

Importance of spoken language within cross- and intercultural communication

*By Copérnico Fernando Pereyra Centella**

Since ancient times, man has had the need to interact with his peers, which led them to form small primitive social groups. But as time passed, these small social groups evolved into much bigger communities and peoples. Throughout this praxis, they began to spread their knowledge, skills and experiences across the members of those groups. This phenomenon gave rise to culture defined in terms of the cultural anthropologists, according to whom “culture is something that everybody has, in contrast with the ‘culture’ which is found only in ‘cultured’ circles...” (Hudson, 1980: 73). Within this culture, they found suitable ways to transmit their heritage from one generation to the next. This transmission has been possible through diverse channels like spoken language. This way, spoken language broke down the barrier of time and space and became a steadfast tenet which somewhat worked as the living memory of those peoples. However, this transmission took place firstly far away from other distant social groups and it was not until each group had the need to shorten such distance that they began to communicate with peoples from different cultures and different languages. From this contention, spoken language is of paramount importance because this is one of the main vehicles for human beings to communicate. I shall discuss on this paper the importance of spoken language within cross- and intercultural communication. Let me first define the terms language, communication, cross- and intercultural communication and culture.

More often than not we take for granted language and we use it without thinking about the way it works. Language is, according to Samovar & Porter (1982:17), a “fundamental tool that humans use to construct and exchange meaning with one another.” However, this meaning do not come from nowhere, it is attached to a social and cultural context. From this viewpoint, it is necessary to understand the cultural setting where language emerged from. In this respect,

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Kramersch (1998: 3) points out that “When [language] is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture ... [and] Speakers identify themselves and others through their use of language; they view their language as a symbol of their social identity.” This way, we have that language is a vehicle for human beings to communicate with their peers and express meaning into their social and cultural reality.

Another term coming into this paper is communication, which is defined in terms of Lustig & Koester (1996: 29) as a “symbolic process in which people create shared meanings.” For my purpose, a symbol refers to the words we emit when interacting with our peers, and whose aim is that of transmitting meaning, that is, perceptions, thoughts, feelings, knowledge, skills, experiences etc. From this viewpoint, communication comprises two main characteristics: it is dynamic and interpretive. Dynamic because it is a process which changes, moves and develops continuously, depending upon situations, settings and participants embodied. This is interpretive in that people interpret and attach meaning to the symbols (words) based on their own social and cultural reality. As Lusting & Koester (1996: 30) say: “Communication is interpretive in nature and people actively attempt to understand and organize their experiences in the world.”

For their part, Samovar & Porter (1991:8) define communication as “a dynamic transactional behavior-affecting process in which people behave intentionally in order to induce or elicit particular response from another person.” Unlike Lustig & Koester, these professors point out this concept of intention to cause particular effects on hearers. Apart from this, they support some components that are found within communication. For example, there is a channel by means of which the communication takes place; a responder who functions as an observer of this communicative behaviour; encoding and decoding processes, through which we produce and interpret information; and feedback, that is, the information we receive and through which we are able to make judgements about the effectiveness of communication.

Cross- and intercultural communication also prove forthright for my paper. Defining these two kinds of communication is, to say the least, complex because

authors have not reached an agreement so far about the boundaries each one comprises. For some researches there are clear differences between them, whereas for others both terms can be used indistinctly.

According to the site *answers.com/topic*, cross-cultural communication is frequently referred to as intercultural communication and it is “a field of study that looks at how people from different cultural backgrounds endeavour to communicate.” From this contention, cross-cultural communication tries to understand the way people belonging to diverse cultures communicate with one another. For instance, the way somebody from Mexico communicates with a person from Japan. This field of study goes beyond and suggests some guidelines with which people with different cultural backgrounds can break down the barriers of those differences and communicate with each other. Moreover, this field resorts to other disciplines like anthropology, sociology, psychology etc.

