Cross-Cultural Psychology
Psy 420
Chapter 9
Culture, Language, and Communication

What is Language?
A system for combining arbitrary elements symbolically into utterances that convey meaning. Some parts of language:

- Lexicon/Semantics: vocab. contained in a language.
- Grammar/Syntax: set of rules governing word forms & the ways words combine to form sentences.
- Pragmatics: system of rules that govern social use and understanding of language.

Is Language Innate or Learned?

- Behaviorist theorists (ex. skinner): Language is learned, primarily through shaping and positive reinforcement. Evidence for and against?
- Social learning theorists (ex. Bandura): Children learn language by observing and imitating the language of those around them within the culture. Evidence for and against?
- Nativists (ex. Chomsky): We are biologically predisposed to acquire language through an innate brain module (a language acquisition device), that enables humans to learn any language with ease, regardless of culture or environment. Evidence for and against?
- Interactionists: An integration of all 3 theories might best account for language acquisition.
Relationship Between Language and Culture

A Reciprocal Relationship: Examples

- Lexicons used to refer to self/other: in U.S., “I” & “You.” In high power distance/status differentiation cultures, depends on the nature of the relationship between self & other.
- Syntax of language allows pronouns to be dropped in collectivist cultures.
- Pragmatics tend to permit more self disclosure in U.S. vs. Taiwan.

More on Culture & Pragmatics

Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) analyzed cultural differences in pragmatics. They focused on 4 communication styles:

1. Direct - Indirect: A direct style explicitly incorporates a communicator's actual intentions in his or her vocalizations, while an indirect style will hide or camouflage one's intentions. Collectivist cultures use indirect styles of communication, which can be interpreted as contributing to the maintenance of group harmony. Ex. Clancy (1986) found that Japanese children learn to use indirect communication styles for both making and refusing requests so as to avoid hurting the feelings of others. Individualistic cultures, however, emphasize directness and openness in self-expression.

2. Elaborative - Exacting - Succinct: This dimension focuses on the content of a verbal communication: elaborative (using a wide variety of expressive language when communicating), exacting (limiting communication to only that information that is necessary), and succinct (communication that includes extensive use of understatement and silence). People from Arabic cultures prefer an elaborative style that incorporates metaphors, similes, exaggeration, and extensive use of modifying adjectives. Most European cultures and the U.S. prefer an exacting style. The succinct style seems to be preferred among Asian cultures. Ex. Hall (1983) stressed the importance of silence, or “ma,” in Japanese conversation noting that “ma” is much more than pausing between words; it contributes to maintaining harmony and synchrony in conversation.

Culture & Pragmatics Cont’d

3. Personal - Contextual: A personal style emphasizes “individual-centered” communication (ex. use of personal pronouns & informality). A contextual style emphasizes a speaker's roles and relationships to others (i.e., status). Contextual verbal styles seem to be more prevalent in collectivistic cultures, while personal styles tend to be characteristic of individualistic cultures. Ex. Korean language incorporates special vocabulary to distinguish gender, status, degree of intimacy, and occasion in order to communicate critical contextual information. They suggest that these communication styles may be closely related to differences on Hofstede’s (1980) dimension of power distance, with cultures that are high on power distance emphasizing contextual communication.

4. Instrumental - Affective: This dimension refers to whether verbal communication is focused on the intents or goals of the speaker’s message (instrumental) or the receiver and his or her interpretation and emotional response to the verbal communication (affective). Research indicates that individualistic cultures emphasize the instrumental style, while collectivistic cultures are more affective. Ex. the importance of the affective style in Asian cultures (ex. Korea and Japan) is reflected in the assumption that, rather than focusing on the content of the message itself, both the speaker and the listener are expected to monitor each other's reactions and intuitively extract the true meaning within the communication.
Barnlund and Araki (1985) investigated pragmatics for the use of compliments in Japan and America. They found differences in:

- **Frequency**: Americans gave and received more.
- **Context**: Americans were most likely to praise others on their appearance and/or personal traits or personality characteristics, while Japanese tended to prefer praising the actions of others, work or study habits, and then appearance.
- **Content**: Americans tended to use a wider variety of adjectives and more superlatives in their compliments (e.g., brilliant, fantastic, etc.).
- **People involved**: Americans tended to exchange compliments with close friends more often. Japanese more likely to exchange compliments with acquaintances.
- **Reactions**: Americans were more likely to simply accept a compliment. The Japanese tended to question its accuracy, deny it, or make no response.

Barnlund and Araki conclude that in a collectivistic culture compliments are discouraged because they act to encourage comparisons that inherently weaken group membership, while individualistic cultures encourage compliments because they confirm the individuality of each person and encourage competition.

