Communicating Cross-Culturally:
A Case for Multi-Modal Understanding

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Abstract

The paper argues that cross-cultural language use and communication is a multilayered and complex phenomenon. It can be traced at all levels of cultural organization of social groups and at all levels of their languages. The paper focusing mainly on language explains how the worldviews of cultural groups vary at the lexical, grammatical and speech act levels of languages.

Keywords: Language, culture, cross-cultural communication

Language and culture are related as the centres of energy for each other. Halliday views culture as a set of semiotic systems (Halliday 1976; Halliday & Hasan 1985) and these semiotic systems are interrelated. Language is a socio-semiotic process and praxis evolved, used and codified within and for a culture to be. Language is one of the modes, but the one which is the most manifest, of making meanings for the members of a cultural group to relate themselves to each other in as many ways as there are the contexts. Thus, every text that we use for communication has in the background a 'CONTEXT OF CULTURE'. Every text is coded and decoded within its 'immediate context of situation' as it is the context which brings its meanings to the ground by placing it in space (here) and time (now) but a context of situation that lets text to be what it is (usable for communication) is not characterized by a "random jumble of features but a totality… of things that go together in the culture" (Halliday and Hasan 1985,1989: 46).

Working as the non-verbal environment for text to be a tangible mode of communication, the context of situation and culture together and simultaneously determine the text but once a text becomes recognizable system of communication it also determines the context. Thus "…the text creates the context as much as context creates the text" (Halliday and Hasan 1985,1989: 47). Some texts gain more manifest identity of structure as they get privileged for some roles and communication within the socio-cultural contexts while other texts get more fluid structures with hybridity as a norm than an exception;

yet all texts have some identifiable relation with cultural contexts. The culturally determined contextual configurations and sequential structures of texts i.e. genres of texts (Halliday 1985, Martin 1986) pair with each other attaching some elements of predictability to the communication. "'Genres [of texts] are classified according to their social purpose and identified according to the stages they move through to attain their purpose. Purpose is theorized here as a cultural category…" (Knapp and Watkins 2005, 2010: 22). In that sense even what is known as 'phatic communion' is also purposeful as the use of language for contact with others is also a purpose. So, purpose is not defined as a referential function of language. So, some or the other purpose is served in all the senses Roman Jakobson develops his functional model of communication. So, purpose is social and cultural rather than informational aspect of communication.

Since communication is purpose defined, it is bounded with culture. But no culture is homogeneous in absolute terms. There are layers of social groups within a culture constituting subcultures. Some cultural groups are closer to more powerful, dominant & specialized domains and related genres in a culture, while others are at a distance. Those at a distance are familiar with the text types that they are exposed to and hence they fail to communicate appropriately and effectively in the powerful and dominant domains of culture. To enter the *privileged, powerful, advanced, and ahead of others* contexts of culture they have to learn the required genres in a language and culture. This aspect of language use is comparable to cross cultural aspects of language learning and communication when the language users are said to be using the same language. For example, the genre of research writing for speakers of a tribal language as well as working class slum dwelling speaker of English is a matter of cross-cultural learning. What I am trying to argue is that firstly cross -cultural aspect of language use in particular has to be understood as more extensively layered and pervasive. It is not just a situation of 'native and non-native but also a situation of native and native. In the same way the situations of communication and texts of linguistic communication may differ not as different genres but as sub-varieties within the same genre. Language use being cultural praxis (Kaplan 1966, Connor 1996, Moreno 1997) differs in rhetorical patterns which weave texts of the same genre.

Secondly the cross-cultural dimension of language manifests in different and/or variable choices of lexico-grammatical resources to conceptualise and represent meanings (reality), both real and imagined, that we propose to represent and assess in our communication. "The vocabulary of a language provides an interesting reflection of the culture of the people who speak it, since it is a catalog of things of import to a society, an index of the way speakers categorize experience…" (Troike 1996: 360).

Cultures categorise reality according to their non-similar world views and it is manifested in different languages through their lexico-grammatical resources. For example, in English the weather is represented with the pronoun (inanimate) *it* identified/ related through a process *be* with an attribute *hot* and the circumstance of time *today* in the following example:

It is hot today.

From the structural/ compositional point of view the pronoun *it* in the above example is categorized as 'empty' *subject* (see Quirk et. al. 1985) and the adjective *hot* can be described as in the *predicative* position. But in terms of meaning, the adjective in the *predicative* position has the function of identifying the *subject* by highlighting one of its attributes. Further, we cannot construe an attribute in a statement without relating it to a THING (noun). Hence in the above example the pronoun *it* cannot be understood as 'empty' without any reference in the reality of experience. We can cite a question to which the above example could be the answer:

How is the weather today?
It is hot.

