

Cultural Gaps in Linguistic Communication with Reference to English and Arabic Language Communities

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Abstract: *Since each culture has its own unique identity, there is often a problem of communication gaps. Cultural communication gaps are crucial issues that influence all types of communication all over the world. These gaps are often the underlying reason for major misunderstandings or misinterpretations among the members of different cultural communities.*

The first aim of this paper is to examine some of the problems that are caused by cultural differences on the basis of linguistic communication, i.e., the verbal means of contact between the source language culture and target language culture. The analysis in this study will be limited to English as a representative of the source language culture (SL) and Arabic as the target language one (TL). The second aim of the study is to suggest some methods for dealing with the problems of cross cultural communication such as understanding the source language culture from various perspectives in order to find a suitable equivalent meaning in the target language. Knowing the shared linguistic features in the language of the two cultures will help to avoid many misinterpretation problems. Adding explanatory foot notes in the case of some cultural items that cannot be easily translated will be also of great assistance in this direction. Then paper is divided into four sections. Section one deals with the meaning of culture and communication. Cultural gaps and problems of misinterpretation with some solutions are explained in section two. Section three focuses on the main problems of cultural gaps in linguistic communication and offers some solutions to them. Finally, section four is the conclusion which summarizes the major findings of this study.

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The Definition of Culture and Communication

This section will examine three important terms in connection with each other. They are culture, language and communication. First of all, culture is defined as a combination of different codes concerning the way of life, tradition, rituals, beliefs, values, morals, shared customs and all the habits that are practiced by a particular community using a particular language as means of expression. Culture is also used by historians to refer to any socially inherited element in the life of man, material and spiritual (See Sapir, 1964: 79-83). Therefore, within this complex network of traditionally inherited habits, language usage or attitudes, culture can be considered as the identity card of a society. Since no two identity cards are the same, no two cultures are identical either, especially within societies that are widely different from one another, like eastern versus western communities.

What is important here is that culture produces social meanings through language, which does not include only verbal and written forms, but also other elements like body signs and movements that are used as a means of communication (Lyons, 1981: 267). In this respect, we can fairly say that because one's knowledge of one's native language is culturally passed along; i.e. gained by his membership in a particular society, language and linguistic dialogues are integrated in the pattern of human communication with one another all over the globe (See Lyons, 1981: 303).

The differences in language use are the results of the existence of personal, social and cultural pressure on a particular language, as is the case with the Arabic language which has its specific nature and cultural features. Words such as عم (uncle – the fraternal brother of the father) and خال (uncle- the maternal brother of the mother) or عمّة (aunt- the sister of the father) and خالّة (aunt-the sister of the mother) are cases in point.

In English culture, there is only one reference to each which is uncle or aunt. When trying to carry out the same meaning in interpreting a text from a source language (SL English) to the target language (TL Arabic), these culture bound kinship terms will probably become problematic in the case of translation into English, particularly when their oligosemic sense is contextually relevant in a particular text

This leads to the fact that the different contexts in which a word is used, and their associated cultural features in the source language culture, make it more difficult to find the right communicative equivalent in the target language culture. So, in order to understand certain texts in the SL for the purpose of giving their correct meaning in the TL, we need to have good background information about the social and cultural codes that are used by the people of the target language, while keeping in mind the strong links between their culture and their language usage. (Hall and Freedle, 1975: 11) For example, if an English customer asks a greengrocer "What is the final weight,

please? “The answer would come, “Four “. In Britain, they use a system which is different from the weighing system used in Arab countries. So, the answer should be understood in the SL language as (four pounds) not (four kilos) as is the case in the Target Language (TL) language, because in the Arab world, the common measurement is by kilos and not pounds.

The term culture has some limits and every society has its own cultural features. On the other hand, education, science and development in all fields affect culture and language and hence the individuals' communication with the world around them, east and west respectively. Accordingly, “the sociolinguistics of society is about the social importance of language to groups of people and, hence, the sharing of meaning becomes a crucial factor in our attempts to communicate with others” (Fasold, 1984:1-3). These attempts to communicate with others can be achieved either through the verbal (linguistic) channel, which depends on the use of words or through a non-verbal (non-linguistic) channel which is also called a silent channel of communication.

