

Cultural Linguistics: The Key to Study Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: In recent years, studies on intercultural communication in applied linguistics witnessed the emergence of several approaches to the study of intercultural communication, which focused primarily on miscommunication, chiefly between native and non-native speakers of English. The new field of cultural linguistics has implications and contributions for second language learning and intercultural communication. Cultural Linguistics has provided a productive method to deal with the investigation of varieties of English. It focuses on the interrelationship between language, culture, and conceptualizations. Conceptualizations on intercultural competence are of fundamental importance in applied linguistics because without a valid framework we cannot meaningfully assess people's competence in interacting across different cultures. The notable development in intercultural communication among individuals from many cultural backgrounds has offered new chances, as well as challenges, for making more researches on intercultural communication and its complex nature. This paper's trend stands for the premise that varieties of English of different cultural groups might differ from one to another at the level of cultural conceptualizations. So, this research provides an account of the rapid increase of Cultural Linguistics and its application to the study of intercultural communication. Furthermore, this theoretical explanation will be followed by an illustration in Cultural Linguistics focusing on researches of embodied conceptual metaphor together with studies of varieties of English. Finally, the present paper will examine how the implications of Cultural Linguistics can be applied in solving problems of intercultural communication.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, Cultural Linguistics, Conceptualizations, Miscommunication.

Introduction

Intercultural communication, between people of different cultural backgrounds, has always been and will likely remain an important issue in human life. It reveals that the future of human community life is necessarily linked to our attitude towards intercultural communication, which is considered an important field of research that relies on widespread discourses on culture and cultural differences. The frequent overlap between the speaker's voice and the discourses that are included in it also makes it a very problematic field. Cultural linguistics comes to explore and develop the principles of communication that create the basis for intercultural communication. This paper provides a framework of theoretical explanation of cultural linguistics and its application to the study of intercultural communication. Furthermore, it aims to illustrate the effects of cultural linguistics that can be applied to solving problems of miscommunication.

A. Intercultural Competence

1. *What is Culture?*

It has been affirmed that the issue of intercultural communication and competence is closely related to the issues of culture. Culture is a very broad concept which covers with values, beliefs, attitudes, and ways of behavior, norms, traditions, and language. There is no single way

to define culture. According to Kottak (1991, p.17, in Wikan 1994, p. 127), culture is “distinctly human, transmitted through learning, traditions and customs that govern behavior and beliefs”. McDaniel, Samovar and Porter’s (2009) define culture as a set of social rules. These rules provide a framework which attributes meaning to events, objects and people. McDaniel, Samovar and Porter (2009, p. 11) explain that we start learning cultural rules since the moment we are born. We learn proper cultural rules and behavior by listening to others, by observing them and most important; growing up by practicing them ourselves. It is easier for us to start the conversation with people who belong to our own culture because we have learned the social rules, and we can choose appropriate patterns of behavior in any situation. On the other side, it’s the contrary when we meet foreign people; the level of social insecurity becomes much higher, because we do not really know what behavior is appropriate with a foreigner who was born and grew up in a different culture, with different attitudes.

2. What is Competence

UNESCO (2013, p 12) defines the word “competence” as “having sufficient skill, ability, knowledge, or training to permit appropriate behavior, whether words or actions, in a particular context”. It includes cognitive (knowledge), functional (application of knowledge), personal (behavior) and ethical (principles guiding behavior) components. Spitzberg (2009, p. 381) writes that competence is defined as ability or a set of skilled behaviors. He, however, points out that any behavior or ability can be considered competent in one context and incompetent in another. Therefore he concludes that competence cannot be defined by any behavior or ability.

3. What is intercultural competence?

Intercultural Competence is mostly defined as the knowledge, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of a host culture (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Kim (2001) recognized that competence is required in a range of areas including language and host-culture norms, while Holopainen and Björkman (2005) stressed the importance of willingness to get involved with host nationals. There is an emerging consensus among scholars that ICC consists of cognitive, affective, and behavioral attributes (Bennett, 2009). Spitzberg (1991) offered the following distinction: Competent communication is interaction that is perceived as effective in fulfilling certain rewarding objectives in a way that is also appropriate to the context in which the interaction occurs. This latter definition provides help for understanding the concept communicative and intercultural competence in many ways. The key word is perceived as it means that competence is determined by the people who are interacting with each other.

According to Chen (2009, p. 394), intercultural communication competence is the “key to cultivating the ability to tolerate and mutually respect cultural differences”. He mentioned that this kind of competences contributes in a great way to the development of knowledge and creativity for a peaceful and productive society. Furthermore, he points out that global mindset is the key element in the development of intercultural competence.

Liu (2012, p. 270) studies the question of communication competence with reference to different authors. Communicative competence is “a person’s capacity to interact effectively with the environment” (White, 1959) states “an ability to accomplish interpersonal tasks”.

