Language is Culture –
On Intercultural Communication

Fengping Gao
Weinan Teachers' College in Shaanxi, China

Abstract

Language cannot be used without carrying meaning and referring beyond itself. The meanings of a particular language point to the culture of a particular social group, and the analysis of those meanings—their comprehension by learners and other speakers—involves the analysis and comprehension of that culture. It disregards the nature of language to treat language independently of the culture which it constantly refers to. Thus, language teaching should always contain some explicit reference to the culture, the whole from which the particular language is taken.

Language is Culture - On Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is not new. As long as people from different cultures have been encountering one another there has been intercultural communication. What is new, however, is the systematic study of exactly what happens when cross-culture contacts and interaction take place—when message producer and message receiver are from different cultures. Increased contact among cultures makes it imperative for people to make a concerted effort to get along with and understand those whose believes and backgrounds may be vastly different from their own.

Successful intercultural communication is a matter of highest importance if humankind and society are to survive. Thus, theoretical and practical knowledge about intercultural communication process and ability, through increased awareness and understanding, to coexist peacefully with people who do not necessarily share our own life styles or values, is essential to guarantee successful communication.

Language is a way of marking cultural identity. Language differs, on the other hand, from other phenomena in that it is used to refer to other phenomena and has usually to be used to refer beyond itself (Jandt, 2003：40).

Language in use by particular speakers is constantly referring beyond itself irrespective at the intentions of the speaker: language cannot be used without carrying meaning and referring beyond itself, even in the most sterile environment of the foreign language class. The meanings of a particular language point to the culture of a particular social group, and the analysis of those meanings—their comprehension by learners and other speakers—involves the analysis and comprehension of that culture.

It disregards the nature of language to treat language independently of the culture which it constantly refers to. No doubt all language teaching contains some explicit reference to the culture; the whole from which the particular language is taken.

The interdependence of language learning and culture learning is so evident that we can draw the conclusion that language learning is culture learning and consequently that language teaching is culture teaching.

Foreign language teachers should be aware of the place of cultural studies within foreign language teaching and try, in every way, to enhance students' culture awareness and improve their communication competence.

2. Culture

2.1. Definition of Culture

Culture is notoriously difficult to define. The American anthropologists, Kroeber and Kluckhohn, as early as in 1952, critically reviewed concepts and definitions of culture, and compiled a list of 164 different definitions. Apt，writing in the *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, summarizes the problem as follows :"Despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature." Consequently, some scholars even suggest giving up defining culture. Despite these problems, I propose the following definition for the purpose of this paper: Culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioral conventions, and basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member's behavior and each member's interpretations of the meanings of other people's behavior (Oatey, 2000：4).

 This definition draws attention to a number of issues. Firstly, culture is manifested at different layers of depth, ranging from inner core basic assumption and values, through outer core attitudes, believes and social conventions, to surface-level behavioral manifestations. Secondly, the sub-surface aspects of cutler influence people's behavior and the meanings they attribute to other people's behavior (along with other factors such as personality). Thirdly, culture is a "fuzzy" concept, in that group members are unlikely to share identical sets of attitudes, beliefs and so on, but rather show "family resemblances', with the result that there is no absolute sort of features that can distinguish definitely one cultural group from another. Fourthly, culture is associated with social groups. All people are simultaneously members of a number of different groups and categories; for example, gender groups, ethic groups, generational groups, national groups, professional groups, and so on. So in many respects, all these different groupings can be seen as different cultural groups. However, in this paper, "Culture is operationalized primarily in terms of ethno linguistic and / or national identity.

The term "intercultural" refers to interaction between people from two different "cultural" groups (Oatey, 2000：4).

2.2. Culture Studies

2.2.1. Terminology of Cultural Studies

The argument that cultural studies is an integral part of language teaching, because of the relationship of language and culture, has led to the notion of a disciplined study of culture. The idea that the study and acquisition of language---language in use and language awareness---must take place in the context of cultural study is widely accepted(Byran, 1989：56).

