ON SUBTLE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN LINGUAL COMMUNICATION AND INTERLINGUAL MISCOMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The article aims at identifying some subtle distinctions and peculiarities of lingual communication and interlingual miscommunication. English as described is a preferred and increasingly accepted means of international and intercultural communication. Basic components and models of verbal communication are singled out. It is illustrated that communication is not a one-way process and that the feedback from the listener/reader will show how his message was interpreted. The article shows instances of verbal, oral and written monolingual and interlingual communication and miscommunication. It is confirmed that using the wrong word, or misunderstanding a speech or a remark, may lead to more waste of time, or even trouble, which is especially inadmissible for business and diplomatic communication. It is reaffirmed that you can only get what you want when you understand the other side and they understand you.

Keywords: monolingual communication, components, models, competence, language, diplomacy

1. Introduction

The world is not globalizing – it's already global. To many, globalization has meant that old systems and ways of thinking no longer work. Goods, money, and people now cross borders at astonishing speeds. While globalization didn't create many of today's economic problems and cultural clashes, it made us aware of them, which has made many people feel helpless to solve them. From the Towel of Babel on there have been countless examples of human's inability to understand the other human. This vitally important problem is feasible today, as well, especially when people speak different languages [1]. Language is an integral part of the human experience. The language we use to describe the

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things we do is a significant reflection of who we are at a given time in the culture. A language, designed and structured by pattern of culture, acts as a communicative tool. Language carries and transmits social/cultural traits through generations. Any language has a particular multi-level organization: its elements are organized in sets (paradigms) at various levels and a language speaker/writer is using the elements of these sets to generate a message intended for communication with other speakers/writers of this language and entirely incomprehensible for those who have no command of this language. Thus, a language may be regarded as a specific code, intended for information exchange between its users [2]. However, in the course of transferring information to one another, there is always a margin of error. This means that miscommunication is bound to occur. Because communication is so important to humans as a species, it is only natural that miscommunication brings with it some sort of consequence [3].

2. Main part

Communication as is known means sharing ideas and information. It includes all the verbal and non verbal signs to establish social interaction. The communication variety with one common language is the monolingual communication. Because we are highly social by nature, communication is vitally important as a tool for human beings. The need to communicate is an integral part of our existence. Verbal Communication is the most obvious form of communication [4]. In fact the actual process of verbal communication is fairly complicated. This type of interaction is primarily comprised of spoken words and written words however it also includes any interaction that results in words being communicated. For verbal communication to be effective the speaker/writer and listener/reader must share the same language and, less importantly, the same syntax. In some cases the interacting parties will share the same root language but have difficulty communicating due to differences in accent, grammatical structure, or use of slangs [5]. So, verbal communication can vary in form, for instance, it can be formal or informal, or personal or impersonal.

Traditionally four basic components of communication can be singled out: communication situations, consideration for others, how communication operates and effective performance [6, 7]. A communication situation can be defined as any contact between people, in which it is possible to accomplish goals. Before speaking, for instance, you should identify what can be accomplished by talking. Every communication act has a particular goal or goals, which can be roughly outlined in the following way:

- people communicate to give or to get information;
- people communicate to offer ideas, to express opinions, to change minds;
- people communicate to change other people's behaviour;
- people communicate to create a mood.

With regard to the subject, audience and occasion, in other words depending on the particular speech situation, it is always possible to single out one primary goal and secondary objectives.

The second component of effective communication, consideration for others, consists in the ability to discover the needs and concerns of others in order to adapt to them. It is important to be able to give the other person a good reason to listen to you. The utilitarian principle of effective communication is that everyone, involved in it, must gain. Obviously, it is vital to master the techniques of audience analysis, to familiarize yourself with their needs, motives and expectations.

It is also essential in terms of effective speaking to be aware of how communication operates. It is hardly possible to transmit your ideas directly into other people's minds. First of all the speaker must be very clear about what information he wants to get across and what language to use with regard to the speech situation and the participants involved. In any event there is always a chance that he will be misunderstood because of various communication barriers. The speaker must remember that communication is not a one-way process and that the feedback from the listener will show how his message was interpreted. Thus, it is important to understand that communication is not static and rigid, that it is a dynamic, flexible process, in which one has to be alert, adaptable and considerate.

The fourth basic component of effective verbal communication is effective performance, which has got to do with organizing and presenting in-formation. Basically, effective performance comprises five fundamental skills: synthesizing information to fit the speech situation and the audience; organizing information so that it could be understood by the audience; putting information into words that others will understand; speaking skilfully to be understood and to be interesting; responding and adjusting to the listeners' reactions.

