

Cross-Cultural Hindrances and Ways of Overcoming Them in the Process of Communication

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the factors that hinder the realization of cross-cultural communication. It is culture that defines the participants of communication, the choice of topics and communication strategies, the context, the way and conditions of transmitting messages, the method of encoding and decoding information, the set of communicative steps, and so on. In the process of the contact of cultures the national-specific peculiarities, unperceived during intracultural communication, become apparent. During cross-cultural contacts a clash of two worldviews takes place. In this article we make an attempt to consider the mechanisms of transformation of the vision of the world in the process of cross-cultural communication, using two contacting linguocultures as an example.

Key words: cross-cultural communication, hindrances, linguoculture, linguistic paradoxes, realia.

Introduction

Two terms are used most frequently to denote phenomena that disturb the process of communication: “hindrances” and “barriers”, and they are often used interchangeably. We consider it appropriate to differentiate them, to study the reasons disturbing adequate cross-cultural communication in more detail.

The factors that hinder the realization of communication as such can be considered barriers. They include not knowing the foreign language in a situation of cross-cultural communication or physiological factors, such as, for example, deafness or dumbness of one of the interlocutors. Hindrances, in their turn, are factors that lower the quality of communication: asymmetry, stereotyped reactions, language mistakes, and so on. However, there is no impassable borderline between these two notions. For example, not knowing the language does not mean a complete inability to communicate, as it can be partly compensated by mimicry and gestures. On the other hand, the process of communication not complicated by hindrances is possible only theoretically. According to different data, only 25 to 30% of the information intended by the addresser of the information is understood by the interlocutor, 10% is lost in the process of realization of the indented into a verbal formula, another 40-45% – at the moment of the utterance because of the shortage of communicative skills of the interlocutors (ability to speak and listen), and another 20% – in the process of listening and understanding because of differences in the level of intellect, competence and volume of background knowledge (Suxix 1998:52; Gamble and Gamble 1990:142).

Communicative hindrances can be of three types: 1) from the source/addresser; 2) from the receiver; 3) from the environment (Weaver 1995:23-24).

Hindrances from the environment include noise and bad visibility that disturb the reception of sound and visual communicative signals, physical distance (for example, when communicating information by phone or fax), and so on.

Hindrances on the part of the participants of communication can be subdivided into: physiological; linguistic; behavioral; psychological; culturological.

The influence of hindrances can lead to communication failures, i.e. the interruption of the communicative chain (as a rule, at the stage of encoding or decoding the message), or to distortion of information. The latter often becomes the result of interference – when factors of the native culture interfere with the interpretation of data about a foreign culture. When analyzing the causes of distorting information, the so-called “serial communication” – transmission of information in turns from one communicant to another – is also of interest (Gamble and Gamblé 1990:143). In this case a multiple or multi-stage decoding takes place, which is accompanied by the interference of multiple hindrances on the part of both the participants and the environment. Each communicant tends to omit (“erase”) part of the information that she/he deems unimportant, to simplify information before communicating it to others, or to interpret it on the basis of his/her own psychological peculiarities and cultural experience. This means that during serial communication there is a multiple “editing” of the initial message. As a result, up to 80% of information can be distorted (the effect of a “Chinese telephone”). In the theory of communication this phenomenon is called “dispersion effect.” As an illustration, we can use the situations when travelers’ stories about distant travels, mediated by third persons, appear in the press in an already distorted form. A similar phenomenon can take place in the process of translation, which becomes an additional step of decoding and interpretation.

Cross-cultural communication is carried out both on personal and institutional levels, and the nature of hindrances on each level has its specific characteristics. One may single out the following hindrances that function on the institutional level:

a) concealing information in accordance with the interests of the authorities; b) intentional dosing of socially significant information; c) structuring information in the form favorable for the authorities; d) using double-standards with regards to domestic and external problems; e) bias in presenting information about other cultures.

The knowledge of the participants of the cross-cultural communication about where, when, and for what reasons hindrances may occur allows predicting and preventing their appearance. Let’s observe the hindrances appearing on the *lexical level* of cross-cultural communication and ways of overcoming them.