However there is still the question of terminology of "cultural studies". The term "cultural studies" used here is not used in British education, or indeed elsewhere, although it is not entirely new. The best established term is that used in Germany,

"Landeskunde", meaning literally "knowledge of the country". The French term "civilizasion" refers in a broad sense to the way of life and distinctions of a particular country. In the United States there is a tendency to use the word "culture" to refer to learning about customs and behaviors associated with language learning, thus concentrating largely on daily life. In Britain, the phrase used in secondary schools is usually "background studies", referring to any knowledge which supplements language learning, largely concentrated in information about customs and daily life with some reference to social institutions. In higher education the term "area studies" has been created to distinguish courses which are not devoted exclusively to literature, as used to be the dominant tradition. (Byran, 1989：58).

2.2.2. Types of Cultural studies

Recently interest has increased in cultural studies, particularly in how communication varies across culture. There are several different types of research used to compare cultures. Kohn (1989, cited in Byran), for example , isolates four types of cross-cultural research: [1] studies where culture is the object of study, [2] studies where culture is the context of study, [3] studies where culture is the unit of analysis, and [4] studies that are transcultural. Each of these types of studies has different goals.

When culture is treated as the context of the study, researchers are interested in understanding how different aspects of culture influence communication. Investigators, for example, can study how dimensions of cultural variability (e.g., individualism-collectivism; in individualistic cultures, the focus is on the individual, while the emphasis is on the group in collectivistic cultures) influence communication in different cultures.

The third type of cross-culture research focuses on cultures as the unit of analysis. Research using culture as the level of analysis requires that data from large numbers of cultures be available for analysis.

The final type of cross-cultural research is what Kohn (1989) calls "transnational" or "transcultural". This type of research in communication focuses on the transmission of mass media messages across national borders (Brannen, 1997：10).

3. Language and Culture

3.1. Language and Culture Teaching

Foreign language teachers often hear that language teaching should be "relevant" (Byran, 1989：2). Language is inseparable from other phenomena both inside and outside the classroom. Language is the medium for expressing and embodying other phenomena. It expresses and embodies the values, beliefs and meanings which members of a given society, or part of it, share by virtue of their socialization into it and their acceptance of and identification with it. The phrase "capital punishment" for example has particular resonances and collocations in British society, some of which are common to all, others only to some. When the phrase is further contextualized it evokes values and beliefs which are part of the network of understandings holding groups of people together. Language also refers to object peculiar to a given culture--- most obviously in proper names--- and embodies those objects. The use of such a phrase such as "loaf of bread" evokes a specific culture objects in British usage unless a conscious effort is made to empty it of that reference and introduce a new one (Byran, 1989：5). We have drawn on the notion that language is both a part of and an expression of a culture and its beliefs and values, that the specific collocations and associations of a given word or expression are peculiar to a language and its

relationship to the rest of culture. With conscious effort, language can be emptied of much of the burden of particular meanings（Byran, 1989：13）.

Language teaching has therefore always and inevitably meant, in fact, "language and culture" teaching. In the British traditions this has largely been taken for granted and considered unproblematic. Elsewhere---in Germany in particular--- there has existed a greater awareness. In Germany, the debate about the relationship between language and Landeskunde, has been long and intense and the fact that at various points in the modern history of language teaching Landeskunde has been called Kulturkunde and Wesenskunde is an indication that the relationship is not unproblematic, in Germany or elsewhere.

Reviewing "Landeskunde" in Germany, Buttjest (1982, cited in Byran) claims that "Culture learning is actually a key factor in being able to use and master a foreign linguistic system", and not just a "rather arbitrary claim that culture learning is a part of language teaching."

In the Bellagio Declaration of the European Cultural Foundation and the International Council for Educational Development in 1981 the following view is maintained: "For effective international cooperation, knowledge of other countries and their cultures is as important as proficiency in their languages and such knowledge is dependent on foreign language teaching".

