Cross Cultural Understanding Through Language

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CROSS CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING THROUGH LANGUAGE

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Much has been done to discover the place that language holds in the development of our communication and thought patterns. The methods through which members of various societies learn different attitudes and how their respective languages reflect and reinforce such patterns have also been studied in some depth with a number of world cultures. The interpersonal barriers and misunderstandings brought about by the dissimilarities between unconscious but powerful forces that culture has upon our thinking are understandably difficult to discern and thereby surmount. In this paper, I will demonstrate how the chances of achieving this aim may be enhanced through the learning of a second language.

Ethnocentrism is the attitude of judging one's own customs to be "best" or "right", while judging all foreign customs by one's personal values, thereby ignoring the merit of distinct customs in other settings. This attitude once served to protect a specific group, tribe or clan, as the associations within the group created loyalties that provided for their protection and survival; but in our modern world where everyday brings us nearer to our various neighbors, and considering the potential that we posses for massive destruction, such in-group/out-group mentality and lack of cross cultural understanding could lead to disaster. (Hanvey, pg. 19) This is a significant part of the value of finding ways to narrow the culture gap.
There are numerous ways in which learning a second language can affect the learner, but the enhancement of the ability to comprehend and empathize with a separate culture is, I believe, the most interesting, important, and elusive. To begin to illustrate what kind of understandings may come about through language study, allow me to first set forth some cultural differences between English speaking cultures and others which are reflected in language. In almost every other world language (perhaps every one), there are at least two words that say "you", three or four words being common, and up to twelve as in Viet Namese. (Rhinesmith, pg. 14) The different words may express singularity or plurality of reference, but there is also a distinction between status or social classes. An American student studying Spanish, for example, must come to understand to whom he should refer as "tu" and who should be addressed as "usted." Before learning this, He likely had little or no concept that such distinctions could be made through language, as English, and more particularly American culture tries to play down such differences, demonstrating our preference for equality which is so evident in almost all of our social structures.

The concept of time for English speakers is also at odds with most of the rest of the world. We tend to see time linearly, as solidly connected to nature itself, as sure as death and taxes, and this is partially responsible for our society being future oriented. When we do think on the past, it is usually to take lessons from it to be used in the future
or to nostalgically enjoy memories. (Hall, pg. 9) The words which we employ to describe the movement of time are prepositional, they are the same as those we use to describe space and distance. Contrast this to polychronic Latin American cultures, whose main expression signifying "a long time" is "mucho tiempo" (much time).

We have often heard people say that they "lost all track of time" or that someone "has no concept of time", but can you imagine if this were to actually happen to an entire culture? The Sioux Indians were such a group. Their vocabulary contained no word for time, and no accompanying concept to make such a word necessary until a social worker forced them to understand its importance by ensuring that bus schedules ran "on time" in order for them to be able to get along in the world outside of their reservation. (Hall, pg. 14)

In the past two decades, we have all become aware of the term "personal space" and its implications in America, but could we guess the extent to which such perceptions could vary among other groups? The underlying concept is that our personal space is an extension of our ego or of our very persona. Different distances are therefore appropriate in differing circumstances and with different people. The personal space that I demand is much greater for an intimidating stranger than for my girlfriend (where I tend to demand less rather than more space between us). The Arab locus of the ego is deep within their bodies, and so it shouldn't be too surprising that their lexicon contains no
word for "rape". (Hall, pg. 158) The Germans, on the other hand, are much more sensitive about their personal space, and consider looking into their homes and yards to be as real an intrusion as actually stepping inside. (Hall, pg. 121) This attitude is somewhat contained in their word "lebensraum" (living room), which was effectively used by Hitler as a psychological lever to motivate the oppressed Germans to conquest.

Whether these attitudes were built by the syntactic construct of the language, or the language was shaped by these attitudes may be speculated on, but the important thing now is to note that such thought patterns are perpetuated through language, and that second language acquisition creates a frame in which increased understanding of such concepts may rest. (Kuroda/Suzuki, pg. 153)

Once these concepts begin to be understood through a foreign language, they do not need to remain dormant while the speaker converses in her native tongue, but may then be utilized, though not as effortlessly, as any other concept.

Even when unconscious, these examples explain in part why the student of a second language may feel that his mind has been broadened and his understanding enlarged in respect to things other than just those pertaining to speaking or writing. The student will not only learn different things, but may also learn to learn in a different way. Teaching methods in world cultures vary from America's practical, hands on, and informal style, to Asia's and France's rote
memorization, all due to underlying values; but language itself sometimes has a hand in how a student learns in less visible ways, as in the case of Chinese students acquiring an ability for pattern recognition due to the intricate characters he must learn.

A popular saying in Europe, or at least in Spain, says, "Business is done in English, Romance in French, food discussed in Italian, and science in German; but Spanish is used to talk with God." While I can't vouch for the authenticity of all such claims, it is true that certain languages are predisposed to distinct patterns of conversation. Just as American cultural orientation contains an aspect of effort optimism, in which we believe that any problem can be solved through appropriate effort, (Steward, pg. 59) our efforts and values tend to turn toward the resolution of problems. With this in mind, note what occurred when a business class taught to internationally mixed classes—to half of them in French and to the other half in English (both halves being equally mixed). The French language class would regularly turn to highly stimulating intellectual discussions, but few practical conclusions; in English, it would not be long until someone asked, "So what?" and the class tried to become pragmatic. The teacher notes that the English language would hardly find the words to express the Francophone intellectual speculations.

Another benefit of studying a second language is an increased awareness of one's native grammar, accent, and
language shortcomings. An example of the latter is the Spanish ability to casually say, "It lost itself." and avoid blame for having lost anything.

Accompanying the cultural understanding enhancement discussed above, an increased awareness and appreciation or at least tolerance for other peoples' customs may come to the student. This may even be true among members of the same culture who speak with different styles. The difference between male and female speech within our own society is pronounced, and the lack of understanding of it leads to thousands of problems, large and small, on a daily basis. In American male speech, a "yes", "uh-huh", or even a nod of the head signifies agreement or at least, "I follow what you're saying so far." while the same words and actions when used by a female are merely tools to carry the conversation ahead by implicating that she is listening. Thereby comes the misrepresentation of many females as brainless and always agreeing with everything a man may say. On the other hand, females often complain that males are poor or non-listeners, when in fact, they are only reluctant to recognize the female's statement so as to not imply agreement. (Maltz/Borker, pg.202)

The preceding example may be closer to home and easier for us to understand and derive value from, but my intention was to use it to emphasize the fact that potential for misunderstanding across cultural boundaries is far greater than between males and females within our society, and that
the implications and results could be far more significant and
damaging than even our high divorce rate or the occurrence of
domestic violence nationally.

I hope that this paper has been successful in not only
illustrating the power that language has of communicating
cultural information, but also underscoring the urgent need
for the propagation of such. Methods should be developed and
instituted to maximize cross cultural understanding in
language courses. Thorough understanding of another culture--
transpception--may be impossible for most of us to ever attain,
and extensive discernment may take years of close contact with
such a group, (Hanvey, pg. 21) but every bit of toleration
that we can acquire is a trace of what is required for a more
peaceful world tomorrow, and perhaps its very survival.