Cross-Linguistic Discrepancies between Lexical Systems

Linguistic personality activates word meaning in his/her individual word-stock. It has been experimentally proven that, with the purpose of semantizing the word, the individual for instance “extracts” all its meanings (unconsciously) from his/her word-stock and chooses the one that is most acceptable for the given context. In cross-cultural com-

munication a wrong choice of meaning may be conditioned by cross-linguistic discrepancies between lexical systems: non-coincidence of the semantic structures of words, problems of homonymy, polysemy, and so on. Thus, on a visit to Cleveland a Russian girl was very confused when an American she barely knew invited her to visit *the Flats*. It turned out that he was not inviting her to his apartment, but to a district in Cleveland that was called so. Non-equivalent lexis becomes a hindrance exactly because it stands for objects or phenomena unfamiliar to foreign language communicants and therefore missing from their worldview. Such names are vividly marked from the national-cultural viewpoint. Here are the examples of Armenian realia that have become part of the English language: *lavash, dooduk, xhachqar, etc.*

The foreignness of the realia for another culture leads to the fact that its interpretation by a bearer and a non-bearer of linguoculture may differ significantly. For example, for us the traditional Armenian *kofta* is a meatball made of well-kneaded ground or mashed meat mixed with onion, vodka, egg, flour etc. But for a non-bearer of our linguoculture *kofta* can be *"the meat is often mixed with ingredients such as rice; bulgur; vegetables, or eggs to form a smooth paste. Koftas are sometimes made with fish or vegetables rather than meat. They can be grilled, fried, steamed, baked or marinated and may be served with a rich spicy sauce"* (Wikipedia).

Cultural-specific meanings are also fixed in onomastic realia: *I'm from Missouri – requiring proof; needing to be shown something in order to believe it.* (From the nickname for the state of Missouri, the Show Me State.); *Lucy Stoner – a female advocate of women's rights; esp. a married woman who uses her maiden name as a surname <the Lucy Stoners and women's rights fighters of her own class at college (e.g., Gij Anush, Ara Gexecik, Msra Melik), i.e. those culturally loaded units, the realization of whose meanings is impossible without accompanying background knowledge comprising the essence of a specific culture.*

The reason for communicative hindrances may be non-coincidence of the semantic structures of words, i.e. their discrepancy in the capacity and content of the notion, as well as their combinability with other notions.

The appearance of "false friends" in translation is the result of cross-linguistic paronymy. For example, the word "credit" is translated as «վարկ» / «կրեդիտ» in the context, where it means «սխալմիտք».

No wonder that they fail to understand each other: the word «քոթեջ» in Armenian is used with regards to privately-owned vacation homes, separate buildings in hotel complexes or two/three-storied houses in which rich or at least non-poor Armenians live. In English the word *cottage* can mean a small (predominantly one-storied) house – a dwelling of a peasant or a farmhand, as well as a small summerhouse in a resort district or village.

Euphemistic Constructions in American Culture

One of the linguistic paradoxes is that Americans, who are proud of their openness and straightforwardness, at the same time manifest an increased tendency towards euphemism. The motives, forcing Americans to resort to euphemism so frequently, are manifold.

American linguists from the Department of Translation Studies, University of Tampere, single out the following reasons: 1) striving to resolve complicated emotional situations, for example, when talking about death ("*the dearly departed*" or "*the loved one*" instead of "*corpse*"); 2) concealing the truth ("*culturally-deprived*" instead of "*slum*"); 3) attributing social status ("*sanitation worker*" instead of "*garbage man*"); 4) desire to present the situation as socially acceptable ("*air-sickness bag*" instead of "*vomit sack*"); 5) striving to satisfy human vanity (for example, with the help of advertisements), ("*pretty-plus girls' size*" instead of "*overly large/plump plus girls' size*"); 6) "technicalization" of the language by specialists ("*receiving waters*" instead of "*effluent*").