The assumption that culture studies will be an aid to efficient communication and cooperation is further reinforced by recent emphasis on "communicative competence" as a broad concept than "grammatical competence". For "communicative competence "involved an appreciate language usage which, in part at least, is culture-specific. This recent development is therefore a renewal and extension of the auxiliary, pragmatic function of cultural studies（Byran,1989：61）.

3.2. Culture and Intercultural Communication

Learning a language is an intricate process involving not only learning the alphabet, the meaning and arrangement of words, the rules of grammar, and understanding of literature, but also learning the new languages of the body, behavior, and cultural customs. Language is a product of the thought and behavior of a society. An individual language speaker's effectiveness in a foreign language is directly related to his understanding of the culture of that language (Taylor,1979 :51).

It has been reported once and again how the dropping of the atom bomb might have been avoided in one Japanese word *mokusatsu* in the answer to the Postdam ultimatum had been translated "Let us wait and see", as the Japanese intended it, rather than literally, as "Let us ignore." John Seward, in his "Views and Reviews" in the Mainichi Daily News, April 13, 1972, commented that the Nixon-Sato problems over the textile issue were probably a result of a badly translated remark made by then Prime Minister Sato. Sato most likely had intended to say "Let me see what I can do about it," but the sentence was conveyed to then President Nixon as "Leave it up to me." Therefore, when the Prime Minister did not perform as the President expected him to, "Nixon lost faith in Sato, which indeed may have been one of the factors behind his (Nixon's) later failure to inform the Japanese government of his visit to China until the last minute." All this is surmising, but incidents involving important international affairs have swung on small hinges. Many regrettable decisions could probably have been avoided if both parties had been able to approach each other with an understanding of the other's culture and of the factual issues involved (Taylor, 1979: 40).

Different culture may have different conventions as to what is appropriate behavior in what contexts. Lack of relevant knowledge may cause intercultural misunderstanding （Hinde, 1997：99).

One afternoon after work, A British Teacher of EFL, who had recently started teaching at a college in Hong Kong, decided to visit some friends who lived in a different part of the city. She went to the appropriate bus stop, and as she walked up, a group of her students who were waiting there asked "Where are you going?" Immediately she felt irritated, and thought to herself, "What business is it of theirs where I'm going? Why should I tell them about my personal life?" However, she tried to hide her irritation, and simply answered, "I'm going to visit some friends."

However, in fact, "Where are you going" is simply a greeting in Chinese. There is no expectation that it should be answered explicitly: a vague response such as "Over there" or "Into town" is perfectly adequate. Moreover, according to Chinese conventions, the students were being friendly and polite in giving such a greeting, not intrusive and disrespectful as the British teacher interpreted them to be.

The teacher was irritated, while she should have been pleased, simply because of the cultural differences---"Where are you going?" is a polite greeting among acquaintances in Chinese, but is an inappropriate explicit question in this context in English (Oatey, 2000:：2).

Modern research has strongly emphasized that nonverbal behaviors (body motions mad gestures) are learned. That is they are culturally determined (Samovar, 1986：163). Cultural differences in nonverbal behaviors can contribute to misunderstandings.

Different cultures have developed a variety of uses for the eyes in the communication process （Smith, 1997：87). Americans are familiar with the admonition to maintain good eye contact with one's audience. But some cultures teach their young people, especially girls, that to look someone in the eye, especially an older one or important person, is disrespectful and highly improper. Hence, one should lower one's gaze accordingly. For example, a very expressive girl from Indonesia, studying at an American university, told her professor that because of this emphasis in her culture, the most difficult thing for her in America public speaking classes was to learn to look at her audience.

On the other hand, in a conversational situation, Americans do not practice such rigorous eye contact as do Britons or Arabs. The educated Briton consider it part of good listening behavior to stare at his conversationalist and to indicate his understanding by blinking his eyes, whereas Americans nod their head or emit some sort of grunt, and are from childhood taught not to stare at people. One writer has asserted that the "Arabs look each other in the eye when talking with an intensity that makes most Americans highly uncomfortable." Furthermore, the Arabs has grown so accustomed to facing the person with whom he is conversing, that he finds it awkward and feels it is impolite, for instance, talk when walking side by side. Thus he may dance ahead in order to achieve eye contact. Americans make more use of eye movements in general, while other cultures make more use of hand and arm motions (Samovar, 1986：265).

