

Intercultural Communication

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INTRODUCTION

To broach a topic such as culture is to find oneself in an “epistemological¹ band” of debates that may not produce any deductive logic. In fact the concept of culture is so dynamic that there is no fixed definition upon which all theorizing cannot be successfully argued.

In essence, we may best approximate culture to signify those symbols, language and other gestures that are understood by a group of persons to mean the same thing. In fact, such cultural affiliations are the facilitators of communication² between/among human beings.

It is therefore not hard to deduce, why communication between two (2) persons or among a group of persons of the same culture would be easier than communication between/among groups of persons of different cultures. Since communication does not only include the dissemination and the use of language (with feedback) then other variables of culture as mentioned above may interfere with effective communication.

Robert Heller in his book; “Communicating Clearly” pointed out that “good communication is the lifeblood of all societies.” He went on to highlight that communication takes many forms. He included speaking, writing and listening as essential variables of communication (1998;P.6). He also went on to point out that effective communication hinges on people understanding your meaning and replying in terms that move the exchange forward. Implied in Robert Heller’s argument is the fact that meanings must be understood by all parties to the communication process to mean the same thing. If that is not the case then miscommunication evolves and no foundation for growth in any form can be achieved, be it social, political or economic.

Inter-cultural Communication would denote communication between cultures. It must be understood from the outset that culture is experienced and identified in many forms and

¹ That which is philosophical and constitutes repetitive theorizing.

² Interactive transference of meanings between intelligences.

at many geographical locations across the globe. Hence to say “inter-cultural³” does not necessarily mean the populace of Jamaica being able to communicate effectively with the populace of Canada for example, but would signify communication between or among indigenous cultures of Jamaica itself. The point to be made here is that intercultural communication is solely entrenched in meanings and not necessarily geographical locations.

Why is Intercultural Communication important?

We communicate to get things done, pass on and obtain information, reach decisions, achieve joint understanding and develop relationships. Hence communication covers the social, the political and the economic aspects of life in any society. Since information technology now seeks to achieve one global culture, then such technology must also be capable of unifying language, symbols and gestures to achieve a true global culture. It is considered a fact that information technology cannot capture all variables of true communication effectively and so we are still challenged with the hypothesis of such technologies being able to provide us with “one world order.”

We live in a world that promotes free trade as the vehicle for economic growth. Free trade captures all goods and services of all societies of the free world/democratic societies. With such a benchmark our terms of communication to foster relationships (political, economic and/or social) must be created on the basis of shared meanings. If such exchange cannot be achieved then there will always be inequities in trade and relationships nationally and internationally.

Communication and culture – merged variables

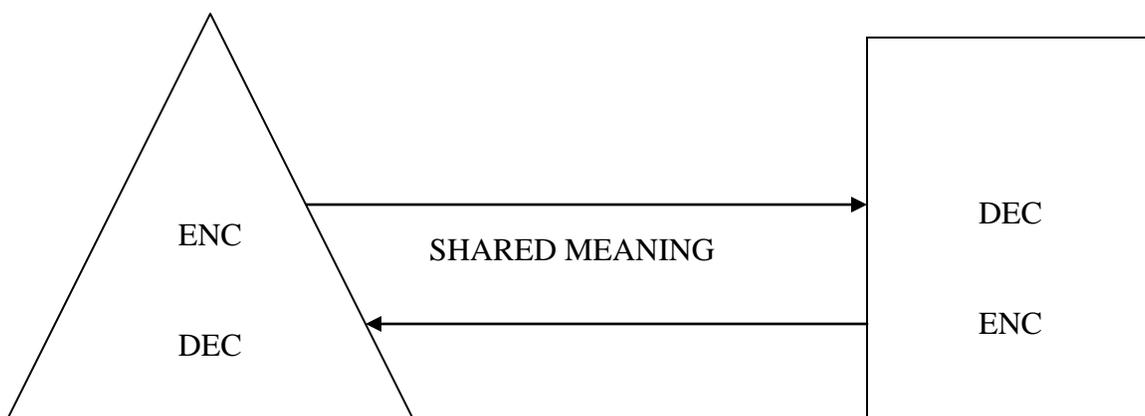
John Fiske in 2000 highlighted that “communication is one of those human activities that everyone recognizes but few can define satisfactorily” (2000;P.1). It is not surprising that this assertion was made because in a new world order where the owners of technology re-defined communication based on the abilities of the technologies over what the technologies actually do, make it difficult for us to have a unifying definition of

³ Between cultures and sub-cultures alike.

communication. However to keep this paper in context, we shall agree from the outset that communication must always denote “the interactive transference of meanings among intelligences.” If “meaning” becomes our operational term, then information dissemination cannot become an active or true definition of communication.