One may also bring the following examples of euphemisms spread in the US that allow presenting unpleasant, unwelcome phenomena, insulting someone's dignity, in a more favorable, "ennobled" light: *food-preparation center* – kitchen; *comfort station* – toilet; etc. The tendency for wide usage of euphemisms has especially vividly manifested itself in recent decades in connection with the tendency of Americans towards political correctness, which has been secured in the legislation. There are lists of words the usage of which is considered unwelcome or unacceptable. American linguists have often written that English language is "sexist," i.e. stipulating the manifestation of gender prejudices. That is why instructions recommend using forms that are neutral in terms of indicating a person's gender: "*human beings*", "*human race*" instead of "*mankind*"; "*business manager*", "*business person*" instead of "*businessman*". The address *Ms.* instead of *Miss/Mrs.* is also considered preferable, it allows avoiding asymmetry compared with an address to a man *Mr.* (not indicating the marital status of its bearer). In letters to officials it is recommended that forms of address *Mr./Ms. President* or a neutral word *Greetings* should be used, as some women leaders refuse pointblank to read letters starting with the address *Mr. President*.

American linguists also recommend being politically correct with respect to people of various age groups. For example, it is not advised to use the words *girl* and *boy* to refer to people older than 13. Teenagers are often called *young man/young woman, young adults* to flatter their self-esteem.

Special attention is paid to words and gestures pointing at the ethnic and race affiliation as, according to V.I. Karasik, "the majority of subjective pejoratives in English are insults on the basis of national and race affiliation" (1989:87). It is recommended to avoid information of such sort in context: "*Zhao She is unusually tall*" instead of "*Zhao She is unusually tall Asian*" Besides, as the authors of the book "*Understanding Intercultural Communication*" point out, some offensive gestures have been replaced in the language of gestures used by deaf and mute people: thus, instead of a twist of the little finger near the corner of the eye to signify the Japanese, now the movement of the palm imitating the form of the Japanese islands is used; instead of flattening the nose to stand for African Americans – a gesture to signify the map of Africa (Samovar et al. 1981:212).

The norms of political correctness should be observed when talking about material well-being and people's social status. "Indication of lifestyle in an English-speaking society is built up in such a way that less affluent people would not feel aggrieved." So, for example, expensive carriages in trains are called *first class*, and the cheap ones are called *standard* (Karasik 1992:43). The same tendency is observed in the attempt to rename

some professions: “*executive assistant*” instead of “*secretary*”; “*beautician*” instead of “*hairdresser*”; “*custodian*” instead of “*janitor*”; “*homemaker*” or “*household executive*” instead of “*housewife*” etc. “Non-prestigious” names like “*second-hand automobile dealers*” now are changed to “*rebuilt*” or “*reconditioned*” and “*second-hand shop*” is changed to “*buy-and-sell shop*”.

In situations of cross-cultural communication, euphemism as a form of indirect nomination does not explain, but, on the contrary, obscures, veils the meaning, and that is why it may become a hindrance on the way to understanding. So, for example, even the British who visit the US perceive the euphemisms for *toilet – restroom* and *bathroom* – in literal sense, as a room for rest and a room for having a bath. It is natural that for native speakers of other languages, for example, Armenian, such forms of language expression turn out to be more complicated to decipher. Many funny cases are connected with incorrect perception by Armenian travelers of such words and word combinations as, for example, “*bathroom tissue*” or “*bath tissue*”; “*powder room*” etc..

Besides, the difficulty in understanding and using euphemistic constructions by Armenian communicants is conditioned by the fact that the norms of political correctness are expressed very weakly in Armenia. One of the reasons for such a state of things is lack of laws and instructions in Armenia referring to norms of political correctness, as well as the fact that this notion has not been formed in the consciousness of most native speakers of Armenian. In this connection during cross-cultural contacts between Armenians and Americans awkward situations often arise, which is based on the fact that we do not take into consideration the norms of political correctness.

However, it should be pointed out that sometimes the effort of Americans to observe these norms goes too far. Unjustified substitutes are offered, “*herstory*” instead of “*history*”.

The use of foul language is closely linked with the problems of creating euphemisms. However paradoxical it may be, American language community that is so fond of euphemism, has nevertheless quite high degree of tolerance of obscene expressions. The forms of linguistic expression that are considered acceptable in the presence of an American woman are unacceptable in the presence of an Armenian woman. The consequences of this circumstance in cross-cultural communication can be very serious. The participant of cross-cultural communication must be capable of balancing the degree of obscenity of the words and expressions in two contacting languages. Otherwise it may give rise to ungrounded resentment; incorrect assessment of the communication partner and his/her speech behavior as extremely free or, on the contrary, stale and hypocritical; inappropriate use of strong language in improper situations, and so on.