In fact, in the absence of any anaphoric/ cataphoric reference for the pronoun *it,* there is a sporadic reference from the situation, as they in the western context refer to weather recurrently at various places and times when there is nothing else to talk about even. While discussing different process types and representational meanings in clause, Halliday and Mathiessen point out: "On the borderline between the 'existential' and the 'material' …some [clauses] are construed as relational attributes: *it's foggy/cloudy//misty/hot*/ humid/sunny/frosty; here, the *it* can be interpreted as Carrier [weather] , since it is possible to substitute the weather, the sky, or the (time of) day" (2004: 258).But there is an interesting aspect of such encoding of weather cross-culturally in different languages. In the English language THING (possessor) and ATTRIBUTE are viewed as separate and in a relational clause represented as related with the use of PROCESS (verb) *be.*

But unlike the English language which represents 'weather' and its 'attribute' as separate entities the Punjabi language represents 'weather' and its 'attribute' as syncretised and single synthesized entity:
ajgarmi   he
/əj gərmi hæ/
Today heat be (is).

In Punjabi 'weather' is not directly represented but indirectly represented by changing an ATTRIBUTE (adjective) into a THING (noun) in an existential clause where the attribute and the possessor of the attribute conflate. Since the THING is characterized by its attribute of being *hot,* it is self-explanatory that if the THING exists its attributes will also be functional. In spoken informal Punjabi it is possible to say
 'bari garmi he'
 very hot be (is)
 /bəɽi gərmi hæ/

without using the circumstance of time and yet making a full/ major clause. But we cannot make a full clause in English without using either the pronoun *it* referring to (weather) and/or circumstance of time *today*. Although in the Punjabi language it is possible to say-
 aj mausam garm he-
/ əj mɔsəm gərm hæ/

It is rather rare and stylistic. The Punjabi word *mausam* is tentatively for both the English words *weather* and *season*. So as a reference to the season the word *garmi* is used in its plural form *garmian* /gərmia/ with mausam in a possessive relationship constituting a noun phrase –garmian da mausam- where *garmian* is Classifier but not Attributive. The use of plural form of the noun *garmi* in Punjabi represents *mausam* as season in the sense of successive reoccurrence of weather continued over a period of time whereas English has the word season different from weather.

In Russian the same reality is experienced and represented still differently with an adverb- yarka:
Sivodnya yarka - Сегодня жарко
/ s̪ʲ ɨˈvodn̪ʲ ə ˈz̪a̝rkə/

Adverb groups are used to represent circumstance attending on the process. Thus, Russian language represents weather as a circumstance of manner i.e. Today the weather is hotly or hot like.

It is the temperature of the day that is hot like and the temperature of the day construes weather for the Russian speakers. Else it may be interpreted as 'Today is hotly or hot like' where the circumstance of time i.e. *today* is in a Token-Value relationship with circumstance of manner 'hotly'. Thus, both the participants in the clause structure are circumstance realized by adverbs. Using the Systemic Functional Linguistics terminology, Circumstance of time and Circumstance of manner are represented as *Token* and *Value*. Or it could be interpreted as a process of existence *be* and an adverb *hot like*. Actually, it seems that the Russian language does not construe qualities as absolutes but as an ideal reference and its instances which are like that. This character of Russian does not limit to the references of weather only. We can trace similar world view in the Russian examples using *mozno* (можно).
 Можно войти?
/ m oz̪n̪ə vɐjˈtʲi/

It is not possible to translate Мне можно войти? as 'May I come in?' because *mozno* (можно) is not a modal verb but an adverb construing the meanings which are close to the modal meanings but not exactly the same. Moreover, adverb also assesses the meanings of verbs by telling their manner etc. So, it can be *Is it being likely to me to come in*?

Although as speech acts both in English and Russian these are acts of seeking permission but in the different modes of lexico-grammar. The English language represents the weather condition as a

quality/attribute placing weather and hot in token value relationship, Punjabi as a Thing as existing and Russian as time in the process of being in the manner of a quality.

Additionally, the conceptualization of which weather is hot also varies. In Britain and even in Russia too, the temperature at 20-25 can be conceptualised as hot but in Punjab it is hot only when temperature varies between 30 to 45.

Thirdly cultures differ in speech acts and so do languages and communication, for example, the act of naming (introducing) oneself. The act of an English speaker and a Punjabi speaker identifying himself/herself by his/her name is realised by a relational clause:
My name is David
mera nan devid he
/mera na ḏevɪḏ hæ/

In the English language and several other languages verbal process of assigning a sign to refer to an individual by the group is nominalised to conceptualise it as an entity/ thing (a sign) which can be possessed. But in the Russian language and most possibly in some other languages too the act of naming is a verbal process enacted by the people and the person named is the Target:
Meniya zavut Sasha
Меня зовут Саша: / mɨˈn̠ʲæ zɐˈvut ˈs̠aş̠ə/
 I am named Sasha

Moreover, naming itself is a semiotic activity of using a signifier to signify a person and this semiotic activity is performed by people other than the one who has that name. Actually, he is the entity signified by that name. It is because the career of the name may not necessarily have the attributes/ values that the name may otherwise have association with. Yet it is interesting that those who give him that name wish him to have all those values. That is why when some aspect of an individual's personality conflicts with his name, people make sarcastic or ironical comments as in the following Punjabi proverb:

Akhan da annah te nan nain sukh: Blind in eyes and the name is 'best and healthy eyes.'
The names of people being only semiotic are mostly arbitrary and these are given (uttered) by others; hence it is metaphorisation when we represent them as possessed i.e. the person has a name and the name is identified as x (Sasha).