Let us take a look at Culture

Culture as defined by Aggrey Brown, is “that dimension of interaction (communication) that defines a particular group of people and incorporates symbolic, technical and social phenomena adopted and understood by such groups (1995;P.14). At the outset we can agree that culture is created and sustained through instrumental and social arrangements of people. As highlighted in Aggrey Brown’s work, technologies are both manifestations of culture as they are the means through which culture is created and expressed. That being the case, technologies have found themselves on both ends of the debate: 1. Technology is a form of culture and 2. It assists in creating or re-defining cultures. Its latter characteristics may help us to better understand how Inter-Cultural Communication may be achieved. Hence, technological advancements modifying cultures may in fact unify some cultures facilitating inter-cultural communication and distort others by dissemination information but not facilitating the exchange of meanings. Hence, we may agree to disagree on the point of intercultural communication as in some instances intercultural communication is achieved and at other times communication between or among cultures become thwarted. Intercultural communication must therefore be characterized by shared meanings.



Communications “bridging gaps” in cultures globally

Where cultures are similar, communications⁴ have the ability to amalgamate such cultures for purposes of common goals and outcomes. Where cultures are dissimilar, communications have the ability to disseminate information and the additional task of providing the avenue by which unified meanings may be adapted and sustained. The question therefore arises: Can information technology modify cultures universally to achieve such global harmony needed to create and sustain what is now called a global culture? It is obvious to a number of us that this global trend is not yet achieved and it is also obvious that barriers of language, symbols, customs and norms are not easily modified by technology in order to create one global culture.

William J. Martin puts the term information into perspective. He pointed out that; “When considering the nature and role of information, from what ever perspective, meaning becomes central” (1995;P.22). He made it clear that the concepts of information and meanings had distinct and separate characteristics [1995;P.22]. Information he said is an intrinsic property of various systems that exist irrespective of whether any human or any forms of intelligences perceive it or utilize it. The above assertion brings “home” the point we have been trying to explicate thus far –dissemination of information does not constitute communication all the time! Hence, it may be deduced that disseminated information is sometimes understood in a socio-cultural context and if the culture on either side of the equation were dissimilar then communication would not have occurred. A word in a foreign language say, possesses information, however, this word may have no meaning to the listener if the listener has no prior knowledge of that language. The example may be extended to include symbols and other norms not shared by those who disseminate information and those who receive it. It is therefore easy to conclude that communications can only effectively bridge gaps in cultures where information is interpreted and operationalized on the bases of similar meanings.

William J. Martin therefore offers us a concise definition of communication. He states that; “Communication is the process through which individuals in relationships, groups,

⁴ The technologies used to facilitate the process of communication.

organizations and societies create, transmit and use information to organize with the environment and one another” (1995;P.26). In such an event, we can better amalgamate our political, social and economic imperatives for the true development of a state or nation.

The Use of Language in Cyber-Space

Technologies have converged in so many different forms and structures that now we can safely say that we have created a world evidenced in which there is what I choose to call Artificial Intelligence. Artificial Intelligence would seek to connote the fact that Information Technology (IT) can perform some human tasks in a way that replicate almost seamlessly the intelligent activities of human beings.

William J. Martin points us to the fact that; “the integration of the voice and data communications continue unabated with digitally coded data being exchanged on the basis of established protocols and standards” (1995;P.65). The above point is evidenced in Cable Networks, Satellite, Microwaves, Mobile Networks and Asymmetrical Digital Subscriber Lines. All this continues to be very complicated for the “ordinary man” to explicate. However, one thing we can appreciate is that a single cable line is capable of transmitting voice, data and graphics in real time. In such an event, we are saying that we can, process data, involve ourselves in verbal communication and visualize individuals simultaneously, regardless of where on the globe such persons are. In other words, we are operating in Cyber-space⁵.

What then is Cyber-Space?: Cyber-Space is that broadband of space (global space) in which human beings operate in real time. So for example, one can sit in his house and “visit” Hollywood!! During that time of interconnection a kind of virtual reality sets in and persons can literally move across the globe mentally through Cyber-space. This is where proponents of the term “virtual reality” have their greatest strength in terms of making the claim that “virtual reality” is not reality. However, the great debate will

⁵ Digital technology amalgamating social, political and economic transactions through high speed transmission of data in space.

never end as most aspects of operations in Cyber-space have produced socio-economic and political advancements, never before experienced without convergence of technologies.

The Asymmetrical Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) offers considerable potential for the delivery of video on demand at home. Williams sensitized us to the fact that computer applications and demands for such would increase thus making room for greater bandwidth in the years to come. In fact, Williams was writing in 1995 and we can confirm today that his vision and predictions have come true! The fact is that we all have Broad Band Internet Services [BBIS] to our disposal in the Twenty First Century.

