

(Mis-) Communication across Cultures: East and West*

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Introduction

This presentation begins the 5th International Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication. The first of this series of conferences was in 1985, in Seoul, Korea. Since then we have alternated sides of the Pacific: San Antonio, Texas, in 1989; Tainan, Taiwan in 1991; San Antonio, Texas, in 1993. The 6th International Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication will be Tempe, Arizona, in 1997. Our current plans suggest that the 1999 conference will be in Hokkaido, Japan. During these ten years since our first conference, other organizations have also been studying the topic of cross-cultural or intercultural communication. Many thousands of scholars around the world are interested in the topic. The interest has grown as modern media technology allows worldwide instantaneous sending of information. Therefore, it is possible to communicate instantly around the world and it is possible to miscommunicate instantly around the world. That is, it is possible for the information being sent through the media to be misunderstood in a number of ways. The study of cross-cultural communication is now needed even more since a growing number of countries are receiving television and other media from abroad and since more people are moving to or traveling in foreign places. Studies and training are needed not only to maximize accurate communication but also to minimize the miscommunication that inevitably occurs in new situations.

My remarks on cross-cultural communication and miscommunication are organized under four headings:

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- (1) cross-cultural or intercultural communication as a field
- (2) language as a basic study in cross-cultural communication
- (3) the different depths of the cultural values underlying language and communication in general and
- (4) a conclusion which includes one model for research projects on cross-cultural communication.

Cross-Cultural Communication

The first topic deals with the field itself. The rapid growth in numbers of intercultural communication scholars and studies led to a curious question being asked last fall. The incoming president of an international communication organization asked this question in a newsletter: "Can Communication be a discipline?" He was looking at the complexities of the study of communication and the wide range of expertise necessary to perform the studies. The answer to his question is clear: the study of communication is an inherently interdisciplinary field; it is not a discipline.

Furthermore, the study of communication as it occurs across cultural boundaries involves an even wider range of disciplines. The number of scholarly specialties at this conference over the past ten years shows that an understanding of the topic of cross-cultural communication requires expertise from almost every area of human study. Scholars who remain in their own small part of the overall field may do fine work. However, their work is better informed when it overlaps with work in related areas. With these conferences we want scholars to share their insights across the wide spectrum of studies and perhaps to plan cooperative projects.

To name only twenty areas of study at these conferences, we have anthropology, area studies, art, business, communication, computer simulations of culture, drama, education, history, international studies, journalism, language and culture, language studies, linguistics, literature, political science, psychology, religion, sociology, and speech. It is important to have scholars from many disciplines and it is also important in cross-cultural studies to have scholars from many cultures involved in their own studies and in joint studies. Over these past five conferences, we have had scholars from some three dozen countries and five continents. The proceedings of the conferences and our related journal, *Intercultural Communication Studies*, have included several joint studies.

Language

The second of the four topics is language. Certainly communication involves more than language, but language remains the basic means of communication between

humans. In the past three-quarters of a century, linguistics has developed from a relatively restricted study of phonology, lexicon, morphology, syntax, language history, comparative language studies and so on. By the middle of this century linguists were looking at such topics as systematic differences between linguistic systems and the cultural systems as codified in the lexical systems of two languages. Since there are hundreds of language systems and since the cultural values underlying the language systems are difficult to study, there is much work left to be done in this field.

In this short presentation, we will look briefly at only a few of the language-related topics in cross-cultural studies.

The first point to be made is that humans seem to have some universal experiences. In my classes on literature in translation, students read translations of some poetry of the East and I have found that they learn to appreciate it with little difficulty. Even with the great difference in the languages and cultures, some poetry can be understood as if it speaks directly to the human heart. The early poetry of a culture often is a good starting point for understanding the ethos of a people. To the Chinese scholar Confucius, an education should start with the reading of the *Shih Ching*, a book of ancient poems and songs going back for centuries. One of the poems in the *Shih Ching* reads this way in Robert Payne's translation:

The white moon is rising
 Oh lady so lovely and bright
 Why am I enchanted?
 Why am I consumed with grief?

The moon in rising
 Is like the splendor of my lady
 Why am I caught in these chains?
 Why am I consumed with grief?