The use of hand and arm motions for communicative purposes varies to a remarkable degree between cultures （Wiseman, 1993：159). The following contrasts have been suggested: Gestures among the Americans is largely oriented toward activity; among the Italians it serves the purposes of illustration and display; among the Jews it is a device of emphasis; among the Germans it specifies both

attitudes and commitment; and among the French it is an expression of style and containment.

When an American clasps his hands over his head, it signifies, usually with pride and occasionally a touch of arrogance, that victory over some foe has been achieved. A prize fighter, for instance, so signals after having been designated the victor. But to the Russians this is a symbol of friendship. Thus, when Khrushchev came to the United States, decades ago, and was photographed making that gesture, millions of Americans were irritated at what they interpreted to be an arrogant signal of confidence in eventual victory of Communist over America and Capitalism. But the gesture was meant to communicate a spirit of friendship. In Colombia, a similar gesture but with clasped hands level with the face means "I agree with you." To clap the hands together is a familiar Western habit to communicate approval, but to many in the Orient it is used primarily to summon an inferior person, such as a servant (Samovar, 1986：266).

In many ways it is extremely difficult to ascertain the thinking ability of other cultures. Not only is it agreed by psychologists that formal tests of intelligence which have been constructed and standardized in Western society are inappropriate for evaluating results in these areas, but also tests of abstract reasoning have this difficulty of the bias of environmental factor. More fruitful approaches to cross-cultural cognition have consisted in comparing one particular cognitive process across various cultures, and investigating the special question of language.

Frake (1962, cited in Samovar) investigated the conceptual scheme of disease diagnoses in Philippines. He describes his perplexity with the society's (the Subanun of Mindanao) diagnosis of an infectious swelling which he developed early in his field work. He received a variety of names for his disease and was not able at first to perceive clarity in the diagnosis by Subanun people. Further interrogation, however, showed that different people were speaking at different levels of contrast. One person was contrasting skin diseases with all other kinds of external diseases. Another informed him that he had an "inflammation" and not some other skin disease. Yet another refined the concept of inflammation as "an inflamed quasi bite" and not some other kind of inflammation. It is clear from his account that a cognitive examination of Subanun diagnostic criteria involved a good knowledge of the underlying levels of contrast against which the disease concepts were operating.

Cultures vary considerably in the degree of frankness expected. The English for instance, with their long heritage of open, direct, and frank confrontation in parliament debating and in the heckling of public speaks, are more likely to be more sharp and blunt than most people, including the Americans. Britons hit hard and expect to be hit hard in return. This was well illustrated when an English in a faculty committee meeting stirred considerable animosity by his frank, sharp, and unambiguous statement of his views on the topic under consideration. When told later of the reactions of some of the committee members, he was shocked, for he thought he had expressed himself rather mildly and circumspectly.

Most Asians would be far more reticent than Americans to engage in a sharp exchange, and tend to couch their remarks very carefully so as not to hurt the feelings of, or embarrass, the other person. This results in rather heavy use of euphemisms and ambiguity. It has also been asserted that some Asians are less able than some Westerners to separate the criticism of issues and the criticism of the person holding those views. Thus, criticizing their views means you are really criticizing the person. Peace Corps volunteers are learning that the common American frankness and open

criticism creates in the recipient a strong embarrassment, loss of face, and possible hostility (Samovar, 1986: 275).

Several definitions of communication competence revolve around the central criteria of effectiveness and appropriateness, or the relationship between communicative practices and the practical and moral context(s). However, what constitutes effectiveness and appropriateness is a complex matter, including not only the doing of proper things properly, and further, there are times and occasions when one ought to exhibit incompetence to artfully communicate to others the competence of being incompetent. With each such situated assessment, competence gets configured culturally, through local symbols, symbolic forms, and their meaning (Wiseman, 1993：177).