Hence, the world has now seen and is experiencing networks which are really circulatory systems which provide mechanism for moving data and messages from one computer to another, from one mobile phone to another and information include voice and graphics. Once human beings “log into” those networks we avail ourselves of and become co-opted into Cyber-space. The growth in such technological investment grew in 1992 from 74million dollars and by the end of 1997 was more than US \$ 2 billion. Today, it is a multibillion-dollar industry. We also have the Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) and the Asynchronous Transfer Mode (ATM) of technologies. ATM has been described as ... the definitive technology for high-speed digital networks. ATM is capable of sending large quantities of data, voice and video conferencing simultaneously over networks [Williams; 1995]. This phenomenon certainly explains how our ATM machines installed by our banks for example, work. Since the technology has the ability to interconnect with other networks, we are able to avail ourselves of Internet banking for example. This and other examples make the realities of Cyber-space “real” and not “virtual reality” and so our modified cultural approach to Cyber-space continuously amaze us but nonetheless, those of us who can are locked into Cyber-space in real time.

We may summarize the above by highlighting three (3) broad categories of value added benefits derived from (IT). Williams highlighted them for us;

1. Enhanced Communication Services: electronic mail, messaging, managed data network services, tele and video conferencing.
2. Transaction Services: electronic data interchange; electronic funds transfer at point of sale, home banking (ATM), teleshopping, ticket reservations etc.
3. Information Services: Online databases, electronic publishing services.

He pointed out that this list is not in anyway exhaustive but he highlighted that the above are “already established” services (1995;P.78).

Against the concepts stated above, which are factual, we are fully cognizant that our world has changed or is changing as to some degree technologies must be communicated to cultures through language for its effective and widespread use! It then follows that language and economic barriers can sometimes affect the widespread use of such nascent technologies capable of associating and integrating us in Cyber-Space.

The Role of Language

To put a global slant on Cyber-space, we are confronted with some harsh realities. We are aware that the world is composed of various and varying cultures, languages and attitudes. If we consider all the languages of the world and all cultures (natural and indigenous alike) we can deduce via common sense that IT built predominantly on the English Language would lack the scope to effectively reach those of us who speak other languages. This is not to say that there are not translations of the Internet from English to some other language, however, the universal scope of its “reach” is substantially limited.

We must recall who physically own websites! They are the sole possession of transnational organizations⁶ that set up their business on the World Wide Web and we access such websites by connecting to the mainframe computer containing the data we require. Since we already know of North America’s ownership of technologies and E-commerce, we find most of these websites advertised in English. What about people who speak Hindu, Arabic, Japanese, and creoles of different nationalities? Is the Internet so

⁶ Profit entities so designed to utilize technologies as a means of selling goods and services.

designed to reach them? Or is it that they would require a translator/translators for their connections to Cyber-space? Considering the stated questions, we may want to agree that if the Internet to a large degree is American owned and the principal language used for information dissemination is English then we might not be experiencing the global communication of which some communication philosophers speak. Again we are co-opted into the realm of epistemology as we sometimes define the globalization of communication in different ways and different contexts.

Language is the principal recipe of culture. That being accepted, we can further posit that communications cannot be effective in its global reach if it is skewed negatively towards most other languages but English. It is often said that English is the Universal Language! Is this true? Who created such prominence for English? Our best suspicions would lead us or cause us to believe that a large percentage of the world's population maybe exempt from this adoption of new IT due to the barrier of language. I may want to relate a simple yet applicable story to this discourse. I became a resident of Canada in September of 2004: I have also been a licensed driver for over 15 years. On entering Canada, I had to do a written Road Test in order to secure a Canadian Drivers License. The fact is that, I failed the written exam 3 times. The most troublesome part of the exam had much to do with interpreting accurately what the road signs signify. Even though we were working in the same cultural context of language [English], signs used in Jamaica for driving purposes were to some degree different in the Canadian context and so I found myself on a "steep learning curve" almost to the point of frustration. The point I am making is that culture, entrenched in language, symbols and norms has to be harmonious, to foster relationships. Hence, intimacy with new global technologies must be built first and foremost on the uniformity of languages, symbols and norms.

