things from other's perspective, there will be a communication gap.

Looking at the things from the other's perceptive does not mean that we accept it. It means that we respect differences. Once we respect the differences we find it easier to understand the symbols they put up to communicate with us. Choosing the right symbols to display our meaning also becomes easier. On the whole it makes communication easier and on target. Trying to look at things from others perceptive prevents us from jumping to unfair and unsustainable conclusion.

Seek and Offer Feedback

''If anything can go wrong, it will" states one of Murphy's Law. This law is more applicable to communication. The very nature of communication invites misunderstanding. Only a fool will be sure that he is very good in communication, that he understands everyone well, and that everyone understands him without difficulty!

One of the ways to do this is to seek feedback, not only asking others what they have understood the presentation correctly. This, of course, has to done tactfully. When you give a child two or three instruction, it may be all right to put them in his own words what he is going to do. Such an approach would, however, insult a colleague. He might think that you treat him like a moron. More indirect feedback is called for in this situation.

When you are given complex instructions or explanations, it is useful to rephrase in your own words what they have told you and then ask if you have understood them correctly. This is really offering you feedback. Public speakers often rephrase their questions from the floor and check to avoid embarrassment of being told at the end of elaborate answer, '' That is not what I asked.''

Offering your feedback as a way of checking if the communication has been reasonably successful can take many shapes. You might offer to summarize a discussion at the end as a form of feedback. You might repeat the decisions at the end of negotiations. Minutes of meetings are a form of written feedback. You might repeat the decisions taken at the end of negotiations. Minutes of the meetings are a form of written feedback to all the attendees. Follow- up action also is another form of offering feedback. Seeking and offering feedback are essential safeguards against miscommunication.

Choose the Right Medium, the Right Channel

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There are three types of medium of communication - spoken, written and non-verbal. There are several channels: face-to-face, one-to-one, and one-to-many (public speaking), telephonic conversation, word of mouth, radio, television, video, letters, memos, notes, e-mail, newspaper, billboards and so on. Choice of the wrong medium or the wrong channel or both can ruin communication. If we take the spoken medium, it is not appropriate when detailed and accurate information, instructions or descriptions have to pass on. Many technical presentations without visual aids leave the audiences bewildered and confused. The presenters fail to communicate well because they have used a wrong medium.

Even simple instructions or directions can confuse a communication if there are several of them and they are given orally. Relative complex written instructions how to operate a machine may confuse a reader unless a demonstration or at least illustrations accompany them. In other words some communication needs multimedia involvement to be effective.

A wedding invitation card may not be taken as genuine invitation if not accompanied by an oral invitation given at the invitees place. A card that is not supported by the telephonic invitation if not face-to-face –may be understood nothing more than just information.

A notice put up at the bulletin board does not carry the same message as does individually distributed memo with the same text. Especially those occupying higher positions in an organization never stop to look at the notice board. Announcements at the notice boards have rarely had same level of importance as notes sent to them individually. So economizing on stationery will be unwise if the message is unwise if the message is important and is intended to reach everyone in the organization.

In organizations, vertical and horizontal movement of messages through the oral medium can cause severe distortions. So it would be wise on our part to choose the medium and channels for our messages.

Be a Careful Listener

The requisite of becoming a good orator is to a good listener. Ability to listen actively and emphatically is essential for becoming a good speaker. Listening provides feedback or vital clues how the communicatee is restructuring one's message. Even when the knowledge and language are required to holding the audience, other factors such as hostility, indifference, pre occupation, distractions can prevent the process. A good communicator is a good listener. He adjusts and readjusts the constellation of symbols depending on the feedback he gathers through simultaneous listening.

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Mark McCormack, author of the celebrated book, *What TheyDon't Teach You at Harvard Business School*, puts listening at the top of the essential qualities a manager needs in order to be successful.

The ability to listen, really to hear what someone is saying has far greater business implications, of course, than simply gaining insight into people. In selling, for instance, there is probably no greater asset. But the bottom line is that almost any business situation will handled differently, and with different results, by someone who is listening and someone who isn't (p.8)

In fact, five out of McCormack's seven-step plan (pp.22-24) is about listening: listen aggressively: observe aggressively: talk less: take a second look at first impressions and be detached (to heighten your powers of observations.)

Plan Your Communication Carefully, Especially the Difficult One

If communication is a leap in the dark, it is but natural that we miss the mark from time to time. Therefore it is imperative that we plan it as well as we can. There is no guarantee that we can put up the right symbols for the communicatee to recreate our message without serious distortions. Planning helps us reduce instances of gross mismatch between what we display and what the communicatee really wants.

Planning is asking ourselves what would be the best constellation of symbols for a given communicatee or group of communicatee to reconstruct our message from the minimum distortion. We might not always get the right answer but it is always worth trying, such as in difficult circumstances like public speaking and writing. Absence of feedback renders those situations dicey.

Planning is twofold- long term and short term. The long term process is essentially perfecting an approach to the people we need to communicate with. It consists of it consists of taking interest in them, in learning about them and learning tom look at things from their perspective. It is getting out cozy, egocentric world and getting into the world of the people we need to communicate with.

The short term approach is specific to the act of communication. It consists of asking ourselves specific question about the possible symbols to display for a given act of communication. Overconfidence and a cavalier approach are sure to lead to minor and major communication disasters.

The French queen Antoinette wondered why people around her clamored for bread didn't try cake. The ignorance and pathetic naiveté and ignorance shock us. The long term approach towards better communication is to make a habit to take interest in and get to know people we

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need to communicate with. Communication is therefore, hard work. If we talk about corporate competencies, we are forced to work with a variety of people- customers, co-workers, superiors, subordinates and public.

The emerging paradigms will definitely help us come across the hindrances in our day –to-day situations in our professional as well as personal life. Strong communicative skills will see us through   in   rough   weather   as   well   as   in   comfortable   times.

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