

Language: Its Cultural and Intercultural Dimensions*

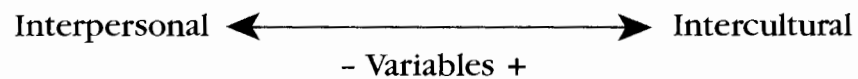
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The Goal of This Special Volume

If educators in the language and intercultural fields had a shared goal, it would certainly be the development of intercultural communicative competence (ICC, or intercultural competence for short). A special issue of the *International Journal of Intercultural Relations (IJIR)* (Martin, 1989) and a more recent endeavor (Wiseman & Koester, 1993) attempted to gather studies on just this topic. Although many aspects of ICC competence are presented, three principal themes emerge:

1. the ability to establish relations
2. the ability to communicate with minimal loss or distortion
3. the ability to achieve or attain a level of compliance among those involved

Stated this way, these abilities are desirable, if not altogether necessary, for everyone everywhere. Not only are these aspects part of "intercultural relations," they are also germane to "interpersonal relations." What complicates matters at the intercultural level, however, is that when interacting with individuals across cultures, we share fewer and fewer commonalities while other variables increase:



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Linguistics and the Intercultural Field

Most notable are the variables that are presented by differences in languages, cultures, and world views that mediate our interaction. For this reason, both language educators and interculturalists share a role in expanding and developing native competence into intercultural competence for use in a wider arena.

A goal of intercultural competence, then, requires insights drawn from both language and intercultural areas. With rare exception (see Ting-Toomey & Korzenny, 1989), however, interculturalists often overlook (or leave to language teachers) the task of developing language competence, just as language teachers overlook (or leave to interculturalists) the task of developing intercultural abilities. This, despite wide acknowledgment that language and culture are dimensions of each other, interrelated and inseparable. Language, in fact, both reflects and affects one's world view, serving as a sort of road map to how one perceives, interprets and thinks about, and expresses one's views of the world. This intertwining invites a fresh look at how we conceptualize what is meant by world view, its components, and their interrelationships; and how language and culture mediate (inter)cultural processes.

Stated this way, ICC is clearly also a goal of several other kindred groups. It is the ardent concern of those laboring in bilingual education, multicultural education, ethnic heritage and ethnic revival education, foreign and second language education, and international and global education. All strive to develop the awareness, attitudes, skills, and knowledge (A+ASK) that take one beyond one's native paradigm while grappling with another that is intrinsically and provocatively different.

Because linguistics predates the intercultural field, it has had many more years to develop concepts about language and language use, concepts that can be helpful in informing language educators and interculturalists about their own work. Surprisingly, too few interculturalists have linguistics as part of their formation; more surprising still is to find interculturalists—and some ESOL language educators—without proficiency in a second language. More than the actual attainment of proficiency is the fact that without a second language experience, they have not grappled with the most fundamental paradigm of all—language, and the benefits that derive from this process. For all of the research and concepts *about* other cultures and

world views, the monolingual ESOL teacher or interculturalist engages mostly in intellectualized endeavors when concepts are not also accompanied by *direct* experiences of other cultures and languages. Without an alternative form of communication, we are constrained to continue perception, conceptualization, formulation, and expression of our thoughts from a single vantage point. Despite our ability to discuss ad infinitum intercultural concepts in our own tongue, our experiences remain vicarious and intellectualized, lacking multiple perspectives, which Fishman (1976) characterized as “. . . monocular vision . . . which can lead to narrow smugness and a smug narrowness.”

Because language is considerably more tangible and easier to document than culture, linguists are often better able to analyze and understand their data. Yet, much of what is gleaned from a linguistic perspective about languages informs our understanding of culture. Because language reflects and affects culture, and because both languages and cultures are human inventions, it is not surprising this should be so. A linguistic concept illustrating this point and widely used in the intercultural field (cf., Gudykunst & Nishida, 1989) is the notion of *etic* and *emic* perspectives (seeing from the outside as a foreigner vs. seeing from the inside as a native). The utility of linguistic insight to intercultural thought is perhaps best supported in the works of Edward Hall and may account for his proposition that “culture *is* communication” (Hall, 1973, p. 97) just as we might add that, “communication *is* culture.”

When analyzed further, the depth of this simple comment is even more apparent. It is often said that the anthropoid is transformed into a human being through language acquisition. Language, that is, our total communicative ability, allows us to develop “human” qualities by learning from vicarious and symbolic (as well as direct) experiences, to help formulate our thoughts, and to convey them to someone else. Without language, none of this is possible. Put another way, communicative ability allows culture development through interaction and communication with other individuals. Language serves as the construct that aids cultural development.