More on Language and Technology

Williams J. Martin points us to the fact that communication networks and the information flow that they support, have enable companies to completely reconceptualize their operation, facilitating new forms of functional structure. The operations he said operate both intra-organizational and inter organizational in order to facilitate a range of alliances

among companies (1995; P.190). Now this fact is not unfamiliar to us as we very well know that the spread of global communications have much to do with (Center-Center & Center-Periphery⁷ connections of global communications. What is of central concern to this discourse is the dynamic ways in which transnational industries are modifying their business policies and by extension the working policies of their human resources, without the individuals (in some instances) being able to conceptualize such changes. We are therefore saying that the language barriers and other cultural variables maybe streamlined by transnationals across the globe for the purposes of commerce. However, those who fall directly in their employ are sometimes confused and frustrated by policy changes that affect them so negatively as their “technological capabilities” become hindered by cultural differences. Hence, the majority of our global societies living on the periphery of “peripheral” and “center” societies are left “out there” as technophobes. Diversification of the language of the technologies as well as affordability i.e. the cultural and the economic would to a large degree shrink the gap between those Neil Postman describes as technophiles⁸ and those who are technophobes.

Structuralism, Language and Semiotics

According to John Fiske Semiotics is a form of structuralism for it argues that we cannot know the world on its own terms, but only through the conceptual and linguistic structures of our culture [2000;P.115]. In that same chapter he quoted Saussure who defines semiotics as that concept that examines the cultural specificity of representations and their meanings by using one set of methods and terms across a full range to signify gesture, dress, writing, speech, photography, film, television and so on. [2000]. The central theme of his argument is that signs create meanings and such signs may create varying meanings depending on the culture of context in which signs exist. Signs then move from the signifier to the signified. The signified is the mental concept referred to by the signifier. So for example, the word “tree” will not necessarily refer to a specific tree, but to a culturally produced concept of ‘treeness.’ In this context semiotics put cultural meanings to language and other signs. Semiotics then becomes apart of the

⁷ The connections between Industrialized countries and developing countries i.e., The Global North and The Global South.

⁸ Those who fear technologies.

vocabulary for cultural studies. Hence we can conclude that culture constitutes language as well as symbols.

Fiske as has explicated structuralism as being that ideology that refers to systems, relationship between systems and formal structures that create and enable the production of meaning [2000;P.115]. With such a definition, we can see that structuralism was not seen as a theory of culture but a theory of language. Hence, Fiske points to Saussure's assertion on the theory of structuralism. Saussure claimed structuralism to be the starting point of understanding and creating culture. Hence, language becomes the principal recipe of culture. Saussure pointed out that there is no inherent connection between a word and an object. It has more to do with what we take such a word to mean. This kind of model of language poses some difficulties for communication technologies. This is so because words in different cultures can have different meanings. In such an event, varying interpretations of such meanings may pose difficulties in light of our stance on what communication means. Hence, the way we see the world is determined by cultural conventions through which we conceptualize the images received.

When Saussure insists that the relationship between a word and its meanings is constructed and not given, he is directing us to the cultural and social dimensions of language. Language then is cultural, not natural and so are the meanings it generates. This ideology of language poses the greatest threat to technologies (even though interactive) providing true global communication, as the technologies will not be able to capture all cultures and unify meanings.

According to John Fiske, Saussure divided language into 2 categories; (a) Langue – all things that can be thought and said and (b) Parole – specific utterance composed by the selection from the Langue [2000;P.123]. He therefore highlighted that language is the signifying system that can be seen to be closely ordered, structured and this can be rigorously examined and ultimately understood. According to him, language is also seen as a means of expression that is not entirely mechanistic in its functions but allows for a range of variant possibilities.

Hence, such possibilities pose the challenge for communication using communications. Evidently, there are diverse interpretations of the realities of the Internet. Due to the interactive nature of the technology, diverse feedbacks are received each day. The feedbacks/responses to advertised Internet content will give the owners of the technology some insight into how differently various cultures interpret the disseminated information. Hence, the Internet, we may agree is capable of “global reach”, however, to achieve global communication to the extent of achieving “one world order” is a challenge for the distant future.

Culture ~ Communication – Communications – Conclusion

Communication depends on the variables of culture and communication, environments in which its meaning can be truly operationalized. Since culture incorporates variables of language, symbols and norms, its manifestations are different nationally and internationally. Hence, it becomes an “up hill” task to create communications capable of facilitating global communication. Here, we make a distinction between information dissemination and communication. Again we focus on the central role of “interactive transference of meanings” in the communication process. We have also come to the realization that communication may not be able to unify all cultures and sub-cultures to achieve the communication spread its philosophers purport it to be capable of achieving.

Culture has also incorporated in it the concept of Semiotics (that which deals with signs) and language. Hence uniformity of symbols i.e. to ensure their uniformity of meanings across cultures would be a necessary “yard stick” by which true global communication may be achieved.

Intercultural communication therefore may be a myth to the degree that unified meanings of information is not achieved. However, since culture constitutes language, the symbolic as well as the technological, we can/may agree that there exists some level of intercultural communication even by virtue of a common language. Therefore, a nascent

global culture may be in the making, however, as it evolves we may experience its true maturity through many generations!!!

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