Language Contact - Misunderstanding, Confusion and Conflicts

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Abstract

This paper discusses the issue of language and culture with a focus on the culturally induced language misunderstanding, confusion, and conflicts as a result of the global language contact. By analyzing the relationship between language and culture, evidence is given to show the prominence of cultural issues in language contact. The central argument of the paper is the view that in terms of possession of culture, not all bilinguals are invariably to be bicultural and, thus, a transfer of the culture of one language into the other may very likely lead to language misunderstanding, confusion and even conflicts.

1. Introduction

Over the last century and increasingly since the Second World War, large-scale international migration has created within many nation-states additional diversities of communication situations, and during the last few decades the development of social intercourse and of mass media of various kinds has provided people from different countries more opportunities to communicate than ever before.

Linguistically, the consequence of massive migration and the social development are the increased number of bilinguals and cross-cultural contact and communication between members of groups from almost all the continents, some of whom have had no prior history of cultural contact with others. And then we should not be surprised to realize that such language contact has lead to misunderstanding, confusion and even conflicts among mixed language communities. The aim of this paper is to show that one of the reasons for such misunderstanding, confusion and conflicts may be the different cultures embodied in prospective participants with respect to fundamental linguistic issues. One such issue is the assumption that a bilingual person is invariably said to be bicultural.

In this paper I will try to show that a stance taken on this matter may lead to significant social consequences. Therefore, my focus is to elucidate the relationship

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between language and culture and to point out the dangers that ignorance of the culture differences in language communication may bring about.

2. Language versus Culture

It is generally believed that language and culture overlap extensively. The strongest kind of dependency of language on culture is the fact that language is itself a cultural entity. Conversely, the influence of language on culture is that, without language, a certain level of cultural knowledge or cultural development could never arise (Langacker, 1994: 30). Cognitive linguistic theories even recognize cultural knowledge as the foundation not just of lexicon, but central facts of grammar as well. At the same time, language is culturally transmitted and a primary vehicle for cultural interaction and transmission.

Having such acknowledge in mind, it can be easily accepted that knowing a language is a lot more than knowing the structure and even the meanings of expressions in the language. Knowledge of a language implies awareness of the totality of associations carried by expressions in the language, particularly in the context of situation and context of culture (Malinowski, 1935: 51-2; Firth 1957: 36).

Arising from this close bond between language and culture, no one can doubt the prominence of cultural issues in language contact-induced conflict world-wide. In English, when people make requests, they tend to make them indirectly. They generally avoid imperatives like "Tell me the time", which are direct requests, in preference for questions like "Can you tell me the time?" which are indirect requests (Clark & Schunk, 1980: 111). It is not people in general who behave in the ways described; it is the speakers of English. But there must be crosslinguistic differences in such requests directly all the time, and if they applied such characteristic of speech act in their own language unconsciously to English because of the ignorance of the English conversational conventions for human behavior in general, they could be possibly considered as lacking of politeness, which may imply future language conflict.

For instance, we hear other people ask questions that we would never think to ask, or answer the questions we ask in the ways that may seem to be quite inappropriate. There are areas in the world in which speakers can communicate reasonably easily with one another even though they claim to speak different languages (Wardhaugh,1993: 134), such as, Norway, Denmark and Sweden, or Serbia and Croatia, or Ukraine and Russia. The easy communication between them is not only because they have so many similarities of their different languages but also because they belong to the same cultural groups.

Turning to speakers belonging to different cultural groups, we will find that communication is no longer as easy as the case mentioned above. In discussing the communication problems in relation to language differences, Pederson (1983: 405) takes English and Chinese as an example and says the following:

Even when the words in Chinese and English were the same the contexts in which the words were interpreted were completely different. Some of the more common counseling words such as concern (e.g. I am concerned about you) simply do not exist in Chinese.

3. Bilingual versus Bicultural

On the other hand, arising from the close relation between language and culture, Christophersen (1973: 34) says:

It follows from what has been said a person who has successfully learnt a second language...will have come to possess not only two languages but also two cultures; he will be bilingual and bicultural.

If this is really the case that all bilinguals possess two cultures, it seems that a conclusion can be drawn as such: Bilinguals automatically belong to two cultures, or, in other words, they combine two distinct cultures. However, extensive investigations have already shown that bilingualism and biculturalism do not necessarily coexist (e.g. Haugen, 1956; Grosjean, 1982:157). Researches have shown an individual might retain the old culture and reject the new, or reject the old culture and replace it with the new, or retain the old culture and add the new (Keefe & Padilla, 1987). However, in the last case, the so-called a process of "being acculturated" is claimed to be unable to make the two cultures coexist within an individual at the same level (McFee, 1968).