The moon rising in splendor
 Is the light of my love
 Why am I forsaken?
 Why am I consumed with grief?¹

In addition to the basic story of love and grief, this example in the original undoubtedly includes poetic and other elements which are not perceived by the reader from another culture. Even so, at one level there is a communication of content and emotion. We

cannot appreciate the subtle elements in poetry of a much different culture and a much different time, but we can understand part of the poem. Even in languages and cultures which share many features, there are connotations and nuances which may be easily missed or misunderstood. As the language and cultures as further apart, the difficulties in understanding can increase.

Let us take this series of conferences for an example. For each conference we include the phrase East and West. As we look at the cultural groups in the countries around the rim of the Pacific Ocean, we see cultures based on much different foundations and we see languages that differ in all elements of language design. As a result, we have the constant possibility of major miscommunications across the many cultural boundaries.

The most frequent attempt at a solution to this problem of potential miscommunication is a method that has been used for millennia. The two groups decide to use the language of one side or they decide to use a third language which both sides know. In either case many of the fundamental problems remain in terms of potential miscommunication. As we all know, the translation of individual words seems at first to be simple. Yet, as we get further and further from words for physical objects, the problems in translation multiply.

In language classes we develop the linguistic competence of our students. In our university programs we develop the overall communicative competence as well. In the USA, the primary languages which are studied have been Spanish, German, and French. The texts and videos for these languages are well developed, since these language have been studied for many decades and the cultural backgrounds are part of general Western culture. In the USA our work on intercultural communication competence for our students is not so well developed, especially for non-Western languages. We have been and are working on this area and must continue to do so. This conference is a sign of the great interest in continuing the study of cross-cultural communication: East and West.

Language and culture study in general are the most basic methods for overcoming cross-cultural miscommunications and misunderstandings. As we train our students in our classes, we also encourage them to travel to a country in which their target language is spoken. We hope that, if possible, they will be able stay a year or semester while living with native speakers of the target language. Through their training and experience, they may begin to understand where the underlying cultural meanings of words and sentences and nonverbal communication in general differ in ways new and strange to them. Thus in a full program of language classes which includes a period of time in the target culture, the students are supposed to learn not only how to communicate across language structures but also how to avoid some of the difficulties in cross-cultural communication. The language program and experience in the target culture are designed

for them to learn to identify miscommunications and how best to overcome them. However, as we know, many students do not learn what we hope that they will learn. Also, unfortunately, some of the people involved in the cross-cultural teaching programs do not know all they should know about the subject. Experience in a different culture and knowledge of that culture as learned from a book are not guarantees that real understanding will occur.

Let me take an extreme example. Many of us know someone who spent twenty years living within another culture, perhaps even using its language on a regular basis, and yet who knows very little about the subtleties of the other language, of the underlying behavioral differences, or of the underlying values of the other culture. One of my favorite examples is the American who spent years in Japan and thought he had a great sense of humor for the Japanese. His humor provoked smiles and a type of laughter, but he apparently did not realize that the smiles and laughs were often only from embarrassment—at times acute embarrassment. Some of his Japanese colleagues told me that they were very uncomfortable in such a situation and sought to avoid the scholars company when possible. Some early training in understanding the nonverbal communication system in Japan might have helped this scholar avoid such difficulties in interpersonal communication.

The point that I am suggesting is a simple one. Students can use well-informed education and training in the interactional situations that they will encounter. This training is of course one basic area of cross-cultural communication studies. Often but not always the preliminary training helps the students avoid or overcome the worst situations and helps them continue to develop in their interpersonal communication skills across cultural boundaries. In scholastic cross-cultural study, it seems obvious that, for example, people in international business should understand the need for knowledge of the other cultural, of potential misunderstanding, and of the other well known problems of doing business internationally. This statement ought to be unnecessary after decades of study of this issue. Yet, every week or even more often we read of business people misunderstanding the different patterns of communication in another culture.

On the language level alone, given the huge vocabularies and the complexities of levels of meaning in any language, many scholars will spend decades to explore and provide material for cross-cultural understanding. When we add the complexities of culture, the problem areas multiply. We will now turn to a few comments on the study of culture in cross-cultural communication.

Culture

A language is always set in a complex of cultural values and these values must be understood or the language itself will be misunderstood. For convenience sake we can divide culture into Popular Culture, High Culture, and culture as an underlying complex of values. The Popular or Daily Culture of another group seems to interest most of our students. The different foods and the preparation of those foods, the holidays, the school schedules and so on catch the attention of our students. The High Culture of another group is also inherently interesting. The great literary works, the enduring architecture, the classical music and so on are avenues to understanding some parts of the other culture.