The Russian language is closer to the practice of naming as semiotic activity as the Russian speakers will introduce themselves: *Menya zavut Sasha*. Its translation in English will be *I am called/ named or known as Sasha.* In some versions of Hindustani, the speaker will introduce themselves not as first person but as third person common noun *banda* (man) and say *Bande ko Ramzan kahtehain.*

Thus, the grammar of this Russian clause configures the meaning as a verbal process by others where the person introducing himself is the target of what others say about him. It is also possible to say in Russian- *Moya imia Sasha-* but this is not a very common expression. It is possible to conjecture that at some point in the history of the protolanguage telling one's name would be public construal rather than a private/individual construal and in some languages the verbal process (verb) of naming became a thing (noun) while in other languages such a construal was transported from languages in contact.

Consider a situation of conflict between the two people from different cultures as represented by Dorriss Lessing in her novel *The Grass is Singing*:

> He replied gently, to everything she said, 'Yes, missus; yes, missus,' not looking at her. It made her angry that he would never meet her eyes. She did not know it was part of the native code of politeness not to look a superior in the face; she thought it was merely further evidence of their shifty and dishonest nature.

Here not that there is difference of races/ cultures but of classes also. The white woman misunderstands a token of politeness used by a black man as his shifty and dishonest nature because in the white culture if the other person doesn't talk to you with a proper eye contact, it would mean that he is not sincere whereas in the other culture it would be impolite for a person of inferior status to talk with the eye contact with the person of a superior status. However, with continuous contact between the people of two cultures the behavior pattern construed by body language will change so will the linguistic construal of cultural behavior and so will the linguistic forms.

People/languages/cultures in contact are never immunized and insulated from each other. The languages are for various reasons pressured to create representational space for new meanings (contexts of situations and culture). For example, in Hindi the address for group of people by a speaker addressing them was *Bhayio aur behno* (brothers and sisters) is becoming *devio aur sajno* as a parallel to English *ladies and gentlemen* in impersonal and formal contexts of communication, the contexts which were not viewed and construed linguistically in Hindi.

The languages and its people and culture are also not in a relationship of neutrality with other languages and their people and cultures, but they are interactive in a variety of socio-political and cultural ways. The contemporary phase of civilization is faced with contradictory position of individual and social, heterogeneous and homogeneous, diverse and similar: a position of interculturalism and cross culturalism.

Languages and cultures differ and yet remain in a continuous though slow process of homogenization. But the processes of homogenization are much more complex than they look. Consider a passage from an Indian novel in English:

In Hasanpur wives used only pronouns to address their husbands [Hindi expression- *Voh* which means *he*]. The first months, eager and obedient as I was, I still had a hard time calling him [husband] Prakash. I'd cough to get his attention, or start with "Are you listening? Every time I coughed, he'd say, "Do I hear crow trying human speech? Prakash, I had to practice and practice… so I could say the name without gagging and blushing in front of his friends…" (Mukherji 1989; text in brackets and emphasis added).

The text above construes a cultural convention of *address* that the narrator (a married woman) follows as she is trained to do. As the convention of addressing and referring to their husbands by the married women using a pronoun rather than their proper names is accepted as 'natural' (social believed to be natural) by the narrator, it is difficult and a matter of conflict for her to address her husband by name. On the other hand, her husband educated in a different value system/ culture (Western culture) challenges her speech act of address by making a joke of it. Then with effort she learns to overcome the problem and resolve the conflict by using her own language with cross-cultural practice.

The culture makes the humans respond to the situations in a defined manner drawing lines to act, including speech acts, accordingly. But the lines, being arbitrary conventions of culture, can change when exposed to the cross-cultural contexts although they are experienced as real until there are strong reasons for change. The sociolinguistic practice in multilingual and multicultural situations thus presents very complex cross linguistic/ cultural scene. In spite of cross linguistic diversity and cross-cultural differences, negotiations, adjustments and compromises syncopate conflicts in communication. Learning other's language involves learning other's culture to varying degrees. The degree of learning that culture will depend on the purpose of learning the target language. Although culture seems to create boundaries by imposing limits on the world views and abilities of the people to relate to situations, the boundaries being fluid and fragile, it is possible for the human beings to relate to the situations. Although there are difficulties in communication the speakers and listeners manage to communicate cross-culturally. So, people can communicate despite the cultural differences as they attempt to grant concession to each other and share the work of communication between them. People may create barriers to communicate when the cultures are hierarchical and restrictive; when one group of people load the other group of people with their culture and create a situation of making it imperative for others to learn it for success. This can also happen even within the same language and same culture in the horizontal cross-cultural communication. The inter-language conflicts in terms of 'communication deficit' and attempts at conflict resolution to reduce the 'communication deficit' require learning and understanding at the levels such as language, layers of culture and behavior. Thus, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic communication requires understanding at multi semiotic modes simultaneously.

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