Samovar & Porter (1991:10) define intercultural communication as that which “occurs whenever a message is produced by a member of one culture for consumption by a member of another culture, a message must be understood.” As we can see, no much difference can be perceived between the first definition and this one. What is important here is the emphasis that Samovar & Porter make on the need to study deeply intercultural communication with the purpose of shortening the misunderstandings and disagreements caused by cultural differences. This emphasis is of paramount importance if we consider that differences in language cause serious difficulties because of the linguistic conventions each language has. For example, these misunderstandings (as Samovar & Porter say) can impact on speech acts, interaction management, lexicon and politeness forms. In this respect, Argyle (1991: 34) says that “visitors to another culture should be aware of [...] the speech style which they use [because they] can indicate a positive or negative attitude to another by shifting towards a more similar or less similar speech style as the respondent, using e.g. a different accent or dialect.”

Carbaugh, for his part, distinguishes to some extent cross- from intercultural communication. Cross-cultural communication refers to the study of “a particular

feature of communication within and across culture (e.g. speech at performance, choice of address terms and turn-taking conventions).” While intercultural communication is defined in terms of “a number of features of two cultural systems as they are used in a particular intercultural encounter” (1990: 292).

There are other researchers who define cross- and intercultural communication considering other elements. For example, Kramsch takes into consideration identities regarding politics like political boundaries, nation-states, national language etc. Even so, all these identities converge on one common point: communication among members of diverse cultures. This way, “the term ‘cross-cultural’ or intercultural usually refers to the meeting of two cultures or two languages across the political boundaries of nation-states” (1998: 81). As we can see, whatever the definition of these kinds of communication, there are always points in common, for example, communication between members of different cultures, language, accent, speech etc.

If defining language, communication, cross- and intercultural communication is important, it becomes equally important to define culture. Sir Edward B. Taylor wrote in 1871 that “culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (*en.wikipedia.org*). That is, the way we think, how we behave and what we do is based on that acquired constructs. In this respect, the site *wsu.edu:8001* mentions that “Culture is learned, not biologically inherited, and involves arbitrary assigned, symbolic meanings. For example, Americans are not born knowing that the color white means purity, and indeed this is not a universal cultural symbol.”

For its part, a 2002 document from the United Nations agency UNESCO states that culture is the “set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs” (*en.wikipedia.org*). This definition is more complete and is aware of the differences among human beings as members of society and, at the same time, it leads us to recognize the Other. Analyzing thoroughly this conception

of culture, we notice that this tries to shorten to the utmost differences and break down social misconceptions.

Whatever the definition of culture, it is a construct that influences and moulds life in society. As I mentioned above, the way we think, behave and what we do is determined to great extent by culture. And spoken language is not beyond the reach of it, because we express this culture by means of language. As Brown (cited in Valdes 1986: 45) says: "Culture is really an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Cultural patterns, customs, and ways of life are expressed in language; culture-specific world views are reflected in language." In this sense, Yule (1996: 246) points out that "[m]any of the factors which give rise to linguistics variation are sometimes discussed in terms of cultural differences."

If we go back to the conceptions of language, cross- and intercultural communication and culture, we will see that all these dimensions are interrelated, and that none of them excludes the other; on the contrary, all of them bring into the same fold: communication between different cultures. This fact is of paramount importance due to the growth of interdependence between people with different cultural backgrounds. Even so, it has neither been a spontaneous nor an easy process. For example, once people with diverse cultures began to get in contact, they started to experience the complexity of cross- and intercultural communication, since they had to face a diversity of ways to understand and interpret other cultures depending upon the language spoken. They found complexity even inside their own culture because their members had different viewpoints of the world. As Yule (1996: 246) says: "in the study of the world's cultures, it has become clear that different [social] groups not only have different languages, they have different world views which are reflected in their languages." However, this contact continues increasing considerably. There are some conditions that have fostered this phenomenon, for example, the development of technology, migration, or globalization.