In some countries like in the United states, where language shift takes place extremely quickly, many second language speakers or bilinguals such as second or third-generation immigrants may be found in some sense to be also bicultural. These bilinguals may be regarded as having possessed the culture of a second language in terms of Bamgbose's (1994) concept of bilingualism. However, in most of the places in the world, bilinguals use their second languages only in specific situations, that is, when their interaction with the world around them requires the use of second languages. Unavoidably they more often than not unconsciously transfer certain aspects of the culture of their first languages into the second, not to mention being unable to share the beliefs, attitudes, and habits of the two cultures. Such a bilingual should not be regarded as being bicultural beyond Bamgbose's (1994: 90), since his thinking itself is in his own language even when he speaks the second language. In such a case, most likely, a cultural norm of a second language can be wrongly interpreted by a bilingual in terms of the norms of his own culture. For example, there was an incident reported in Sukwiwat (1981) of a hostess in 1949 post-war southern England asking a foreigner guest on which day of the week he would like to have his bath. Although the guest understood every word of the question, he could not offer an answer, as the idea of a weekly bath was entirely alien to his culture.

Besides, every language is a vast pattern-system, different from one and another, in which linguistic forms and categories are culturally ordained and by which the speakers of the language use it not only to communicate with each other,

but also to analyze notions and human relations, or neglect types of relationship and phenomena and channel their reasoning to build the house of their consciousness (Lee, 1996). Thus, a line of thought expressed in any language could be translated with loss of meaning into any other language. For instance, through masses of UN transcriptions it is noticed that an English speaker in one of the cases saying "I assume"; the French interpreter renders it "I deduce"; and the Russian interpreter "I consider" (cf. Glenn, 1981) - By that time the assumption idea is completely gone.

Instances of the similar kinds show that bilinguals are more often than not unaware of their lack of biculturalism. However, they are indeed always in a cross-cultural communication situation whenever they communicate in their second languages. As a result, there is always a potential danger of language conflict in communication, due to the ignorance or lack of cultural differences.

4. Culture-induced Misunderstanding, Confusion and Conflicts

If we accept the view after Haugen (1956) and Grosjean (1982) that bilingualism and biculturalism are not necessarily coextensive, and if we accept the view after Bamgbose (1994) that in terms of possession of the culture, not all bilinguals are bicultural, we may safely conclude that a transfer of the first language to the second language also involves a transfer of an aspect of the culture of the first language into the second, which will very likely lead to language misunderstanding, confusion and even conflicts.

As part of the aim of speaking a language well, a bilingual may try hard to situate his language use within the cultural context, either through awareness or through an understanding of the culture of his second language. For instance, the American writer Eva Hoffman, who, as a teenage emigrated from Poland with her family and settled in North America, writes of her early experiences as an immigrant as follows:

> I learn that certain kind of truths is impolite. One shouldn't criticize the person one is with, at least not directly. You shouldn't say "You are wrong about that" though you might say, "On the other hand, there is that to consider." You shouldn't say, "I like you better in that other outfit." I learn to tone down my sharpness, to do a more careful conversational minuet (Hoffman, 1989:146).

If we turn to the culture-specific conceptions, we easily find more examples of language conflicts induced by culture. Anyone who has enough experiences of contact with people from different cultures believes that different cultures differ in the sense of 'intimacy'. It is not sensed as being intimate in English and in Swedish to call people by their first names. "Tom" instead of "Dr. Galloway" or "Staffan" instead of "Mr. Eriksson" implies only less distance, informality and friendliness.

In any communicative encounter in which there is cultural difference there is a potential for culture-induced language conflict arising from different attitudes towards certain norms. One area in which such conflict can be shown is the way politeness is expressed. How politeness is expressed in particular situations is

language and culture-specific. When there is difference from the culture of a source to that of a target language, a bilingual speaker of a second language may express his politeness that is considered to be inappropriate or to try to make some other efforts judging by the norms of the second language.

For example, second language speakers of English with Chinese cultural background find it difficult to avoid the obligatory politeness which is a norm of politeness typical of the Chinese society when they interact with the people from other cultural backgrounds. In Chinese culture, it is virtually important to address someone with an appropriate title according to social status, relationship, gender, and age. Western teachers working in China may feel they are oddly addressed when students start showing their politeness and respect by standing up right at once on seeing the teacher enter the classroom and calling out in one voice "Good morning, teacher!". Unable to feel any politeness to be addressed with such a title, the westerner may start writing his or her name on the blackboard and telling the students to call him/her, say, "Mr. Johnson" or "Miss Hinkle", etc. And, at the same time, s/he may keep on encouraging his/her colleagues to call them "Bob" or "Linda" instead of his/her family name with a title.

Similarly, for a Chinese child and even an adult to address someone "Uncle" or "Aunt" who is about his/her parents' age; "Grandma" "or Grandpa" who is about his/her grandparents' age is the standard mode of addressing someone politely. On the contrary, for a westerner, being addressed with such a "title" implies closeness in interpersonal relationship, which has to do with interpersonal knowledge as well as interpersonal feelings. Without such a foundation, one would rather be addressed within one's conventional mode to keep the social distance even if it may be at the cost of making their interactants break their norms of politeness.

Another example of politeness in the context of culture is the difference in the convention of beginning a telephone conversation. In the Swedish society, the practice in making private phone calls is to tell from whose residence the call is made, or to verify one's own phone number, not simply one word "Hello". Such a traditional norm is actually not followed by all temporary residents and immigrants. Some may simply pick up the phone and say "Hello". As a result, these foreigners have received a reputation of being impolite in making phone calls.