One can hardly over-estimate the strong relation between culture, language and communication. Yet, culture seems to be the most influential element over language as a means of communication.

Cultural Gaps and Problems of Misinterpretation with some Solutions

This section focuses, mainly on the role of cultural gaps in causing the problems of misinterpretation between the source language, and the target language. Cultural overlap can be found between two societies: “This overlap could be more or less depending on the degree of contact and the relation between these two societies, “(Lyons, 1981; 323). This cultural overlap is related with two important facts, namely the use of words having meaning that are not familiar in the second culture and the features of the language in use. However, travel, trade, scientific cooperation or translation and mass media nowadays play important roles in bridging the gap between cultures through introducing some culture bound words and expressions to people from other cultures. This borrowing of new words and expressions firstly, brings closer the different cultures of the world. Secondly, it helps in making the process of text interpretation and analysis in the target language culture easier.¹

In spite of this, the difficulties of interpreting a text or finding the right meaning in the second language in linguistic method of communication remain, because as stated earlier, cultures do not share the linguistic qualities or language features. Eckert and Richford, argue that “in the communicative function ...the term register is used to represent language varieties

characteristic of particular situations of use.”(2001:239) In other words, because the form and the function of language change across different cultures, and since the TL culture has few situational and linguistic features identical to that of the Source Language (SL) text the difficulties and problems of translating or interpreting a text become greater. This shows that the problems of translating meanings from one culture to another are influenced not only by the use of words and expressions that are not found in the second language culture, but also by its language form and usage.

Let us consider some areas of difficulties related to the interpretation of some culture bound words or expressions. For example, the familiar word “pizza” refers to a famous Italian dish. Although this dish has become universal, its equivalent is not yet found in Arabic culture. In this case, it becomes a problem when trying to find the proper meaning for it in Arabic. Such word does not exist in the dictionary of the Arab world, or in its everyday usage. Since no equal meaning is found for it in Arabic, the best way of dealing with it is to write it as it is pronounced in English “بيززا (pizza)” and add some explanatory note to it. This method is called (transliteration) that is writing the word as it is pronounced in the source culture. Other examples are found in English cultural food like “Hotdogs” which literally means “الكلاب الساخنة” (the dogs that are hot) in the Arabic interpretation of it because of its unfamiliarity to their culture. In reality, Hotdogs is some kind of a cheap and popular food, particularly in the USA. Similarly, other English culturally bound foods or drinks such as Jumbo and Chips “عملاق وبطاطا” (Huge and Potato), Bloody Mary “ماريا الدمويه” (a girl called Mary covered in blood) or Banana Split “الموز القسوم” (Banana divided) are not known in the traditional Arabic Culture. In this case, the Arab translator will need to search for a new or a similar concept in order to overcome these cultural gaps in meaning or use of such words. Hence, the nearest interpretation for Jumbo and Chips in the Arabic culture will be باطاطا مقليه (fried potato). Bloody Mary which is a cocktail drink will be translated into Arabic with some explanation in a foot note. The same solution can be applied to Banana Split which is also a famous English desert. This leads to the fact that if no equivalent is found for a word or an expression in the second culture language we can either find a new concept similar to it in meaning to the original one in the source language, or write the word as it is pronounced in English and then explain its meaning in the Arabic culture. In the case of a few words, in order to deal with the culture gaps, we need to deal with each individual problem. People need to have good background information about these culture specific items to overcome the problems related to misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