Firstly, the development of technology has increased the flow of information, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and ideas beyond the frontiers given that nowadays communication takes place faster than ever before in a world pervaded by all kinds

of mass media. By means of phones, satellites, the world-wide web etc, it is more likely that people from a particular culture are in contact with the rest of the world. This fact has caused a growth of interdependence of people affecting almost any human task. As Kluver (2006) points out: “[these] communication technologies, have transformed [...] social relations to such an extent that cultural and economic barriers are minimized.” In this respect, Wang (1994: 5) is more categorical and establishes broadly the power hold by media and their impact on societies. She calls this phenomenon informatization, which is “a process of change that features (a) the use of informatization and IT [information technology] to such an extent that they become the dominant forces in commanding economic, political, social and cultural development; and (b) unprecedented growth in the speed, quantity, and popularity of information production and distribution.”

Secondly, there is migration. Migration is a social phenomenon that is increasing each day around the world that makes people abandon their land and bump into other cultures. This phenomenon forces these people to speak, or rather to do what they can to understand a language they are not familiar with. That is, a total different reality of seeing the world based on the culture of that territory. In this respect, Kramsch (1998: 3) says that “Language is the principal means whereby we conduct our social lives. When it is used in contexts of communication, it is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways ... [since] *language expresses cultural reality.*”

Thirdly, the changes in communication technology, business environment, political environment, capitalism (mostly now with the fall of communism), the notion of nation-state, migration etc, as well as integrations between countries such as the European Union, has broken down the frontiers. This praxis has led the world to a smaller place to live where communication between members of different cultures has increased as never before. This phenomenon is called globalization. Friedman (1999: 7) argues that “globalization involves the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states, and technologies to a degree never witnessed before.”

However, although this term emerged from an economical environment and referred primarily to economics, the effects impact on the social and cultural life of countries and moulds cross- and intercultural communication in such a way that even traditions, national identities, spoken and written language, behaviours, and thoughts are in danger. For example, “Modern media content is characterized by a never ending stream of popular and mass culture oriented programming and has banned alternative views and discussion from the consciousness of the mass audience [...] In the truest sense of the word, the culture has been comodified and is viewed as a cost-benefit factor for the attainment of the global media audience and the global information society” (Kluver, 2006).

Let me mention now two examples which are closely related to spoken language within cross- and intercultural communication. They are taken from Lado (1957: 110-123), who carried out a research project called *How to compare two cultures*. He mentions an example of a comparison between the English and the Spanish culture systems, regarding Spanish-speakers when they go to America to study the American way of life or American culture. The starting point of this study is on the questions “what do we show the visitor and what do we tell him? How do we know what to show and tell him?” For this researcher, this is not an easy task because we should have accurate understanding of each culture to be compared, otherwise, it will cause serious problem. As he says: “Our inability to describe our cultural ways parallels our inability to describe our language, unless we have made a special study of it. The paradox is that we are able to use the complex structure that is our language [...] but when someone asks us when to use *between* and *among*, for example, we will tell him the most surprising fiction with the best intention of telling the truth” (Lado in Valdes, 1986: 52).

Lado talks about the transferability between languages when learning a foreign culture, and the trouble inside this process. From the examples he mentions, I will only show two of them. The first example is related to linguistic evidence and he says that it is really interesting the way some vocabulary items that are applicable in the same way for animals and humans in English have separate items for animals and humans in Spanish. For instance: “In English both

animals and persons have *legs*. In Spanish, animals have *patas* “animal legs” and humans have *piernas* “human legs. Similarly, in English, animals and humans have *backs* and *necks*, while in Spanish, animals have *lomo* and *pescuezo* “animal back” and “animal neck” [...] In Hispanic culture the distinction between man and animal seems very great, certainly greater than that in American culture” (Lado in Valdes, 1986: 56, 57).