Liu concludes (2012, p. 270) that the key elements, which unite all the definitions, are effectiveness and appropriateness. Liu (2012) defines “effectiveness” as “individual’s ability to achieve the intended goal through interaction with the other communicator or environment”. Spitzberg (2009) defines “effectiveness” as “accomplishment of valued goals or rewards relative to costs and alternatives”.

“Appropriateness”, according to Liu (2012), is “individual’s ability to act and speak in a way that leads to positive communication outcomes (or avoids negative outcomes)”. Spitzberg (2009) understands appropriateness as a behavior, which fits into the context; or at least it is when “valued rules, norms, and expectancies of the relationship are not violated significantly”. Moreover, Liu (2012) writes that there are linguistic and cultural 26 differences, which distinguish intercultural competence from general communication competence. Dahl (2001, p.175) illustrates that when people with cultural diversity meet or communicate, general communicative competence might be insufficient, and this opens the door for a specific type of competence that is intercultural competence.

All what was described above has given a general idea of what intercultural competence is. It is an ability to act appropriately in a given situation in relation to other people with cultural diversity.

B. Cultural Linguistics

1. *What is Cultural Linguistics?*

Cultural Linguistics is a multidisciplinary field of research that focuses on the relationship between language, culture, and conceptualization (Palmer, 1996; Sharifian, 2011). The concept “cultural linguistics” was first used by a pioneer of cognitive linguistics, Ronald Langacker when he explained the relationship between grammar and cultural knowledge. He maintained that “the advent of cognitive linguistics can be a signal to a return to cultural linguistics. Principles of Cognitive linguistic identify cultural knowledge as the foundation lexis, as well as grammar”. (1994, p. 31).

The role of culture in shaping language and influencing it in all levels was not effectively dealt with until the book of *Toward a Theory of Cultural Linguistics* (1996) was published, by Gary B. Palmer, a linguistic anthropologist from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in southern Nevada. Palmer argued that cognitive linguistics can be immediately applied to the study of language and culture and their correlation.

Palmer proposed that “language is an act of uttering verbal symbols that are formed in imagery, which is culturally created” (3). He claimed that imagery includes all aspects of language, including figurative language, semantics, grammar, discourse, and phonology. His proposal called for close links between three approaches in anthropological linguistics and Cognitive Linguistics, as follows:

Cognitive linguistics can be tied in to three traditional approaches that are central to anthropological linguistics: Boasian linguistics, ethnosemantics (ethno-science), and the ethnography of speaking. To the synthesis that results I have given the name cultural linguistics. (Palmer 1996,p .5).

Palmer’s proposal can be summarized as follows:

1. Boasian linguistics, named after the German-American anthropologist Franz Boas, who related language with people's mental life and culture, and these linguistic types aim to affect the thought styles of their speakers (Lucy, 1992).
2. Ethno-semantics "is the study of the ways in which different cultures organize and categorize domains of knowledge, such as those of plants, animals, and kin". (Palmer 1996, p. 19).
3. The ethnography of speaking, or the ethnography of communication, largely associated with the work of Dell Hymes (1974), explores culturally distinctive means and modes of speaking in general. He focused on how the sociocultural context influenced the ways in which speakers perform communicatively. He claimed that the competence that is needed for the conduct of social life includes more than just linguistic competence. He suggested the concept of communicative competence, in which the competence contains suitable standards of the use of language in several sociocultural contexts.

For Palmer, these three traditional approaches, indirectly or directly, show a great concern in cognition and awareness, and none of them participates with the cognitive features of language and culture. Palmer draws the gap that could be filled by cognitive linguistics, with its emphasis on the relationship between language and cognition, as conceptualization.

Palmer supposed that the connection between Cognitive Linguistics and Cultural Linguistics could provide Cultural Linguistics with a valid and a solid intellectual perception. Though, cognitive linguistics started to be criticized for not having a strong cognitive base, in the sense of cognitive representations, structure, and processes (Peeters, 2001).

Furthermore, Cultural Linguistics opened a new path in terms of developing a theoretical framework that would present an incorporated understanding and explanation of both concepts; cognition and culture, as related to Cultural Linguistics. Cultural cognition developed its concern to focus more on collectivism and move beyond the level of the individual; that is it worked to present a deep multidisciplinary illustration of the collective cognition that describes a cultural community. Several cognitive scientists and researchers have worked on cognition as collective unit or one entity. (Clark and Chalmers 1998; Sutton 2005, 2006; Wilson, 2005).

Language is considered as a "collective memory bank" (wa Thiong'o, 1986) of the cultural cognition. Many aspects of language are shaped by the cultural cognition that has prevailed at different phases in the history of a speech community, and these phases can be traced in the present linguistic practice. So, language can be viewed as a central device for storing as a memory bank and for communicating and transmitting cultural cognition.