It follows from the outline of effective communication components that communication is a fairly sophisticated process that involves an interrelated and interdependent group of elements working together as a whole to achieve a desired outcome of goal. The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point. To acquire and improve one's communication skills it is important to understand the fundamental principles of this process, which can be presented in the form of communication models. Shannon's model of the communication process may be considered, in important ways, the beginning of the modern field [8, 9]. Indeed, it is one of only a handful of theoretical statements about the communication process that can be found in introductory textbooks in both mass communication and interpersonal communication.

The basic components of the interactional verbal model communication may be distinguished as follows – sender (speaker, writer), message, channel, barriers, feedback, and receiver (listener, reader):

- Sender (encoder). Determines the goal of communication, encodes the information and creates a message, sends it to the receiver.

- Message. The information encoded by the sender can be verbal or non-verbal.
- Channel. The means by which the message is communicated (face-to-face, public address, telephone, radio, television, etc.)
- Barriers. Refer to any factors that interfere with the exchange of messages (physical or psychological factors, inaccurate or in sufficient encoding of the message and so on).
- Feedback. Informs the sender how the receiver has interpreted the message.
- Receiver (decoder). Decodes and interprets the message.

In some of the existing interactional models 'sender' and 'receiver' are viewed as a single component, because in a typical face-to-face interaction the participants alternate their roles as senders and receivers of messages. Some scholars insist on including one more component, 'situation', which in fact is a relevant factor, since it introduces the context of the interaction [10]. The process of language communication proper involves sending a message by a message sender to a message receiver – the sender encodes his mental message into the code of a particular language and the recipient decodes it using the same code. Messages are not always interpreted as we intend them. Osmo Wiio, a Finnish communication scholar who is best known for his somewhat facetious 'Wiio's laws' around communication, points out the messiness of communicating with others when he suggests the following maxims:

1. If communication can fail, it will.
2. If a message can be understood in different ways, it will be understood in just that way which does the most harm.
3. There is always somebody who knows better than you what you meant by your message.
4. The more communication there is, the more difficult it is for communication to succeed.

These tongue-in-cheek maxims are not real principles; they simply humorously remind us of the difficulty of accurate communication. 'Wiio's laws' are "humoristically formulated serious observations about how human communication usually fails except by accident" [*A commentary of 'Wiio's Laws - and Some Others'*, http://www.cs.tut.fi/~jkorpela/wiio, retrieved December 10, 2014].

This brings us by a natural transition to the question of the so-called 'linguistic competence'. The concept was first introduced by the American linguist Noam Chomsky as a part of the foundations for his Transformational - Generative Grammar in the 1950s, who based linguistic theory on an ideal speaker-listener with perfect linguistic knowledge, which is supposed to be unaffected by cognitive and situational factors during actual linguistic performance [11]. This knowledge allows speakers to speak the language fluently. 'Competence' is a better word here than 'ability' because, despite the general belief to the contrary, the learning of foreign languages is mainly a matter of hard work and is well within the powers of anyone who is not tone-deaf. Another American linguist, sociolinguist and anthropologist Del Hymes

objected to the marginalization of performance from the centre of linguistic inquiry and proposed the notion of 'communicative competence', or knowledge necessary to use language in social context, as an object of linguistic inquiry [12]. Most scholars now consider linguistic competence to be a part of communicative competence. They assert that communicative competence is based on a number of representations and knowledge structures underlying communication, which are used for both conveying and reading intentions. To understand and produce messages, we rely not only on our knowledge of the language at several levels (or nonverbal means to express ideas), general knowledge about the world, cultural schemata and represented constraints, specific situation models, and representations of our own mental and physical states, goals and intentions, but also assumptions about the other person(s) involved in the communication and about their goals, intentions, feelings, attitudes, opinions and knowledge [13]. However, it is a matter of some controversy to what extent we need explicit representations of our interlocutors' mental states and fully fledged theories of mind in each and every case of communication.

It is important to remember that communication skill is not something you are born with; there are a lot of people who fail to communicate their needs, opinions and ideas to others. Effective communication is a skill, which can be acquired. Expertise in communication can hardly be achieved without the awareness of the basic principles of communication, its nature, structure and forms [14]. Most of us are not good communicators by nature. Fortunately, learning to communicate in a powerful and effective manner is not rocket science. We can all learn how to choose the right words for the right situation, how to speak in a tone conducive to getting our message across, how to change our body language, and read the nonverbal signals that reveal their true thoughts and feelings, and how to listen properly.

