INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION FROM A SLOVAK SPEAKER'S VIEW

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Abstract

The paper deals with basic issues related to intercultural communication. It introduces key terms related to the field and briefly touches on non-verbal intercultural communication. More attention is paid to verbal intercultural communication, and specifically the encounter of Slovak learners with the English language, and the reflection of Slovak and English cultures in language patterning. In the verbal intercultural communication section, the exemplification of Slovak vs. English language patterning is included. The paper is the author's preliminary contribution to the field of differences in Slovak-English communication based on the observation of culture-related particularities appearing in the language in accord with the provided understanding of the term 'culture'.

1   Introduction

> The relationship between language and culture has been a focus of attention from a variety of disciplinary perspectives for many years. Linguists, anthropologies, sociologists, psychologists, and others have sought to understand whether and how cultural factors influence aspects of human behavior such as perception, cognition, language, and communication.
> *Michael H. Long, Jack C. Richards: Culture in Second Language Teaching and Learning, CUP, 1999, p. ix*

Key words appearing in the title are culture, communication, and communication among cultures. *Culture* can be understood in narrow and broad senses; in the narrow sense, it represents art, music, literature, food, or dress; and in the broad sense it refers to the shared background (national, ethnic, or religious) entailing customs, beliefs, attitudes, and values as well as common language and a communication style. *Communication* is traditionally defined as the process of shared meaning through verbal and nonverbal behavior. *Communication among cultures* as communication between people from different cultures influenced by cultural values, attitudes, and behavior, is covered by two terms – inter-cultural or cross-cultural communication.

The paper is composed of three parts; Parts 1 and 2 are rather general; Part 3 is more explicit. Part 1 presents the concept of culture in a broad sense. In Part 2, the term non-verbal communication is briefly introduced and sketchily applied to the Slovak and English cultures. Part 3 deals with verbal communication among

cultures, and is more specific in providing examples of dissimilarities between Slovak and English languages based on the conventions that either stem from the development of English or have established their position in English over the years; the examples provided represent items belonging to different language levels and the awareness of them helps understand the nature of some aspects in the two languages.

2   The notion of 'culture'

Culture in a broad sense represents two concepts. The first concept is about viewing a culture as a representation of a national, ethnic, or religious background that is shared by people residing in a particular country. It is represented by nation's customs, values, beliefs or attitudes and reflected in the nation's way of everyday life. The second concept is a little narrower in scope, and stands for the language itself, for the way people communicate among themselves, for the conversation style mirroring what is entailed by the first concept and what has become conventionalized over the years. The following lines discuss the two concepts and introduce the focal point of the paper.

The first concept, a culture as a representation of a nation's values, beliefs or attitudes, when someone from a different culture attempts to understand it, may shrink into national characteristics, or a culture stereotype. It does not take much effort to stereotype cultures from what we see in movies, on TV or from what we read in magazines or books. Stereotypes can be helpful in creating an image of a place that we have never been to and in helping us to understand the behavior and communication style of the natives. On the other hand, stereotypes can contribute to generating prejudices and bias against a particular nation. The positive connotation outweighs the negative one if we adopt the national characteristics so we fit the target society better and do not misapply it in order to avoid offending anyone.

Based on anecdotal evidence, the Japanese are perceived to be hard-working, always polite and respectful, and seem to be rather embarrassed and shy; they look very serious so one never knows what they think; their attitude to foreigners is, however, friendly. Australians at all times seem to be easy-going and laid-back, also generous and polite; they are very sporty and big beer-lovers; they are friendly and tolerant to foreigners. The British seem to be reserved, self-centered and fussy, which is why others may see them as arrogant; in their own community they are very polite and gentlemanly, yet their attitude to foreigners might be conceived of as superior. Americans have a strong belief in themselves, which may project them as boastful; they are raised to be independent, and behave that

way at whatever age; they are direct, and also less formal than other cultures.

The stereotypes (used in the positive connotation) deserve proper attention and are worthy of being researched; however, this paper focuses on the other concept – a culture as a display of the language usage. The above characteristics epitomizing several randomly chosen nationalities may be truly important for second-language learners or users. If they are unfamiliar to them, they may cause them to feel like outsiders during their encounter with the second-language environment (culture). The way people behave or talk has undergone an evolutionary process. Every nation has a historical background that shaped the society's values, including the language, and has left imprints on how people think, speak and converse. Users of the language express themselves in the way that they have observed since they were born. They have been exposed to a particular language patterning and in their verbal and social performance behave accordingly. Such performance may be difficult to be identified or mastered by someone raised in a different culture and exposed to different language patterns. It is important that users of the second language be aware of the role that the culture plays.