As we move further from the more visible parts of the other culture, the research is more difficult. In the textbooks on cross-cultural or intercultural communication, some of the deeper elements of culture are discussed.²

The social organization of a culture is part of the students study. For example, the importance of the family, the hierarchy of older brother or sister and younger brother or sister can be observed. I have found that the classic Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* can help the student understand the importance of family structure in China.

The attitude system, which can be defined as a learned tendency to respond in certain ways, can be studied by the student.

The values system includes such qualities such as usefulness, aesthetics, goodness.

The belief system is often tied to one or more religious systems. They are usually normative and inform the person what is good and bad, true and false, and so on.

The world view of a culture deals with the cultures orientation toward such fundamental issues as God, human nature, the universe. The world view is at such a deep level in the person that it is taken for granted and rarely even brought to the level of conscious thought.

These last few topics are crucial to cross-cultural communication because misunderstandings at these levels can cause communication to cease or can cause offense. Since belief system and world view involve conceptions of right and wrong, good and evil, misunderstandings which are based on these levels can cause one person to consider the other person to be hypocritical or evil. We will return to this point below. The textbooks on this subject vary somewhat in their treatment of these deeper levels, but the general idea is the same.

One way that textbooks may interest our students in another culture is the inclusion of information on popular culture and high culture. Videos and now CD disks are available to supplement the textbooks for many languages. At some point in the language program, it is crucial to begin to include the underlying cultural values upon

which even the group's language itself has been developed. The more distant the two culture are, the more important to include some information. Especially as the religions and ethical systems of cultures differ, the difficulties caused by miscommunication at the deepest level are increased.

Before turning to examples of this miscommunication, a few comments on the inclusion of language and culture in language textbooks are in order. In my classes on language and culture over the past 25 years, we have charted the development of language textbooks in the USA. The good texts now include language structure and vocabulary as before and they have added or re-added more information on Popular and High culture. The texts have also increased the amount of information on nonverbal communication and on some parts of potential cross-cultural misunderstandings. Some of the texts are including some information on the deeper underlying cultural values, although the information is often rather superficial. As usual in the area of language study, the texts on German, French and Spanish often lead the way, but better textbooks on such languages as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean are now available. These texts mark an advance in the cross-cultural study of last few decades.

In the research on the importance of understanding the cultural values associated with a language, there are two examples in American English that demonstrate how differences in a belief system or world view can cause a lack of understanding or a potentially serious misunderstanding. It is this area of study that is my current area of interest in the field of cross-cultural communication. In the last few paragraphs, we will look at two examples.³

Example 1: Rights

The first example is a fundamentally important one in the United States of American: Rights. The average US citizen has no clear idea of the source of rights or even their philosophical definition. Even so, at an unconscious level, rights are considered to be fundamental. The basic concept of rights is seen as part of the spiritual nature of humans and therefore to the American these human rights are immutable. In the Bible story about Moses, the Bible listed the Ten Commandments. Each Commandment can be seen to involve a right. The Commandment against murder means there is a Right to Life. The Founding Fathers of the United States of American mentioned some of these human rights in the Declaration of Independence in 1776. A second type of right in the view of Americans is a Civil or Constitutional right, which are rights based on the U.S. Constitution, as for example the Right to Free Speech. A third type of rights is a legal right, which are rights based on specific legislation at the national, state, county, or city levels.

It should be clear from this brief set of definitions that the idea of "Rights" to average Americans is based on a particular religious system, a particular Constitution, and various specific codes of law. However, the average American tends to consider this view of rights as the only correct view and any other views as simply wrong. The average American tends to evaluate rights in other cultures in relation to this view of rights. The American feels that American rights are absolutely fundamental to the human condition, that they should be universal, and that they are immutable. This view is a fundamental part of the ethos of American culture.

Since this American view of rights seems to be embedded in the deepest level of cultural values, that is, as part of the world view, it is often difficult to discuss the topic of rights. In fact, when the average American with this view of rights encounters a person who disagrees with this world view, the American may become suspicious about the person, as if that person were being hypocritical.⁴ Therefore, one part of cross-cultural education might include showing the student the most important ways in which the religious, Constitutional, and legal systems differ in various countries.