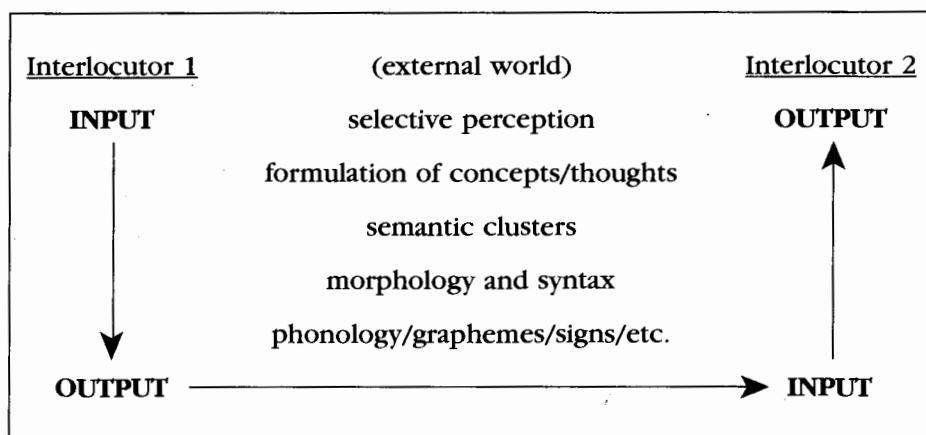
Studies of wolf and feral children, as well as those of older adults raised in isolation, attest to the incredible constraints that lack of any communication system exerts on their development as human beings (e.g., Brown, 1958; Curtiss, 1977; Lane, 1976; Rymer, 1993; Schaller, 1991). But for those

A Language-Culture Paradigm

undergoing “normal” development, language affects and reflects culture just as culture affects and reflects what is encoded in language. Although language and culture do not perfectly mirror each other, a dynamic tension nonetheless exists between the two. Whorf and Piaget observed such influences, although each emphasized a different starting point (Piaget in Spencer Pulaski, 1971; Steinfatt, 1989; Whorf, 1956).

A linguistic construct that depicts how language exteriorizes one’s perceptions of the world (as it helps in turn to develop one’s internalized view) is the following input-output framework:

How Language Exteriorizes Perceptions



To elaborate further on this model, we find ourselves in a given context (external world). However, each individual (in accordance with one’s language, culture, and experiences) selectively attends to (i.e., perceives) certain aspects of that context. Perceptions (apprehended through the various senses) are formulated into concepts or thoughts, essentially a mental process. However, communication of one’s thoughts to another person requires reformulation of thought into tangible manifestations (in accordance with one’s available language systems). Thoughts are “reinterpreted” while grouped by semantic features (which eventually become

words or signs) when shaped (i.e., given morphological form) and ordered sequentially (because language can only be conveyed linearly; that is, one word placed after another in accordance with the available syntactic system), couched within existing symbols (sounds, script, gestures, and so forth), and then expressed physically. The mental aspect of this process is what Noam Chomsky termed *competence*, while the physical expression is one's *performance* (corresponding to deep and surface structures).

Whereas one gathers input through perception, one's expression through tangible symbols provides the output. Input and output are interconnected within each speaker through mental processes that are mediated at both deep and surface levels by the particular language of the speaker. Language symbols, however, provide the "substance" that allows thought to be exteriorized.

Assuming two interlocutors share a similar language-culture background, output from the first provides comprehensible input for the second. In this way, they can alternately reverse the process during dialogue, at times moving from perception to thought to expression (from input to output); and at others, receiving someone else's symbolic output as input. The process is then reversed to create a facsimile of the other's mental representations (providing another way of experiencing and "knowing"). However, this process of converting perception to thought, and thought to language, necessarily requires breaking down and fragmenting holistic experience in accordance with the word categories available in one's own tongue because each language system consists of discrete units, conveyed one symbol at a time.

In this way, language serves as a primary classificatory system, segmenting and fragmenting our notions about the world while also grouping and combining word categories, ranging from wider classifications to narrower specifications based on semantic criteria that are clustered and form their meaning. Moreover, words cohere in hierarchies (from general to specific) with other words sharing many of the same semantic features (Anglin, 1970, 1995), whereas hierarchies mesh into heterarchies (a hierarchy of hierarchies). As we learn our native tongue, we learn to generalize and specify about the things of the world as we encode concepts into the words of language, just as the words of language in turn lead us to concepts.

Language Unawareness

More intriguing still is to recognize that each language-culture establishes its own hierarchy. Hall (1973) says as much when he points out that “there is no necessary connection between these symbolizations and what occurred. Talking is a highly selective process . . . highlighting some things at the expense of some other things” (pp. 97-98). He alludes, of course, to language-thought connections as arbitrary convention or conventionalized arbitrariness, a concept advanced a century ago by Saussure (1961). Yet, once the relationship is established, it remains rather fixed. This relationship between experience, thought, and expression, then, speaks to how language and culture mediate world view, serving as our most fundamental paradigm.