A conscientious user of the second language understands that each language is unique in its own special way; in the way people look at the world around them, label and interpret the extra-linguistic reality, construct ideas and express meaning, or use language to engage socially. Such diversity derives from the idiosyncratic nature of each and every culture. In the 1980s, the cultural aspect attracted the attention of professionals in the field of language teaching. "Robert Lado," one of the founders of TESOL, "… was one of the first to suggest that cultural systems in the native culture could be compared with those in the target culture and serve as a source of transfer or interference in much the way other types of contrasting linguistic systems do" (Long & Richards 1999: ix). It is necessary to say that only the awareness of the differences between the mother tongue ('mother culture') and the second language ('the second language culture') can help one acquire knowledge beyond the language, knowledge that lessens one's apprehension or discomfort in an authentic setting.

Knowledge beyond the language is knowledge about those aspects of culture that are beneficial in acquiring the conversation style and conventionalized communication routines of the second language. Culture serves as a means of understanding of how the language-to-be-acquired and/or -mastered functions. This is impossible without applying the method of observation, but most importantly that of comparison and contrast (Svoboda 2002). Comparing and contrasting the first and second languages, especially the way of looking at the world in the two languages (e.g. Slovak and English), will possibly bring

about information that no learner could ever find in the textbook written by a native speaker of English. Such textbooks can be used worldwide because they familiarize learners with the system of the English language and the cultures where English is the first language. They may talk about spots from all over the world but there is no chance of showing the pattern in which people view the reality in all the places the books are used. The comparison and contrast is an invaluable addition that enables learners to master the language and to be aware of verbal and social do's and don't's in the social life of the studied culture. The mentioned approach is applied to English and Slovak languages in Part 3.

3   Verbal and non-verbal communication

Communication is traditionally described as the process of exchanging information and sharing meaning through verbal and non-verbal behavior. The former is the focal point of the subsequent section (Part 3); the latter is briefly discussed in the following lines. In any kind of conversation, verbal and non-verbal behaviours are inseparable from each other. They complement and supplement each other at the same time; even so, in the presented paper they are treated as discrete areas for the aim of the paper, namely to look into the differences between English and Slovak languages in some areas of verbal behavior.

Non-verbal behavior is about encoding and decoding messages through touch, eye contact, pitch of voice (or silence), facial expression, gestures, posture, distance, etc. Ninety-three per cent of communication is non-verbal; 55 per cent through facial expression, posture or gesture, 38 per cent through tone of voice (*Nonverbal communication*, http://lynn_meade.tripod.com/ id56.htm). Non-verbal communication has different functions. It may be used to repeat the verbal message (e.g. to point in a direction while stating it); it is often used to accent a verbal message (e.g. to give emphasis to a specific word or part of the utterance); it may either reinforce or contradict a verbal message (e.g. a nod will reinforce a positive message, a wink may contradict a stated positive message); it may regulate interactions (e.g. some cues convey when a person should start or stop talking); or it may substitute for a verbal message, for instance when hearing the message is obstructed by noise, gestures and facial expressions are helpful (e.g. placing a finger on the lips to indicate the need for quiet, or a nod instead of a *yes*) (*Non verbal communication modes*, http://www.andrews.edu/~tidwell/ lead689/ NonVerbal.html).

Non-verbal communication is particular to the culture. Facial expressions, gestures, etc., are the first things that are noticed during a conversation. Any

body movement may convey a specific meaning that is hard to deduce or may be misinterpreted by a stranger unfamiliar with a certain culture.

Slovak and English cultures, fortunately, are not so far apart as far as non-verbal communication is concerned. Neither of the cultures is over-explicit in making gestures (as opposed to, e.g. Italians or Latin Americans), which makes the path to mastering the conversation style of native speakers of English less bumpy. Some differences worth mentioning are those in understanding time patterns. Speaking of time, some countries are considered to be past-oriented – they pay a lot of attention to traditions, ancestors (e.g. Asian countries); Slovakia, in this respect, can be tagged present-oriented; and the U.S.A. is a paragon of a future-oriented country (with respect to achievement and progress) – the society encourages people to look to the future rather than to the past, which affects their life and relationships. It follows that tradition plays a limited role in American culture (Levine & Adelman 1993). Also, for example, the United Kingdom and the U.S.A. are located in different time zones than Slovakia. This has great influence on the organization of an ordinary day of a person. Since the sun rises later, the working day also starts later than in our country, usually at about nine o'clock. On the other side, the working time may finish between 6 and 7 p.m. Undoubtedly, having different time patterns is not the only dissimilarity between the two cultures that might have an impact on the process of familiarization with the second-language environment; non-verbal or verbal means of communication are equally important for successful communication.