The 1991 Miss University Contest, hosted by the popular American media figure Dick Clark, was shown on American television in the summer of 1991. The field of contestants had been narrowed to the final three, Miss Netherlands, Miss Mexico, and Miss USSR. As is the typical in such events, the final stage of judging involved an evaluation of how each contestant responded to the same question, while the others were secluded in a soundproof booth. The question this year as posed by Clark was: "What are the main problems confronting your country and what should be done about them?" Both Miss Netherlands and Miss Mexico responded without pause by describing some prominent problems in their countries, and sketched some general solutions to them. Miss USSR, however, was left literally speechless. Feigning the question as inaudible, she asked that it be repeated. Upon hearing it again, she replied with a brief utterance and what appeared to be extreme embarrassment, "They are all over now" (giggle).

Most American viewers who were interviewed about this exchange interpreted her reply, or lack of a reply, in individual terms, as an unfortunate slip in her poise or personality. After all, one should be able to speak in public---with talk about problems being the hallmark of many prominent American scenes. If one is asked to produce such talk, and does not, several inferences may be forthcoming. Perhaps, as some American viewers suggested, the Soviet woman simply lost her composure and couldn't gather her thought in order to be responsive; or perhaps she was being disingenuous, or maybe was being silenced by some hidden force (such as the government).

Soviet responses, however, suggested deeper forces at work in this public communication event. From the vantage point of a Soviet expressive order, when one is in public, and especially in the presence of outsiders, there is a strong moral (and in the recent past, governmental) imperative that one ought not speak problems; one should espouse the virtues that are the bases of social life. Further, these should be predicated to a collective agent, and presented as exercised pattern of behavior, "such as occur in the Motherland"---as Soviet have put it. So, to ask Miss UEER about "the main problems confronting (her) country and what should be done about them," was to create an agonizing public exigency for Miss USSR.

Miss USSR could have addressed the question or not. If she talked about the problems, she would perhaps exude competence to the pageant judges (and American, Western audiences) and enhance her standing with them, but she also would risk accusations of incompetence, perhaps even betrayal, by those in her motherland. If she did not speak about problems, she would fail to address the question, thus lose standing within the pageant, but she would uphold the expressive system of her homeland. Each of these two possible and feasible public speeches, with the inherent counterforce of patriot and pageant, was clearly suboptimal for at least some crucial

part of her audience. Against these dynamics, her eventual utterance appears rather artful, for she indeed addressed the topic, if hesitantly, and did so in order to dismiss it, "They (the problems) are all over now." In an utterance her ably artistry apparently failed to impress the pageant judges, since Miss USSR, on the basis of this interview, was ranked third of the final three contestants.

Cultural characters, such as Miss USSR, find their interactional footing with distinctive and cultural frames of reference, including at times different assessments of what is proper (and improper) for public speaking. And thus different standards of appropriateness, of competence, are invoked within a multicultural event, with the one being as the standard of final judgment (Wiseman, 1993：175).

To avoid misunderstandings like these and some others in intercultural communication, good communication competence is indispensable.

Communication competence is generally defined as the overall internal capability of an individual to manage key challenging features of intercultural communication: namely, culture differences and unfamiliarity, intergroup posture, and the accompanying experience of stress (Toomey, 1991：259).

Communication competence has been examined by scholars from a variety of academic disciplines, yet consensus has not been reached concerning the definition and conceptualization of the communication competence (Asante 1990：247).

Communication competence involves interactants making social judgment concerning the "goodness" of self and others' communicative performances (Spitzberg and Cupach, 1984). According to Spitzberg and Cupach, both appropriateness and effectiveness are dimensions that people use to base their judgments of a communicative performance. Behavior is appropriate when it meets contextual and relational standards or expectations and effective when it is functional in achieving desirable ends or goals or satisfying interactants' needs.