"Cultural Schema," "Cultural Category" (including "cultural prototype"), and "Cultural Metaphor" are tools used to study and analyze the features of cultural cognition, and they are known by "cultural conceptualizations." These analytical tools are seen as existing at the level of the individual as well as that of the collective cultural cognition. Cultural schemas are, culturally speaking, considered as sub-class of schemas; that is, they are taken from people's cultural experiences. (D'Andrade, 1995; Shore, 1996).

An important class of cultural conceptualizations is "cultural Categories." We tend to categorize every single entity around us, for example "clothes" and "food," and we tend to join

certain prototypes with such categories. However, these categories and their joined prototypes may differ from one culture to another.

2. Cultural Linguistics and studies on Conceptual Metaphors

Cultural Linguistics is related to cultural conceptual metaphors, or what is called cultural metaphors, for instance, the class of cultural metaphors that reflect human body parts. These cultural metaphorical jargons reflect and mirror conceptualizations of body parts as the seat/center of beliefs, thoughts, emotions, language, etc. As an example, expressions like “my heart has been stolen!”, and “you broke my heart!” illustrated a heart’s conceptualization as the seat of feeling. Research on Cultural Linguistics has showed that such conceptualizations have their origins in particular cultural traditions. (Sharifian et al, 2008).

3. Cultural Linguistics and Studies on Varieties of English

Varieties of English have been well explored by Cultural Linguistics. This research’s tendency stands around the principle that varieties of English may be different from one to another according to the level of cultural conceptualizations because those varieties of English have emerged from various cultural communities. That is, a lexical item, for example, “family,” as used by different varieties of English may be associated with different cultural schemas or cultural categories (Sharifian 2005).

Through the lens of Cultural Linguistics, Wolf and Polzenhagen (Polzenhagen and Wolf, 2007; Wolf, 2008; Wolf and Polzenhagen, 2009) have illustrated conceptualizations of the African community in African varieties of English. Wolf (2008, p. 368) claimed that this “cultural model involves a cosmology and relates to such notions as the continuation of the community, the members of the community, witchcraft, the acquisition of wealth, and corruption, which find expression in African English.” For example, by analyzing speech Cameroon English (e.g: “they took bribes from their less fortunate brothers”), Wolf observes that the central conceptual metaphors in that variety of English are kinship is community and community is kinship (2008, p. 370).

4. Cultural Linguistics and Intercultural Communication

Several studies have shown that, in certain contexts, intercultural communication, particularly miscommunication, reflect changes in the ways of conceptualization by various groups of people, as they draw on their different schemas, categories, and cultural metaphors. Wolf and Polzenhagen (2009, p. 183) notice that “cross-cultural variation at the conceptual level calls for a strongly meaning-oriented and interpretive approach to the study of intercultural communication,” and that is what Cultural Linguistics has to focus on. An example of this is the following:

Mr. Anderson (Australian) and Roya (Iranian) are neighbours. Each month when mowing his lawn, Mr. Anderson mows Roya’s front lawn as well. She is very pleased, and one day says to him:

Roya: “You always make me ashamed by mowing my lawn.” (Mr. Anderson decided to no longer mow her lawn from that date.) (Sharifian and Jamarani 2011, p.237).

When she was asked to analyze and talk about the situation, Roya maintained that Mr. Anderson's behavior was weird, because he stopped mowing her lawn when she "expresses thanks" to him.

From the perspective of the Anglo-Australian cultural conceptualizations, Mr. Anderson had been understood that he made Roya "embarrassed" by mowing her lawn, suggesting that he made her feel ashamed and guilty for not having a responsibility to do her duties herself.. However, Roya has, in this event, drawn on the Persian cultural schema of "being embarrassed," which is often related to the speech act of expressing appreciation (Sharifian and Jamarani, 2011). The concept of "embarrassment" related with appreciation is meant to deliver the interlocutor's awareness that the other person has spent sometimes power in providing the speaker with services that they were under no obligation to be requested. The speaker admits this by expressing "embarrassment" statements, as if guilty and uncomfortable because of this awareness. Therefore, the English expression of "embarrassment" used in this context by Roya is in fact a heightened expression of thankfulness and appreciation. The other speaker in these cases is expected to respond with statements that would functionally be equal to the English expressions "You're welcome, that's my pleasure".

Conclusion

This paper provides an illustration of Cultural Linguistics and its analytical tools and explores the potential of this approach for studying intercultural communication. Applying Cultural Linguistics in the field of intercultural communication has resulted in a great development in the study and exploration of intercultural communication between people from different cultures. This successful result is due to the study of language, at all levels, less likely to be interested in it compared to grammar and phonology, and therefore more likely to cause miscommunication. Cultural Linguistics also shows an evolution in the study of intercultural communication in terms of defining the type of competence that is required for a successful intercultural communication by using appropriate cultural concepts during intercultural communication.

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