4   Verbal communication among cultures – The case of Slovak users of English

When we study a foreign language, we are prone to compare it with our mother tongue; we look for similarities and try to understand what lies behind the features that are different from the patterns we are acquainted with. During the acquisition of a foreign language, along with a different perception of the extra-linguistic reality we come across questions to which the answers are not so straightforward or so easily provided. However, many problems can be solved by mere excursion to the past. The present-day language is a legacy of the past; each language has a longer or shorter history during which a certain amount of modification was made. The changes that shaped the development of English, actually, give answers to questions like why English needs articles, why English nouns and verbs are not fully inflected, why English verbs are regular and irregular, etc. It is only owing to the changes during the development of the English language that present-day English is completely different from English of the past.

The English language had made great strides until it attained the form that we nowadays perceive as different from the conventions of our mother tongue. Approximately until the 11th century, the English language bore a strong resemblance to present-day Slovak – inflected word forms, variable word order, concord between adjectives and nouns, etc. It was only during the time when people from Normandy had control over the British Isles that inflections were being neglected in pronunciation, which caused the grammatical relationships to become unclear; for this reason a fixed word order and periphrastic forms started to be used. Only a couple of inflections survived into Modern English (15th century); thanks to the invention of book printing, Modern English was rather free from radical alterations. The language never ceases to develop; yet the stage that English has reached allows for alterations of functional nature (i.e. how the language is actually used) rather than formal (changes in word structuring).

From what has been said it follows that the present state of the (English) language comprises normative grammatical and lexical occurrences anchored in English grammar and lexis as well as grammatical structures or lexical units that are becoming a new habit in accord with the dynamics of the language (Dontcheva-Navratilova 2005). Speaking of a culture, the term stereotype is often mentioned (more often than not with a negative connotation). However, as stated above, if viewed in the positive connotation, it can only assist in the acquisition of the language. Typically it is confined to the national characteristics but it may well refer to the routines in the language patterning of a particular culture with no disrespectful intention.

With regard to the history of the development of the language and other sociolinguistic factors, each culture views the extra-linguistic reality in a different way. This can be illustrated by examples on any level of the language system. Through the author's observation arose the following overview of the differences between Slovak and English languages originating either from the development of the languages or from different views of the world due to other factors. Ignorance of the presented dissimilarities may cause the acquisition process to take a relatively slow pace. The word 'relatively' is intended to refer to a different level of significance of the following instances. The overview outlines differences occurring on grammatical levels (morphological and syntactic) and a lexical level.

1. morphological level

1/ _Conjugation_ and _declension_ are realized by different means. In the English language, verb conjugation is realized by means of a pronoun/noun functioning as the subject. Nouns, pronouns, adjectives appear in non-inflected forms and the

relations are expressed either through a preposition or the position they take in a sentence. In the Slovak language, major word classes are typically inflected (an inflection is added to the word base) to express the relationship towards the other elements in a sentence.

2/ English and Slovak have different *verb systems*. English has three to five morphological verb forms (it depends on whether the verb is regular or irregular) – all the other relations are expressed in the co-text surrounding the verb. In the Slovak language verb system, verbs have approximately 25 morphological verb forms that express person, number, mood, voice, or tense. Each language has its way of expressing the relations, i.e. morphological categories: English uses *pronouns* to 'conjugate' the verb – for this reason, the presence of a pronoun (noun) is obligatory in an English sentence; the Slovak language expresses all the morphological categories through *verb inflections*.

3/ Expressing *states* and *activities* in English and Slovak reflect different looking at the world. The English language differentiates between events in progress and recurrent events, which is marked by the morphological category of aspect (simple vs. progressive); the Slovak language has no language means to express that. Further, English possesses the means for reflecting on the situation that is midway between two distinct time periods (past and present, past and further back past), i.e. English differentiates between events viewed as completed in a particular time period and events linking two time periods, which are also marked by aspect (perfect). This is not possible in Slovak since it does not have verb forms for expressing that – for this reason Slovaks simply do not recognize such time division.