In most of the cases, the problem may actually comes from the problem of translatability of certain words which are only partially translated or literally translated. For instance, "Hello", which in Chinese can mean not only to draw one's attention as it does in English, but also be translated into *Nin hao* (How do you do!). If the Swedish speakers could understand 'Hello' given by the Chinese on the phone in a Chinese sense, it would sound perfectly polite. To our dismay, sometimes, the intended message does not always come through in a translation because of different cultural assumptions.

5. Mutual Belief

In sociology the notion of mutual belief is used in the analysis of various sociological concepts. For instance, the concept of convention was explicated in terms of mutual belief. Bach and Harnish (1979:267-283) apply this concept into a general account of linguistic communication by claiming that "There are mutual contextual beliefs, which facilitate various steps of the hearer's inference to the speaker's communicative intention, and the several presumptions, which assure the hearer that there is an inference to be drawn. The speaker relies on these mutual beliefs to make his communicative intention recognizable." To a great extent, it is true that people achieve successful communication and understanding on such a basis but my question is: Do people from totally different cultures share the same concept of mutual belief? With reference to the culture-induced misunderstanding, confusion and conflicts, I am coming down to more specific contention that the conceptual mutual belief may be responsible for many disagreeable phenomena, one of which is language conflict.

We may imagine potential situations in which native and non-native speakers of a language coming from different cultures get together. The work place is probably the best example of the milieu in which language contacts may occur. Conflicts may then arise due to varying speech habits which are perceived as naturally polite or appropriate judging by their own cultures of different speakers, and more seriously misunderstandings of certain words and expressions from lack of mutual belief, since the notion of mutual belief may give a wrong impression that people's beliefs are automatically uniform and stable. In fact, such a uniformity can only be reached within a given culture, never in all cultures.

Again, a good case in point is the concept of politeness. Tannen (1986:188) reports on the difficulty it brings about: "People instinctively feel that their ways of expressing things and being polite or rude are natural and logical." Hayakawa (1953:7) states that "We all tend to believe that the way we use words is the correct way and that people who use the same words in other ways are either ignorant or dishonest."

Conceptual differences of mutual belief, no matter how small they may be, do not only cause unimportant misunderstandings, which we all continually experience, but also serious conflicts. Janicki (1993:109) claims from the linguistic aspect that the Gulf War as a political and military conflict sprang at least partly from a language conflict. He says "Prior to the actual break-out of the war both parties used harsh and offensive language. Both parties talked about a just war, a God-given victory, heroic deeds, etc., except that each party referred to a different reality standing behind those words."

His contention draws us attention to giving similar thoughts to the constant conflict arising from the issues of democracy and human rights between China and certain developed countries. It seems that people from different cultural and political societies may perceive the concepts, such as, freedom, democracy and human rights, etc. quite differently. For instance, for a Chinese in the present Chinese society, his/her sense of freedom may be very much restricted to his/her

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everyday life matters, and thus, may feel enjoying full freedom. On the other hand, in an economically highly developed society, a person's sense of full freedom may not be focused on everyday life matters, but rather more on political issues, such as, the free involvement of voting for governmental leaders at all levels, or the right to publish their own opinions, whether it be for or anti government, etc. Such issues once raised and discussed between the people with different definitions of the concepts will no doubt cause conflicts.

As a matter of fact, even among the people from the same society, the understanding and definitions of conceptual words may be rather different. For instance, several years ago when the Swedish state minister, Mr. Göran Persson, commented about China as being a "politically stable" society, disagreement arose even among the Swedish people holding different views about the Chinese political situation. One of the solutions for Mr. Göran Persson to avoid being criticized was to give further definitions of the term 'stable' that he used in his comments.

On the other hand, in point of fact, complexities and subtleties of human communication have been taken as an advantage in diplomatic communication to avoid conflicts. Take the recent Chinese-American spy plane situation, the diplomatic carefully planned translation of the English 'sorry' into the Chinese 'dao qian' is a good example of the art of effective communication which avoided further conflicts between the two nations.

6. Conclusions

It is common knowledge that there is a multitude of different factors, which, from small scale to large scale, may generate language misunderstanding, confusion and conflicts. I have made my efforts first to claim that a bilingual person is not invariably to be bicultural, and then to try to prove the prominence of cultural issues in language contact by analyzing the relation between language and culture. Finally I broadened my perspective by turning to the concept to mutual belief to show that there are conceptual differences from culture to culture, which also heightens the danger of language conflict.

In the situation of cross-cultural communication, linking language misunderstanding, confusion and conflicts with cultures should be a common awareness. In a given culture people have a shared set of quite specific cultural norms. As a result, in any cross-cultural communication, there is always a potential for culture-induced language conflicts, which may become even more obvious with the coming of more opportunities for people from different cultures to meet and to communicate. We will be far from sufficient to achieve successful communication, unless we are aware of the potential conflicts that may occur due to cultural differences.

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