4. Conclusion

Inquiry into the nature of intercultural communication has raised many questions, (but it has produced only a few theories and far fewer answers). Most of the inquiry has been associated with fields other than communication: primarily, international relations, social psychology, and socio-psycholinguistics. Although the direction of research has been diverse, the knowledge has not been coordinated, there is still a good deal to specify the nature of intercultural communication and to recognize various viewpoints that see the phenomenon somewhat differently.

It is quite clear that knowledge of intercultural communication can aid in solving communication problems before they arise. School counselors who understand some of the reasons why the poor perceive schools as they do might be better able to treat young truants. Those who know that Native Americans and Mexicans use eye contact in ways that differ from other Americans may be able to avert misunderstandings (Dodd, 1997：2).

It has long been a fundamental belief of language teachers that one of the contributions of foreign language teaching to students' education is to introduce learners to and help them understand "otherness". Whether it be linguistic or cultural terms, learners are confronted with the language of other people, their culture, their way of thinking and dealing with the world (Clyne, 1994：25). However the complexity of the journey to be traveled from academic study of exotic peoples to the foreign languages classroom is not underestimated.

Culture teaching needs to drew on the disciplines of the social sciences, especially cultural and social anthropology, in order to determine what shall be taught

and why. Similarly, culture teaching needs to have regard to work in social psychology in order to understand and foster the psychological process which learners may be expected to experience in the course of exposure to a different culture. The peculiar relationship between language and other aspects of culture--- and the traditions of language teaching itself---require particular consideration. Thus from a social anthropological point of view it is possible to consider teaching culture through the learners' own language, for from the point of view this language is used in a specific way to interpret the other culture (Ager, 1993：126). From a psychological and linguistic view point, however, it is necessary to create modifications in learners' concepts and schemata by a process of further socialization and experiential learning in the foreign language, which itself embodies the foreign culture. Since, however, the acquisition of the foreign language at language schools inevitably lags behind the maturation and socialization process, the use of the learners' first language has to be invoked to some extent in the modification of existing and still developing perceptions of culture and society.

There are, therefore, two possible approaches: first, the use of learners' first language as the medium of study of a foreign culture, taught according to the principles of appropriate disciplines, although without the intention of introducing the learner to the totality of the culture. Second, the integration of language and culture learning by using the language as a medium for the continuing socialization of students is a process which is not intended to imitate and replicate the socialization of native-speaker teachers but rather to develop students' cultural competence from its existing stage, by changing it into intercultural competence.

Bibliography

Ager, D. (1993) *Language Education for Intercultural Communication.* U.S: Multilingual Matters LTD.

Asante, M.K. (1990) *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication.* SAGE Publishing's.

Brannen, N. S. (1997) *Translation Where Cultures Meet: Translation J-E.* J-E Link, Inc.

Byran, M. (1989) *Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Education.* Multilingual Matters LTD.

Byran, M and Sarries, V. E. (1989) *Investigating Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Teaching.* Multilingual Matters LTD.

Byran, M. (1989) *Cultural Studies in Foreign Language Teaching.* Multilingual Matters LTD.

Brannen, N. S. (1997) *Communication in Japan and the United States.* State University of New York Press.

Clyne, M. (1994) *Intercultural communication.* Cambridge University Press.

Dodd, H.D. (1997) *Intercultural Communication.* Wm.c. Brown Publisher.

Hinde, R.A.(1997) *Non-verbal Communication.* Cambridge University Press.

Jandt, F. E. (2003) *Intercultural Communication: An Introduction.* London: Sage Publications.

Oatey, H. S. (2000) *Culturally Speaking: Managing Rapport Through Talk Across Culture.* London: Continuum.

Samovar, L. A. (1986) *Intercultural Communication: A Reader.* U.S: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Smith, E. L. (1997) *Discourse Across Cultures: Strategies in World Englishes.* U.S: Pentice Hall.

Taylor, H.M.(1979) *English and Japanese in Contrast.* U.S: Regents Publishing Company, Inc.

Toomey, S.T. (1991) *Cross-Cultural Interpersonal Communication.* SAGE Publishings.

Wiseman, L.R. (1993) *Intercultural Communication Competence.* International Education and Professional Publisher.