   2. syntactic level

1/ One of the big differences between English and Slovak is *word order*. In the English language, the word order is fixed, since it is one of the means that compensate for the absence of conjugation and declension. In the Slovak language, the word order is variable because full conjugation and declension of word forms allow for that.

2/ *Passive structures* occur in both language but are given different status. They are much more frequent in English, since English is a S-V-O language and the presence of the subject is inevitable, whether it is a doer of the action or the object affected by the action. In the latter case, we can choose whether to express the doer or to leave it unmentioned. This is so when the 'doer' of the action of the verb is unknown, general, obvious or unimportant, when we need

to follow an impersonal style of writing (avoid the usage of '*I*' or '*we*'), or avoid the naming of a specific person responsible for the action. In Slovak, if we wish to keep the 'doer' of the action of the verb unexpressed, we can either leave out the subject (*Ukradli mi auto. Peniaze nemeníme*) or use a reflexive verb (*Stratilo sa mi pero*). For this reason, the Slovak language has a much higher incidence of active than of passive sentences.

3/ Studying English makes us realize the difference in the nature of <u>English and Slovak attributes</u>. It is possible to say that English attributes are fairly *unbound* while Slovak attributes rigidly *constrained*. The English language, as opposed to Slovak, is rather benevolent, if it comes to expressions determining a noun. A multi-word unit consisting of expressions of different word-classes can premodify a noun: *She gave me that I-know-what-you-mean look and walked away*. Moreover, the whole phrase can be assigned a certain meaning through adding a suffix, if needed: *I hate her I-don't-careish approach*.

3. lexical level

1/ <u>English lexical units are rather *vague* while Slovak lexical units tend to be more *precise*</u>. If we treat an English expression out of context, it is much more difficult to identify its meaning than the meaning of the Slovak expression. The reason is that English expressions are rather vague and depend on the context (or co-text) – it is the co-text that provides its specific meaning. Slovak expressions, generally, communicate specific meaning by themselves; they are much more exact in this way. If expressions like the following ones are not given in context their meaning is unclear: 'functions' can be a 3rd person singular verb form or a plural noun; *go* can express the notion of movement or can be linked with adjectives like *stale*, *rotten*, *mad*, *blind*, etc. – the meaning is made clear only by the element that surrounds the verb 'go'. In a phrasal verb it is the particle that specifies the meaning, e.g. *look up*, *look for*, *look after*.

2/ Another noticeable feature is <u>*nominal phrases* vs. *verbal phrases* in English and Slovak</u>. English very often expresses reality by nominal phrases; the Slovak language prefers verbal phrases for expressing the same idea. Nominal phrases include a linking (copular) verb and a noun, gerund (which is a verbal noun), or adjective. Verbal phrases imply the usage of a full (meaningful) verb. Common practice provides the following examples:

- Verb + Noun: *have breakfast* (*raňajkovať*), *have a sip of water* (*napiť sa*), etc.
- Verb + Gerund: *I like dancing* (*Rada tancujem*), *He quitted smoking* (*Prestal fajčiť*)

- Verb + Adjective: *be angry* (*hnevať sa*), *go sour* (*skysnúť*), *grow older* (*starnúť*), etc.

In many cases Slovak adverbs have verbal equivalents in English:
NÁHODOU I <u>happened to</u> meet him there.
Má RADŠEJ He <u>prefers</u> ... to ...
Hovorila ĎALEJ. She <u>went on</u> talking.
NAOZAJ to stratili? <u>Are they sure</u> they lost it?
ASI nepríde. <u>He is not likely</u> to come.
ASI pôjdem spať. <u>I think</u> I'll go to bed.
Text znie TAKTO. The text runs <u>as follows</u>.

3/ The English language makes us realize how different <u>the nature of the verb in *expressing T-V address*</u> is. The Slovak language has different pronoun forms for expressing a relationship between people, family members, friends, or strangers. The Slovak society is rather formal and expects a formal linguistic behavior, e.g. using V-forms when talking to strangers even if they are the same age as the speaker is. English has only one pronoun form whether we express T or V address. The verb has the same form in both cases; when we meet a stranger, we use a verb form that corresponds to a Slovak T-form. V-form relationship is expressed by different means. They include the usage of honorifics like *Mr/Mrs/Miss* and the full name (first name and surname) or titles (*Doctor, Professor*, etc.). In general, English society, in contrast to Slovak society, is informal; they do not have such a strong need to express V-relationship in every day life as is felt in Slovakia.