The second example is regarding the fact that people belonging to a particular culture usually take for granted that their way of thinking, understanding the world or speaking are the only correct, and reject different ways of behaviour. Lado describes an example based on the way people refer to coffee. “When foreign visitors from areas where coffee is served very black and very strong taste American coffee, they do not say that it is different; they say that American coffee is bad. Likewise, when Americans go abroad to countries where coffee is black and strong, they taste the coffee and do not say that it is different; they, too, say that it is bad” (Ibid.: 59).

There is an interesting article I want to mention. It was written by M. Yahya Kharrat (2000). This article mentions some problems that Arab EFL learners face when they are placed in a situation where they feel that they do not communicate appropriately. These learners manage basic vocabulary and syntax in the target language, but they have no full competence in sociolinguistic skills. Here, there is an example.

This example lies on the way Arabs address people and the cross- and intercultural communication problems when studying the target language, because Arabic has more titles to address than English. ‘While English speakers have limited options such as “sir”, “madam” for addressing people, “Fadilat al Sheikh” (His Eminence, the Sheikh) is used to address important clerics. Arabic uses the title “Sa’adit al ameed” (His Honor, the Dean) and “Ma’ali al mudeer” (His Excellency, the Chancellor). Likewise, the use of pronouns or of first names is deemed rude in Arabic.’ This is understandable if we really notice that distinction and respect are of paramount importance in Arabic. Unlike Americans that tend to be less formal in this respect. For instance, ‘the distinction in Arabic between “anta”

(you singular), and “antum” (you plural), signals a significant difference in formality. Addressing an important Arab person by using “anta” instead of “antum” is considered impolite’ (Kharrat, 2000).

Another study which proves forthright for spoken language within cross- and intercultural communication is Lixian Jin and Martin Cortazzi’s work (in Byram & Fleming, 1998: 98-118) carried out in China. In their work titled *The culture the learner brings: a bridge or a barrier?*, they make emphasis on the need for learners to learn not just the target language, but also to acquire knowledge of the target culture. They say that intercultural skills in relation to culture are sometimes taken for granted and that there is a little emphasis on the culture learners bring to the classroom. This fact affects cross- and intercultural communication to great extent.

There is an example that shows categorically the way the fact mentioned above impacts on the development of discourse within the classroom. Jin & Cortazzi mention that “The activity of having a group discussion in class [...] may be positively valued by Western teachers [...] Many Chinese students, on the other hand, consider it ‘fruitless’: they thought it wasted time; they risked learning errors from their peers [...] they believed the teacher should present knowledge and a correct model” (Ibid.: 105, 106). Not knowing this cultural behaviour, may cause misunderstandings in such a way that communication can be stopped from taking place.

Bearing in mind the sample of the three studies above, there are some obstacles which impact on cross- and intercultural communication. For example (from *business-english-training.com* & Kramersch, 1998: 67):

1. Language: vocabulary, syntax, slang and dialects are sources of difficulty because when speaking, people tend to interpret the new language based on theirs and they often believe they understand, but they do not. For example, in English the word order may vary, but the common order is *subject, verb, object*. In Japanese it is *subject, object, verb*. In Welsh it is *verb, subject, object*. And these linguistic aspects shape our perception regarding the new language.

2. Cultural stereotypes: these are overgeneralizations that help us explain and understand what we perceive around us. However, this aspect can often interfere with objectivity in spoken interaction, since these cultural stereotypes lie on beliefs we have as result of belonging to a particular culture. In this respect, Kramsch (1998: 67) says that “what we perceive about a person’s culture and language is what we have been conditioned by our own culture to see, and the stereotypical models already built around our own.”
3. High anxiety: this is a common factor in cross- and intercultural communication given the uncertainties around the speech event. The presence of high anxiety can be a barrier, since (for example) the native person of one country may feel uncomfortable when speaking with a person from another country because the normal flow of conversation cannot be maintained.
4. Tendency to evaluate: it refers to the false belief that each person’s culture is the only correct, proper and natural. This belief is dangerous because we tend to reject the statements or actions of others, instead of doing what we can to understand the reasons why those people think and feel of that way.