Example 2: Fairness

Another example of a term deeply embedded in the American ethos is "Fairness." The university student who travels to the USA will most likely encounter sentences which begin with the phrase "It's not fair that..." An example would be: "It's not fair that I made a C on my paper when I studied just as long as John did and he made an A." To an American, being "fair" is like being honest and good. That is, a person who is knowingly "unfair" in the American definition is possibly unethical and dishonest. Thus, the idea of "fairness" is fundamental to understanding the American in intercultural communication. To the American, the idea of "fairness" is associated with the even more fundamental idea of "rights." Ethical behavior is considered behavior in which rights are respected and which follows both the legal code and the code of "fairness."

The idea of "fairness" permeates many areas of American thought, even when it is not overtly mentioned. The idea of "fairness" becomes involved in the definition of rights through a crucial phrase in the Declaration of Independence: "all Men are created equal." The basic meaning is that all citizens are equal before the law and have the same human and civil rights. Over the years, however, people have begun to understand the notion of rights and of equality in a non-historical and a non-legal sense. Americans may see countries as being "unfair" to their citizens if those citizens do not have the same set of rights as the American has. This general feeling that the American's rights and ideas of fairness are absolutely fundamental to the human experience, that they should be universal, and that they are essentially immutable is part of the ethos of Americans.

Equal opportunity is a second source for the particular understanding of fairness in the USA. Along with England, in various games and sports Americans try to equalize the possibility of victory for contestants. In certain types of horse-racing the horses that have proven faster are loaded with heavier weights. In golf the poorest golfers are given the highest "handicap," which in this case means they get to take a large number of strokes off their actual score. In American football, as soon as the offenses of many teams score "too many points" in one year, the rules committee may change the rules so that the defense has more opportunities to stop the offenses. The examples are too numerous to list. This concept of "fair play" which goes far beyond mere acceptance of the rules of the game is a fundamental one in America and England. The American, for example, may feel as if he has a right to special treatment so that he has a chance to win a game, even when the game originated in another country and the rules officials are from that other country. Even in other European countries, however, this English and American concept of fairness is often difficult to understand. There the usual understanding is that the best player should win, the fastest horse should win, the best team should win. No one should be penalized for being the best. Since the rules of each game or sport are published, the misunderstandings in international competition can be resolved.⁵ Problems occur when the American applies the non-legal definition of equality and the "fair play" idea from sports to government action, to business, and other areas of human interaction. When the American applies his standard of "rights" and his idea of "fairness" in communication across cultures, the possibilities of misunderstanding multiply geometrically.

Let me close this section by repeating an earlier point. These American conceptions of rights and fairness are usually at an unconscious level and have never been brought to the level of consciousness and made explicit to the individual. These conceptions are often left at the deepest level of the American ethos. They may affect speech, behavior and thought without being mentioned or consciously considered. It is the deepest level of culture that is hardest to research, yet at times it is the most important part of cross-cultural misunderstanding.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me leave you with these three ideas.

(1) In the preceding parts of this presentation, there are references to the objects of study of several fields, including anthropology, history, linguistics, education, speech, geology, philology, literature, religion, sociology. All these disciplines must be included in a full study of communication. All these scholars must look to one another for

cooperation. All these scholars should look to the scholarship done in the other culture as one basis of cooperation.

(2) The study of communication across cultural boundaries requires these disciplines as studied on both sides of the boundary. Any cross-cultural study of any part of communication should include experienced scholars from each side. Cooperative research helps to avoid misunderstandings based on the deepest of cultural differences.

(3) The study of a field as large as cross-cultural study will take many years. It is not surprising that many of the books and articles published to this date are still dealing largely with the relatively obvious parts of the field. At our conferences such as here in Harbin, we learn of many studies not yet widely known to scholars in the field. As scholars from more than two dozen disciplines exchange their ideas, we see many new topics for cross-cultural cooperative study. The person to person contact here will lead to several cooperative studies which will still be increasing our knowledge of the field for decades. The first of these conferences, some ten years ago, led to joint studies by scholars who did not know each other until the conference. The cooperative projects from this, the fifth such conference, will have an even greater impact.

Notes

1. The translation of the Shih Ching by the poet Robert Payne (1949)
2. See, for example, the discussion in Samovar and Porter (1994), pp. 14-6.
3. The topics in the sections on rights and fairness were explored more fully in Hill and Hoffer (1994).
4. Given the differences at the deepest levels of cultural values, discussions and arguments which arise may not be productive. See Kotani (1994).
5. For an example of compliance gaining across cultures, see Wiseman, *et al.* (1994).

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