Using written language or words to convey a message is another prevalent type of communication. Good communication is the lifeblood of organizations. Nowadays, the existing means of communication enable us to settle most business problems without personal contacts. A very large part of the business of the world is conducted by means of correspondence. Therefore it is extremely important to be able to write good business letters – letters that represent one's self and one's organization to best advantage. In a speech to the Japan Business English Association, Professor Francis W. Weeks identified one of the most difficult items in business correspondence and illustrated it with an anecdote: "The number one problem, in my opinion, will always be the manner and style of our approach to people through the medium of written communication. One aspect of this problem can be expressed this way: 'How direct or indirect should our communications be?' To be completely direct and forthright, striking to the heart of the matter immediately, is also to be blunt and perhaps offensive. To be indirect is to be polite and considerate to the reader. 'Oh, no' say some writers. 'To be direct is to be efficient, to save time, effort, words, and money. To be indirect is to waste time and be wordy'. Nearly ten years ago when I had a

sabbatical leave of absence from the University of Illinois, I was at the Douglas Aircraft Company in California studying the communications of their Marketing Department. I remember one day reading a letter from Japan – two pages long – written in very good English, but I could not determine what the writer was driving about. He seemed to go round and round his subject matter without ever coming to the point. I put the letter aside intending to go back to it later; then several hours afterwards, 'the light dawned'. He was saying 'No'. And he was saying it as politely and tactfully and indirectly as he knew how. I know an American executive who would have handled the situation far differently. He would have written 'No' in big letters across the face of the letter he was answering and sent it back to the writer. Even direct, efficient American writers would characterize that as brutal treatment of a correspondent." [15] Part of the problem, of course, is that notions of courtesy in Japanese business dealings are quite different from those prevailing in the United States. Yet research has shown that even in the United States, it is more effective to present good news directly and bad news indirectly. This principle is true because people form their impressions and attitudes very early when reading letters [15]. Here is an example. A college student who had applied for a scholarship received a letter explaining that he had not won it. The letter began: "I'm sorry, but you were not awarded the Smith Scholarship". In disappointment, the student threw the letter on his desk and left his apartment. Three days later he picked up the letter and read further. It went on to say that the committee thought his record was so strong that he should call immediately if he were interested in another, but lesser-known, scholarship. The student called but was told that the other scholarship had been awarded to someone else. Since the student had not called immediately, everyone had assumed he was not interested [16].

If, however, the communication process involves two languages — bilingual communication for the sender and receiver – than the peculiarity of this communication type lies in the fact that decoding and encoding of mental messages is performed simultaneously in two different languages. However, a language is a code unlike any other and its peculiarity as a code lies in its ambiguity – as opposed to a code proper a language produces originally ambiguous messages which are specified against context, situation and background information. And the ambiguity of a language makes it necessary to use situation and context to properly generate and understand a message (i.e. encode and decode it) [17].

Native speakers of English, for example, have linguistic competence of the English language sounds, sentence structures and word meanings. Like any other, it is a constantly changing entity. This means that it grows and renews itself by a never-ending process of taking up new words and expressions and pushing worn-out ones into the background to languish or die. The process is slow: each age adds something to the national heritage, something that is typical of the spirit of that age. The result is clearly seen in the writing and speech of that age. It is almost impossible to get through a day without using, or hearing,

some catch phrase or other. Many of the everyday phrases used appear to be modern, but have been in existence for centuries – with some originating more than 2,000 years ago. They have become such a normal part of everyday conversation that we use, and accept, them automatically – knowing something of their meaning, but not always their full implication. However in every literary language there is also a great number of unmotivated combinations, whose meaning cannot be deduced from the meaning of their components, but the functional and semantic potentiality of words is fully revealed in a word combination or sentence. A mere catalogue of words and their meanings is insufficient. Special attention must be paid to instances where gradual changes of meaning are evident, for these may eventually enrich the semantic structure of the word. Here seems to be debates about what it means to know a word as well as what aspects are involved in this knowledge. Knowing a word implies knowing the limitations imposed on the use of the word according to variation of function and situation; the network of associations between the word and other words in the language; the different meanings associated with the word and the semantic value of the word. Besides, in combination with other words, a word may give rise to certain associations which are not directly connected with its given meanings [18].So, communicative competence means to 'know' a language; in addition to speakers having mastery over the structural elements of language, according to communicative competence they must also be able to use those structural elements appropriately in different social situations

Using the wrong word, or misunderstanding a speech or a remark, may lead to more waste of time trouble, or even trouble. However, the beauty of it all is that generally, people laugh when such speech errors are made. If somebody knows you're a foreigner, you often get the benefit of the doubt. For instance, English is not easy for people whose languages are logical and mean exactly what they say. There are numerous anecdotes about the difficulties of people travelling in foreign countries without knowledge of the language of that country. This is well shown by the story of the Frenchman who came to England for the first time. In the train between Dover and London he kept leaning out of the window, the better to see the landscape. Just before Sevenoaks he showed signs of leaning out again. An Englishman in the same compartment, aware of the tunnel, shouted to him, 'Look out!' The Frenchman took the advice literally.