In different linguocultures the forms of expressing the external, social component of emotions may differ and thus influence the individual perception of the connotative component of the language. The wrong choice of the word may lead to discomforts, insult and misunderstanding. So, for example, the word «*խնդիր*» in Armenian is neutral, but in English “*problem*” has a negative connotation. That is why when during communication with business partners from USA Armenian businessmen say: “*Let’s discuss some problems*” very often Americans feel (get) offended and embarrassed.

In essence the English language is more energetic, the way of expressing thoughts is precise and laconic. For the Armenian language, in its turn, a more subtle nuancing of meanings is typical, the whole structure of the language is aimed at expressing various shades of emotions.

Non-coinciding interjections that serve to express the same or similar emotions can also become hindrances. For example, «Ուֆ» – “Phew!”; «Վախ, վախ» (ցավի ժամանակ) – “Ouch!”; «Թու!» – “Nuts!”; «Շշ» (սուս) – “Hash! Hash!” etc.

Phraseologisms occupy a special place among language units from the point of view of their emotional richness and evaluativeness. According to E. Belyaevskaya “a word exists in the lexical system of the language, in the context of the linguoculture, on the crossroads of different associations with other language units” (1987:59). In each specific context a word acquires new connections and associations that often follow it and later get their realization in new contexts. Connotations and associations maybe closely related to precedent texts (the term suggested by Yu.N. Karaulov), the knowledge of which is essential for adequate understanding of such nationally marked units as “*gone with the wind*” – *gone as if taken away by the wind (A phrase made famous by the Margaret Mitchell novel and subsequent film “Gone with the Wind”. The phrase is used to make gone have a stronger force.)*; “*Tooth fairy*” – a fairy supposed to leave money under a child’s pillow in place of a baby tooth that has just fallen out; “*Box and Cox*” – used to refer to an arrangement whereby people make use of the same accommodation or facilities at different times, according to a strict arrangement (The term comes from the comic play ‘Box and Cox - A Romance of Real Life in One Act’, by John Maddison Morton. Box and Cox were two lodgers who shared their rooms - one occupying them by day and the other by night.) in English and «*Քաջ Եւազար*», «*Չախորդ Փսևոս*», «*Կիկոսի մահը դառնալ*» (Հովհ. Թումանյան), «*Գասպարյանի շարադրություն*» (Միմակ), «*պեր Թողիկի դարոց*» (Բաֆֆի) in Armenian. One may object that not all native speakers are familiar with the complete text that became the source of creating these units. However, we believe that minimal knowledge of at least the brief content of precedent texts is necessary to realize the meanings of the units under consideration. Not knowing the precedent texts both in one’s own and in a foreign culture, not realizing their cultural ties may lead to communication failures.

Conclusion

For adequate cross-cultural communication to occur a correspondence of the worldviews of communicants is required. Relocation into a new cultural-linguistic space requires that a foreign-language communicant should correct his/her own linguistic worldview and bring it into correspondence with the changed conditions.

If difference in worldviews makes communication difficult and leads to communicative hindrances and failures, then a necessity arises to bring them to correspondence with each other: both communicants “shape their own pragmatic orientations: the first one – for adequate transfer of information, the second one – for its adequate understanding. In cross-cultural communication the main burden of adaptation falls on the non-bearer of linguoculture who is learning to think, speak and act as a native.

For an accurate perception of reality a communicant from a foreign culture needs to make corrections in his/her linguistic worldview, corrections that reflect a certain language and culture properly. The appearance of a qualitatively new image of the surrounding reality signifies the transformation of the linguistic worldview of the communicant – the participant of cross-cultural communication.