¹ Ibid

Indeed, cultural gaps are found in all aspects of life. It is seen in reference to traditions, geographical features, clothes, proper names ...etc., Let us consider the latter case briefly. According to Quirk "peoples' surnames normally carry their national identity. Peoples' names are also linked, at times, to religious and historical background" (1974:118 -119). Accordingly, he suggests that the best way to deal with such culture –specific names is to write them in the target language culture as they are pronounced by people of the original culture.¹¹ In the case of translating them from English into Arabic, we arabicize them; that is to say we transliterate them into Arabic. Benazir Bhutto is thus referred to in Arabic as بناظير بوتو (Benathir Boto) and not بنازير بوتو (Benazir Bhutto) as the English people pronounce it (See also Crystal, 1987:343). It is worth mentioning here that some words have negative meanings in one language, but positive ones in another language or culture. For instance, the word "owl" in English is associated with wisdom while its Arabic equivalent "بومة" is associated with Bad Luck/bad omen in the Arabic culture. This difference in the meaning of "owl" depends entirely upon cultural and traditional use of the word in each society. Thus, we need to have good information about the different cultures of the world and not only depending on the dictionary meaning in dealing with such culture bound word like "owl". We also "need to learn the cultural terms in order to develop sensitivity to cultural variation, especially when such variations reveal great differences in interpretations and analyses in the source language" (Carbaugh, 1989:95).

In conclusion, this section stated that exchanging cultural information and learning new cultural terms are as important as studying the linguistic features of the different languages of the world for the purpose of reaching a better and successful communications between different cultures of the world.

Cultural Gaps in Linguistic Communication

The important issues that are going to be discussed in this section are: the meaning of communication, the cultural problems related with these worldwide methods of contact between the different languages. Let us begin with the definition of a concept of communication "Communication is a process in which a person, through the use of signs, whether verbal or non –verbal express meaning to another in order to affect change or pass on information to another individual in either the same or in a different society. We can simply say that it is a method of exchanging knowledge for the purpose of bridging the gap between cultures of the world and individuals in either different regions in one country or different societies".

(as shown in www.regent.edu/acad/schcom/phd/com707/def_com.html).

In this case, the linguistic method of communication refers, in particular, to the spoken and written means of contact (i.e., the use of words) between the different cultures of the world. "Every language has a cultural focus, i.e., each language has its own terminology, its own strange functional and structural nature and culture –bound register or a socially conditioned language that need careful treatment when transferring their peculiarities and meanings from one culture to another" (Newmark, 1981: 121-125).

Interestingly, in his book *Culture Bound: Bridging the Cultural Gap in Language Learning*, Valdes states that "meanings, like forms are culturally determined or modified." (1988:54). Since this socially conditioned linguistic identity varies across cultures, and since language changes continually, as new words, idioms and phrases appear to match the continually changing needs of cultures, cultural gaps in linguistic communication is inevitable. Choosing words or finding the right equivalent becomes a serious problem in text translation or reaching a proper level of communication between cultures.

The difficulty in dealing with lexemes, on the level of linguistic communication, does not come only from understanding the source language words or terms within the linguistic context of the source language, but also from finding the equivalent vocabulary within the appropriate linguistic context in the target language. This proves the fact that a word is not just a word list, but it has real cultural, linguistic identity that should be carefully studied when dealing with the problems of cultural gaps in linguistic communication between different societies. For example, the simple statement "I am going home" has two different meanings in Arabic language (TL). It either suggests that the person is going to his own house "انا عائد الى المنزل" (I am going back to my apartment), or he is going back to his own country "انا عائد الى الوطن" (I am going back from abroad to my country). The meaning depends on the non-linguistic context.. Understanding the intention of the word "home" depends on the context and the situation of the speaker. There are other words that cannot be understood even in a context of situation, such as uncle, aunt and cousin in the English language. As stated earlier, in the discussion unless the individual in the TL culture has good background information regarding such words, they may interpret uncle to عم (Uncle- The father's brother) who is in fact خال (Uncle- the mother's brother) and so on.

However, cultural gaps in linguistic communication are not only limited to words or the transference of word list stuff alone. More serious problems come out when dealing with phrases, idiomatic expressions or proverbs, especially when they appear strange and sometimes meaningless to individuals in TL culture,

¹¹Ibid

like the Arabic. For instance, the sentence “it is raining cats and dogs” is a meaningful phrase which means there is some heavy rain in the English (SL) culture (Watson, 1970:662-663). In the Arabic (TL) culture, such an expression does not exist and if it is going to be literally translated, it would sound bizarre and almost meaningless “إنها تمطر قططاً وكلاباً” (it is raining real animals “cats and dogs”).