4/ <u>The *signifiant* and *signifié* representing a particular referent in the Slovak language *do not correspond* to those of the same referent in the English language</u>. The difference is either due to the etymology of the word or social factors present over the years. Based on the experience from the first language we automatically assign a particular meaning to a word or phrase of the second language without questioning its applicability to a different environment. The examples are as follows:

- the Slovak phrase *slabý ako čaj* ('as weak as tea') may confuse all those who are familiar with the English culture since English tea is strong (Svoboda 2002);
- expressions with the same meaning can be used in different ways, e.g., English *morning* and Slovak *ráno* cover a time period of different duration (ibid.);

- while English distinguishes between *arm* and *hand* or *leg* and *foot*, the Slovak language uses one word in both cases – *ruka*, *noha* in every-day communication style (ibid.);
- while English uses a common noun *cousin*, Slovak has a different word for a male and a female – *bratranec, sesternica* (ibid.);
- what Slovak refers to as *ulica* (only one word), English has a number of expressions for that, e.g. *street*, *road*, *lane*, *embankment*, *crescent*, *avenue*, *alley*, *drive*, etc. – each has a different connotation, yet all share the same semantic trait (ibid.);
- what in English is called *mushrooms*, Slovaks refer to by a number of expressions; the English word *mushrooms* stands for what Slovaks call *šampiňóny*; other types fall under one group *wild mushrooms* (ibid.);
- *expressing time* – in Slovak, it is possible to say *o dve minúty štvrť na tri*; in English, it is impossible to express that in this way; no one would even think of such a phrase – if they looked at their watch they would see *13 minutes after 2;* the two languages have their own way of understanding the position of the hands of the watch;
- the Slovak word *palacinky* is often translated as *pancakes*; yet pancakes are actually 'lievance' in the Slovak cuisine, the proper word for 'palacinky' is 'crepes' (AmE);
- *sandwich* is automatically translated as *sendvič*, while the two expressions represent in their own cultures two completely different referents;
- *never* is sometimes wrongly interpreted due to its primary meaning 'never so far'; however, in present-day English, especially American, it is commonly used instead of a negative particle 'not', like in the following sentences: I *never* made it to the prom. (= I *didn't* make it to the prom), I invited him to the party but he *never* came. (… but he *didn't* come).

After a several-year experience with the second language and the second culture, the elements of the two systems may co-exist or, if language users are not careful, they may merge and result in a disturbing conversation howler. The following examples appeared on Slovak TV. The first clipping is from a political interview; the clipping No. 2 is from an American movie:

(1)   "*Ako sa stalo, že z priority Dzurindu sa stal <u>biely slon</u>, kopa mramoru, porcelánu, čo treba predať?*" (Channel JOJ, Sedmička, 16.1.2003)

The politician used the English phrase *a white elephant* which does not reside in the Slovak lexicon; hence, it might as well be unclear to a Slovak listener without any knowledge of English.

(2)   A: *Čo robíš?*
        B: *Som <u>veterinár</u>.*
        A: *Ja som vo Vietname nebol.*

The translator ignored the fact that the original dialogue must have been built on the word *vet* that has two meanings in English – either a short version of veterinary doctor or a veteran. Such imprecision made the dialogue completely unclear to all who do not speak or study English.

Underestimating the importance of inter-cultural competence, in other words, not recognizing the component of the second culture in our acquired knowledge may cause that the utterance is either nonsense or is unclear to the listeners (Povolná 2006).

5   Conclusion

If we want to sound natural in a second language, we need to view reality through the lenses of the language we are speaking and leave behind how reality is understood in any other language. If we ignore, often unintentionally, the patterns of the English language, our production bears traces of the Slovak language. We do speak English, we do write English sentences; yet, it is obvious that the utterance conveys the Slovak way of thinking. Every language has its own patterns for expressing ideas, it has its own logic, and if we want to sound natural, we have to accept it (Urbanová 2004). It has features that are typical of that particular language and do not occur in other languages. The way we express ourselves reflects how that particular language views reality. What non-native users see as typical of the language that they study, native users view as common, nothing out-of-ordinary. Whenever we classify something as typical of language, it tends to be different from the conventions of our mother tongue; whenever we classify a language phenomenon as typical, we are about to provide a comparison of two languages. Mastering the English language requires being alert and watching out for structures and occurrences like those described in the paper. The paper is the author's humble contribution to the field of Applied Linguistics, to its area of Cross-cultural/Inter-cultural communication.

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