**Language & Cognition**

Does language shape thought or does thought shape language?

- **Vygotsky’s Position**: Language facilitates thought. Ex. Private speech important in cognitive development.
- **Piaget’s Position**: The more important an aspect of experience is, the more precisely one wants to describe it; therefore, the more detailed the language becomes. Cognition precedes & “causes” language.

**Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis**

Sapir-Whorf: The language one speaks shapes the way they think about the world.

- Most studies supporting linguistic relativity look at differences in cognition among cultures and attribute them to lexical differences between languages. Weak support since correlation between lexicon and thought is small.
- Studies that look at differences in cognition among cultures and attribute them to grammatical, syntactical, and pragmatics differences provide stronger support.
- Overall, more support for a correlation between language and cognition (weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) than for a causative link. E.g. Bilinguals think differently in different languages. Conclusion: Lang. ➔ Cognition? Or, Cognition ➔ Lang.? Or, Culture ➔ Lang. & Culture ➔ Cognition?
Linguistic Relativity & Prejudice

Do the words we use influence the way we think about social groups?

- Alleen Pace Nilsen (1993) discussed forms of sexist language (which, according to empirical research, affects women's interest in job positions, learning (comprehension and recall of material), self-esteem, and participation in school (McConnell & Fazio, 1996)), including:
  - Word pairs that have a businesslike connotation for the masculine form and a sexual connotation for the feminine form—ex. sir vs. madam, master vs. mistress.
  - The tendency to put the masculine form first and the feminine form second—ex. men and women, brothers and sisters.
  - Women are passive, men are active—ex. stating that "women were given the vote" omits information about the actions of women in that cause.
  - Women are associated with negative connotations, whereas men are associated with positive connotations—ex. "bachelor" as opposed to "old maid".
  - The use of the generic he—ex. using "he" to mean "he and she" or "men" to mean "men and women."
  - The use of female modifiers—terms such as "woman doctor" convey the idea that real doctors are men.
  - The use of childlike terms to refer to women—ex. terms used to refer to women in general (baby, doll) or women’s names that include a diminutive (names with "ette" at the end).

Linguistic Relativity & Prejudice
Cont’d

- Robert B. Moore (1988) discussed several forms of racist language in English, including:
  - Using the passive voice to make key actors invisible—ex., "when the continental railroad was built..." omits information about the Chinese laborers who built much of it.
  - Using words to dehumanize—ex. "slave" conveys a more objectified meaning than the phrase "African people held in captivity."
  - Using words to set standards of comparison—The term "non-White" sets Whites as the norm. The term "Third World" vs. "Second World" (ex. Russia & Eastern European countries) vs. "First World."
- Joseph H. Neisen (1990) suggests that the term homophobia conveys the message that the origin of discrimination against gay men and lesbians is something dreadful about homosexuality, whereas the term heterosexism conveys the message that the source of discrimination is the oppression perpetrated by heterosexual institutions.

Language & Personality

- Are there two personalities in a bilingual individual?
  - Responses to self-report tests of personality (ex. California Personality Inventory) differ when given by the same individuals in different languages.
  - Responses to projective tests of personality (ex. Thematic Apperception Test) show the same pattern of within-group differences.

- What explains this phenomenon?
  - The Culture-Affiliation Hypothesis: Bilinguals identify with the culture associated with the language they are currently using.
  - The Minority Group-Affiliation Hypothesis: Bilinguals behave according to the stereotypes of the majority group about the minority group when using the language of the minority group.
Bilingualism
Helpful (additive) or harmful (Subtractive)?
• Early research: Bilingual children obtain lower scores on intelligence and verbal tests.
  • Conclusion → cognitive capacity limited, 2 languages crowd the brain and limit cognitive development.
  • Subsequent analyses: low SES is the culprit.
• Recent Research:
  – Bilinguals understand the structure (grammar/syntax) of their native languages better than monolinguals.
  – Bilinguals score higher on cognitive flexibility, empathy, and lower on ethnocentrism.

Bilingualism Cont’d
• Foreign language processing difficulties (taking longer to process & to respond to information presented in a foreign language) could lead to negative impressions.
• Foreign Language Effect (experiencing interference between a non-linguistic task and a foreign-language task) could lead to temporary declines in performance on non-linguistic thinking tasks.