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Միջնակութային խոչընդոտները և դրանց հաղթահարման ուղիները հաղորդակցության ընթացքում

Միջնակութային իրազեկության կառուցվածքում արդիական է դառնում փոխըմբռնման խնդիրը, քանի որ հաղորդակցման գործնական շատ իրավիճակներում անհատը բախվում է նրան, որ իր խոսքերն ու գործողությունները սխալ են ընկալվում գործընկերոջ կողմից, «չեն հասնում» նրան, քանի որ հաղորդակցման ընթացքում առաջանում են արգելքներ և խոչընդոտներ: Դրանք խոչընդոտում են փոխըմբռնմանը, խանգարում արդյունավետ հաղորդակցմանը և կարող են հանգեցնել հակամարտության (կոնֆլիկտային իրավիճակների): Որպես կանոն, առաջացած դժվարությունները պայմանավորված են հաղորդակցվողների մշակութային տարբերությունների աստիճանով, որոնք չեն կարող վերացվել ամիջապես հաղորդակցման ընթացքում: Հաղորդակցման նման դժվարությունները ընդունված է անվանել միջնակութային *խոչընդոտներ* կամ *արգելքներ*: Վերջիններիս հաղթահարման համար պահանջվում են հատուկ ջանքեր և խորքային գիտելիքներ:

Այս երկու եզրույթները՝ «*խոչընդոտներ*» և «*արգելքներ*» հաճախ օգտագործվում են որպես միմյանց փոխարինողներ: Սակայն, նպատակահարմար ենք համարում տարբերակել դրանք և որպես օրինակ դիտարկել բառային խոչընդոտները, որոնք խանգարում են միջնակութային շփման իրականացմանը:

Այն պատճառները, որոնք խանգարում են հաղորդակցման իրագործմանը, անվանում են *արգելքներ*։ օտար լեզվի չիմացությունը միջնակութային իրավիճակներում կամ ֆիզիոլոգիական գործոնները, ինչպիսիք են հաղորդակցվողներից մեկի խլությունը կամ համրությունը։ Խոչընդոտները, իրենց հերթին, գործոններ են, որոնք նվազեցնում են արդյունավետ հաղորդակցման որակը։ ‘Իրանք են’ անհամաչափությունը, կաղապարված հակազդեցությունները (ոեակցիաներ), լեզվական սխալները և այլն։

Հաճախ խոչընդոտների առկայությունը հանգեցնում է կոմունիկատիվ / հաղորդակցական ծախսողումների, այսինքն՝ տեղեկատվական և հաղորդակցական շղթայի ընդհատմանը կամ տեղեկատվության աղավաղմանը։ Վերջինս հաճախ հարազատ մշակույթի գործոնների և օտար մշակույթի խորքային գիտելիքների անհամապատասխանության արդյունք է նրա մեկնաբանության ընթացքում։ Միջնակութային խոչընդոտների առաջացման պատճառների իմացությունը թույլ է տալիս կանխատեսել և կանխել դրանց առաջացումը։

Межкультурные помехи и способы их преодоления в процессе коммуникации

В структуре межкультурной компетентности актуальной становится проблема взаимопонимания, поскольку во многих практических ситуациях общения индивид сталкивается с тем, что его слова и поступки неправильно воспринимаются партнером, “не доходят” до него, т.е. в процессе коммуникации возникают помехи и препятствия. Они мешают взаимопониманию, нарушают процесс эффективной коммуникации и способны привести к возникновению конфликтных ситуаций. Как правило, возникающие трудности обусловлены степенью межкультурных различий партнеров, которые не могут быть элиминированы сразу в процессе коммуникации. Такие трудности общения принято называть межкультурными коммуникативными помехами или барьерами, которые в силу их практической значимости требуют особых усилий и специальных знаний для преодоления. Эти два термина: “помехи” и “барьеры” нередко используются как взаимозаменяемые. Однако, полагаем целесообразным дифференцировать данные термины, и как пример рассмотрим лексические помехи мешающие адекватному межкультурному общению.

Причины, которые препятствуют осуществлению коммуникации являются *барьерами*: незнание иностранного языка в ситуации межкультурного общения или физиологические факторы, как, например, глухота или немота одного из собеседников. Помехи, в свою очередь, – это факторы, которые снижают качество эффективной коммуникации: асимметрия, стереотипные реакции, языковые ошибки и т.д.

Зачастую наличие помех приводит к коммуникативным сбоям, т.е. прерыванию информативно-коммуникативной цепочки или к искажению информации. Последнее часто становится результатом несостыковки факторов родной культуры с фоновой информацией чужой культуры в процессе ее интерпретации. Знание причин возникновения межкультурных коммуникативных помех позволяет прогнозировать и предотвращать их появление.