In order to shorten these obstacles to the utmost, everyone who wants to communicate with people belonging to diverse cultures should be well-instructed regarding the foreign language culture and various types of speech. Here, there are some tactics for removing the obstacles (from *business-english-training.com* & *maec.org*):

1. Opening and closing conversations: it is important to be aware of customs different cultures have about who addresses whom, when and how. It also refers to the order people in conversation have to speak, that is, who speaks first, second etc. Kramsch (1998: 45, 46) mentions the following example: “The question of who speaks first is, in Japanese culture, of paramount importance. No one simply decided to speak first, as in the American groups. In all the Japanese group discussions, a female member started, followed by the other

female member, and then by the younger male member, and last by the oldest male member.”

2. Taking turns during conversations: some cultures see it as appropriate to take turns in an interactive way, while in others it is more important to listen attentively and without comment; otherwise, it is taken as a challenge or a humiliation. It broadly depends on the context of the conversation, the audience, relationship between people interacting etc.
3. Use of humor: it is very common that in the West we often try to interact through humor, however, this is not universally seen as an appropriate behaviour in all contexts. For instance, ethnic humour is often perceived by many cultures as evidence of racial prejudice.
4. Be aware of words that suggest that all or most members of a racial group are the same: for example, “Why can’t Joe ever be on time?” “He’s African American, isn’t he?”
5. Be aware of rules of attentiveness during conversations: for example, the constant maintenance of eye contact while listening during a conversation often violates a conversational rule in working class African American and Hispanic cultures.

Finally, we must transfer this importance of spoken language within cross- and intercultural communication and the instruction of the target culture into our teaching practice and do what we can to teach the second language taking into account not just the system, but the culture where this system emerges from. Here, there are three suggestions:

Firstly, throughout this paper, we have seen the relation and interdependence of constructs like spoken language and culture with cross- and intercultural communication. From this contention, it is important to tackle this communication within the classroom from a sociological and anthropological perspective. As Stern (1983: 200) points out: “Nevertheless, the study of society and culture embodied in sociology and anthropology has an obvious relevance for

a language curriculum which aims to relate language teaching to the sociocultural context.”

Secondly, Dunnett, Dubin & Lezberg categorically point out the impact that teacher’s attitude toward their learners’ cultural background has on teaching English (for example) from an intercultural perspective, as well as the knowledge about culture for part of the teachers. They also make reference to the importance of setting courses and activities which focus on culture-related themes. “[...] all those professionals concerned –teachers and administrators– must possess certain basic understanding about language and culture. If they have this awareness, the programs they plan, the courses they create [...] and the material they write can foster an intercultural point of view” (in Valdes, 1986: 148).

Thirdly, it is relevant to make learners be aware of the importance of knowing that people of other cultures understand the world based on their own cultural background and that they react to life in different ways. “The teacher’s thesis should never be ‘*This is the way it is in our culture and this is the way it should be everywhere*’. Instead, it should be: ‘*This is the way it is in our culture. How does your culture perceive that? How does your culture deal with the same issue? What do you think about it?*’” (hitmag.co.uk).

As we can see throughout this paper, spoken language is not only a channel of communication, but also a cultural vehicle to transmit values, behaviours, beliefs, tasks etc. This way, spoken language is of paramount importance within cross- and intercultural communication in a world where boundaries are being broken down and is becoming much smaller continuously. Because of this reality, communication between people belonging to diverse cultures and the growth of interdependence have never before been of such magnitude as it is today. From this point of view, it is imperative to study other cultures and be aware of the fact that people around the world understand and interpret the world around them based on their own cultural background. And we teachers should understand that teaching a foreign language involves for more than the mere act of teaching the language system. This process comprises categorically the teaching of the culture attached to the language we are teaching.

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