Non-Verbal Communication
Accounts for the majority of the meaning people get in an interaction. Perceived as more truthful than verbal communications.
Body language and appearance:
• Gestures: nodding yes
• Personal space: proximics
• Eye gaze
Culture and the Use of Gestures

- **Gestures as illustrators**: Illustrators are actions that highlight or accent speech content. Some cultures (ex. Jewish, Italian) encourage illustrators, others (Ex. Japanese, Thai) discourage them. People from cultures that encourage “gesticulation” probably think something is wrong when they interact with people from more reserved cultures. Conversely, people from more reserved cultures may feel threatened or overwhelmed, when they interact with gesturally expressive people.

- **Gestures as emblems**: Emblematic gestures and movements that have a total meaning by themselves (Ex. the “finger,” thumbs up, and head nods and shakes). These gestures can have different meanings across cultures. Ex.:
  - The A-OK sign is a vulgar gesture in some European countries (an invitation for sex) and a rude sign in other parts of Europe (means “You’re nothing”).
  - In some countries pointing your index finger toward your head and temple area signals that you are smart, but in other countries it means that you are crazy.
  - Repeatedly tossing head back, then forward means yes in U.S., “no” in Italy/Malta/Greece, and is used in Scandinavia to beckon someone.

Culture and Personal Space

- **Hall (1966) described 4 distance zones that are important to human interactions**:
  - **Intimate Distance**: 0-1.5 ft. For lovemaking, comforting, & intimate conversations.
  - **Personal Distance**: 1.5-4 ft. Used for conversations with people we know well.
  - **Social Distance**: 4-12 ft. For conversations with strangers & to transact business.
  - **Public Distance**: >=12 ft. Used for speeches, formal occasions.

Culture and Personal Space Cont’d

- **Cross-Cultural Differences in Personal Space**: People from “contact cultures” interact at closer distances than people from non-contact cultures. Ex. Watson and Graves (1966) found that, in a discussion task, Arabs touched more, had more face-to-face orientation, and maintained less distance between each other than Americans.

- **Ethnic-Group Differences in Personal Space**: Baxter (1970) observed dyads at the Houston zoo and found that:
  - When interacting together, Mexican American pairs were closest and African American pairs were farthest apart with Anglos intermediate.
  - There is an ethnic group by sex interaction. For Anglos and African Americans, male-female pairs stood closest and male-male pairs furthest. However, for Mexican Americans, female-female pairs were closest with male-male pairs most distant.
Intercultural Communication Competence

- Obstacles to effective intercultural communication:
  - Assumptions of similarity
  - Language differences in semantics/syntax/pragmatics
  - Nonverbal misinterpretations
  - Preconceptions and stereotypes
  - Tendency to evaluate and rush to judgment
  - High anxiety or tension
  - Less developed intercultural sensitivity

Intercultural Sensitivity

- Milton Bennett’s 1993 Developmental model on intercultural sensitivity proposes 6 stages along a continuum from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism:
  - Ethnocentric Stages:
    - Denial
    - Defense
    - Minimization
  - Ethnorelative Stages:
    - Acceptance
    - Adaptation
    - Integration

Denial

- Denies that differences exist
- Lacks awareness of significant minority populations
- Disinterested in international affairs that don’t directly impinge on one self
- Trips abroad (when attempted) in a familiar cultural bubble, insulated from cultural differences
- Seeks out those who are culturally similar
Defense

• Strong defense of one world view, usually one’s own, sometimes another’s (reversal)
• Distrustful of different cultural ideas or behavior
• Cultural knowledge consists of strong (usually negative) stereotypes --personal acquaintances who don’t fit the stereotype are seen as exceptions to the rule
• Trips abroad highlight the cultural deficiencies of the host culture, compared to one’s own
• Denigrates or avoids of those who are culturally different because of their unpleasant traits

Minimization

• Cultural difference is no longer avoided or denigrated
• Believes that cultural differences are trivial, only on the surface
• Believes people would all be alike if they could
• Try to treat everyone as one would like to be treated

Acceptance

• Recognizes and values differences
• Believes that one’s own culture is only one of many ways of experiencing the world, Other cultures represent a reality as complex as one’s own
• Seeks opportunities to learn more about other cultures
• Withholds judgment, knowing that the meaning of ‘unusual’ behavior varies with cultural context
• No change in behavior, but an awareness that other cultures might interpret one’s actions in unusual ways
Adaptation

- Cognitive changes
- Recognizes the value of more than one more cultural perspective
- Easily shifts into other cultural frames of reference
- Evaluates a situation according to the participants’ points of view

Integration

- Behavioral changes
- Integrates cultural variability into behavior
- Broad repertoire of culturally appropriate behavior
- Intentionally changes culturally-based behavior when appropriate
- Uses the ability to shift into other cultural frames of reference to act as a bridge between cultures
- Try to treat every person as the person would like to be treated