The man who speaks in a foreign tongue, not his own, is to a certain extent wearing a disguise. If one wants to discover his ideas 'de derrière la tête' (hidden/veiled thoughts) encourage him to use his own language. This shows one of the many aspects of linguistic difficulties encountered in communication. At the present time, such difficulties are due to an increasing number of causes: a greater number of official languages in use; differences in the 'language convention' between nations supposedly speaking the same language, take for instance, Belgium, France, Switzerland, and Canada; England, Ireland, Scotland and the United States; Spain and Latin-American countries. Even amongst countries speaking the same language, the same word sometimes has different

connotations. Knowledge of foreign languages is important, but the English language is at present the language of the world. Over the past several decades, English has acquired a global presence [19]. Currently, over 1.5 billion people around the world use English as their first, second, or foreign language. English is the dominant or official language in over 75 countries. It is a preferred and increasingly accepted means of international and intercultural communication [20]. It is the language in all walks of life, in politics and diplomacy, the language of science and technology, the language of culture and business.

A foreign language word is considered to be a 'cognate' if it is similar in both sound and meaning to a word in one's native language, and they both descended from the same source, either from a mother language or through borrowing. These cognates happen frequently when two languages borrow heavily from the same language. It's not uncommon for foreign language speakers to accidentally use a 'false cognate'. These are, as you might suspect, words that sound very similar in two languages, but have different meanings. Sometimes, the mistakes can be innocent, but sometimes… "A little Learning is a dang'rous thing", Alexander Pope, one of England's most notable 18th-century poets and satirists, famously wrote in his poem 'An Essay on Criticism' [http://www.enotes.com/topics/an-essay-criticism-alexander-pope#summary-the-work]. Nearly any foreign language one studies will have some sounds that are different from those in your native language. There's no shortage of ways to mess up in a foreign language. Between treacherous false-cognates, deceitful second meanings, grammatical gaffes and malicious mispronunciations, sometimes a second of speech may seem like an ocean of opportunity for offensive communication. Of course, in politics and diplomacy even more than in private life the greatest difficulty is to know exactly what you are talking about, and this involves a practice of the delicate and precise art of definition [21]. It goes without saying, any diplomat has the free choice of using any of the languages he can speak, especially if he knows his counterpart's linguistic background. Sometimes even to make the right decision regarding the language use requires a sense of diplomatic approach. In certain cases it might be tactical to choose the language that he can speak not so well. At the same time, it's a sign of good-will, politeness or special respect if someone greets their counterpart in their own language. Realistically, however, most of us don't do much to become fluent in other languages [22]. Since English is in a fair way becoming the 'lingua franca' of the world [23], certain contemporaries discoursing on the qualities needed not only in an ordinary person or a business person, not to speak of a diplomatist, have even gone so far as to deny the importance of linguistic proficiency. Say, for instance, an amateur diplomat acquires a smattering of a foreign language and sets out to make use of it. When this happens it is time to take cover, for although many of his mistakes are merely amusing, some of them lead to trouble and misunderstandings not easily dispelled. Literal translations from one language into another can produce far from comic results: "Monsieur l'Ambassadeur, je dois dire que j'aiété deçu par votre proposition" (I must say that I have been disappointed by your proposal).

Thus spoke a French diplomat to his British colleague. They both thought they knew each other's language. In their conference each spoke his own tongue, without an interpreter. But, in this case, the British diplomat was very offended. Misled by a similarity of sound (by one of these 'false friends') he understood: "I have been deceived by your proposal" [24]. Naturally, he resented the remark.

3. Conclusions

In explaining the notion of communication, one may focus on three aspects of communication: communication as information processing, as interaction, and as situational adaptation. Communication is a social interaction and can, therefore, be described in terms of collective action and cooperation. Added to that one may say that there are several ways to overcome the problem of communication between people who speak different mother tongues. None of these ways is ideal. One solution, obviously, is that one of the interlocutors speaks the language of the other. Problems may arise: the knowledge of the language may not be adequate, one side is making a concession and the other has an immediate and significant advantage, there are possible, say, political implications, it may be difficult to apply in multilateral diplomacy, etc. A second possibility is that both sides use a third, neutral, language. A potential problem may be that neither side possesses full linguistic knowledge and control, leading to possible bad miscommunication. Nevertheless, this method is frequently applied in international practice because of its political advantages. A third formula, using interpreters, is also very widely used, particularly in multilateral diplomacy or for negotiations at a very high political level – not only for reasons of equity, but because politicians and statesmen often do not speak foreign languages. To sum up, a language, which makes possible communication among people, is part of all human activities, of life itself. You can only get what you want when you understand the other side and they understand you.

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