Another example is when a native speaker of English says “I’m off color today”; in the SL language, this indicates that the speaker is not feeling well. In this case, simple knowledge of grammar rules and vocabulary items will not be enough to give the right equivalent meaning in the Arabic TL culture. In order to overcome this type of cultural gap, the TL culture addressees must familiarize themselves with the meaning of such expression in the SL culture. This basically is achieved through experience and intercultural exchange between the individuals in both SL and TL cultures. In this case, the most suitable explanation for “I’m off color today” will be in Arabic “أنا متوعك قليلاً اليوم” (I am feeling a bit unwell today).

The problems of cultural gaps in linguistic communication are further complicated by the difference in the structure or the grammatical system of English and Arabic. This difference may further enhance the possibilities of misinterpretation or misunderstanding of a spoken or a written text when transferred from English into Arabic. A clear and simple example is found in the difference between the placing of the subject and verb in both languages. In the sentence “Ali went home” the subject/agent comes before the verb. The Arabic equivalent of this sentence will be “ذهب على البيت” (Went Ali to home). The place of the verb is always before the agent in verbal sentences in Arabic.

The above discussion of cultural gaps in linguistic communication leads us to the assertion of the following conclusion; first and foremost is that languages usages differ grammatically and semantically within and cross cultures in accordance with the social practices in which they take shape. Accordingly, the meaning of words differs from one society to another and respectively from one culture to another. Thus, different rules of interpretations and text analyses should exist within one culture in order to remove all misunderstanding, when trying to carry the English (SL) cultural bound lexemes or expressions into the (Arabic) TL culture. Secondly, in order to succeed in carrying out the task of removing cultural gaps and misunderstanding of SL, we need to have a wide knowledge concerning source language culture like knowing about the peoples’ habits, the situation of their particular speech, the common linguistic and structural features of their speech. In addition, to the understanding of the grammar features of the SL language, every bit of information will count in providing the nearest interpretations of the SL culture

and hence in minimizing the mistakes of finding the most suitable equivalent in the target language culture. Thirdly, when we want to interpret a word or a concept from the source language, where no direct equivalent is found, “we can either produce a new word to show the intended meaning in the target language, or use whatever resources of the target language to render the meaning we want to express (Newmark, 1982 :121-125).

In spite of these suggested solutions to some of the problems of cultural gaps in linguistic communication, the problem of how far should the interpreted text integrate in the target culture and how much it retains of source language culture remains a matter of speculation for further study.

Conclusions

Cultural gaps are serious problems which affect all aspects of communication all over the world. This paper aimed at examining some of the major problems of communication between cultures that are characterized by obvious cultural gaps, between the Arabic and English cultures. The paper investigated the difficulties of interpreting culture bound words, idioms and proverbs, in an attempt to suggest a number of possible solutions to the problems of cross-cultural communication.

The analyses in this study focused particularly on the linguistic method of communication and the culture gap problems related to it, with reference to examples from both the English and Arabic languages. In the examination of the cultural difficulties in interpreting meanings of words with specific cultural use and features on the bases of linguistic communication, the paper had four areas of focus, firstly on showing the nature and the types of the existing problems related to the cultural gaps between the source language culture (SL) and the target language culture (TL). Secondly, the results of the study reveal the fact that in order to overcome such cultural gaps in linguistic communication, individuals in the TL culture are required to be aware, as much as possible, of the SL language features so as to avoid the problem of losing the meanings of words, due to their lack of such knowledge of the source language or its culture. Thirdly, to overcome the obstacle of translating culture bound items into TL, a good background knowledge in terms of historical, traditional and even geographical aspects is required to establish the nearest equivalents to them in the TL Arabic culture. Fourthly, understanding the influences of the SL culture is also equally important in enabling a successful communication, in spite of the clear gaps between the two cultures in question.

Finally, an investigation of the shared features between the source and the target language cultures must also be carried out in order to reduce the cultural

gaps, and hence to overcome the crises of misinterpretation and misunderstanding between different cultures of the world.

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