Why is it then that we take language for granted, unaware that our native tongue is not merely a “neutral” communication system, but a pervasive medium that directly influences every aspect of our lives? It may be because we seldom need to reflect on our use of language; it has been there for as long as we can remember. And therein lies the power of a different cultural experience. While providing a chance to learn about another way of life, it provokes even more questions about one’s own language, culture, and world view.

By 5 years of age, children have already become effective members of their culture, displaying amazing language ability. They use this ability to explore, to learn, to communicate, and to formulate simple and sometimes very profound questions. Unaware of their own accomplishments—mastery of complex patterns of sounds (or signs), forms, and syntax—children acquire their native tongue unthinkingly, its acquisition incidental to their need to perform all that they do with language (Fantini, 1985).

Moreover, language is species-specific. Animals do not acquire language; only humans do. All human children everywhere develop speech—with ease, untutored, and in similar stages. Yet, the language paradigm is our most basic metaphor because word creations substitute for the thing signified. As we master words, we often fail to distinguish between verbal symbols and the reality for which they stand. But words can only evoke conceptually what is meant, thereby providing vicarious mental experiences for speaker and hearer. Once acquired, words have the power to

Language—A Two-Edged Sword

mediate what we think, say, and do. Through language, we have the power to recreate events experienced, but also to talk of things we “know” only indirectly through symbols. Language aids (and sometimes limits) imagination, fantasy, the make-believe. Real or imagined, language can bring into existence even that which may not exist at all. And once experienced, directly or indirectly, language becomes a repository for our collective human memory—or at least for the memory of those who share the same tongue—generation after generation.

Language is a double-edged sword: Language communicates, but it also excommunicates. That is, it includes only those who share the system; others are excluded. Likewise, language both liberates and constrains. Our ability to symbolize, for example, allows us to move freely, albeit conceptually, through time and space. We can recall and tell of things past, or project into the future, merely by uttering words. So great is our faith in words that we can viscerally experience the “reality” of something we never experienced directly at all, whether in the past or the future. Yet, there is no way to retrieve the past nor ensure the future; we can only symbolize about them while we remain always only in the present moment and space.

Just as language conveys thoughts and experiences, it can also constrain and contradict them. Through language we learn, for example, that things are not always what they seem. In fact, much of what we learn and “know” we really do not “know” at all—that is, directly. Knowledge is tremendously augmented through language use. Much of schooling and other learning in life is accomplished through language, expanding the limits of what we can know through direct experience alone. Language permits contemplating the impossible and exploring the unfathomable. We talk about concepts as difficult and as abstract as “death,” for example, which we can never know directly, at least not in life. It is difficult to imagine what life might be like without our human ability to symbolize, just as it is difficult to imagine how we might think or know differently if we spoke a language other than our native tongue, or in addition to it.

Language as Communicative Competence

By giving tangible expression to thought, language enables communication with others. Although speech signals are often part of communicative ability, there are other forms as well—written symbols, signed language, and other means. Whichever we use, these are usually combined, forming several interrelated systems:

- a linguistic component (sounds, signs and/or graphemes, forms, and grammar of language)
- a paralinguistic component (tone, pitch, volume, speed, and affective aspects)
- an extralinguistic component (nonverbal aspects such as gestures, movements, grimaces)
- when context is considered, a sociolinguistic dimension (a repertoire of styles, each appropriate for different situations)

All are mastered in overlapping stages as part of one's native competence. Understanding these multiple dimensions and their interrelatedness elucidates what is involved when developing competence in a second or third system.

During the past quarter of a century, the notion of *communicative competence* has increasingly commanded the attention of language teachers and interculturalists alike. For language teachers, it suggests that teaching "language" means more than the linguistic (i.e., grammar) component alone. In practice, however, linguistic considerations often continue to preempt the major portion of time in classroom teaching. For interculturalists, on the other hand, a common approach to communicative competence includes culture-specific ethnographic studies based on the work of Hymes' (1972) framework (cf. Carbaugh, 1990); as well as attempts to extend this sociolinguistic framework to intercultural interaction (cf. Collier, 1989). In these endeavors, however, the language component is often superseded by a focus on the communicative rules of interaction.

The term, nonetheless, signifies the whole and helps remind us about all aspects of the communication process. In a similar vein, language and culture may also require a broader label, a superordinate term that connotes and ensures their inseparability. The term *linguaculture* has served this purpose in my own work; and recently, another writer proposed the word *languaculture* (Agar, 1994). Both reflect attempts to link the

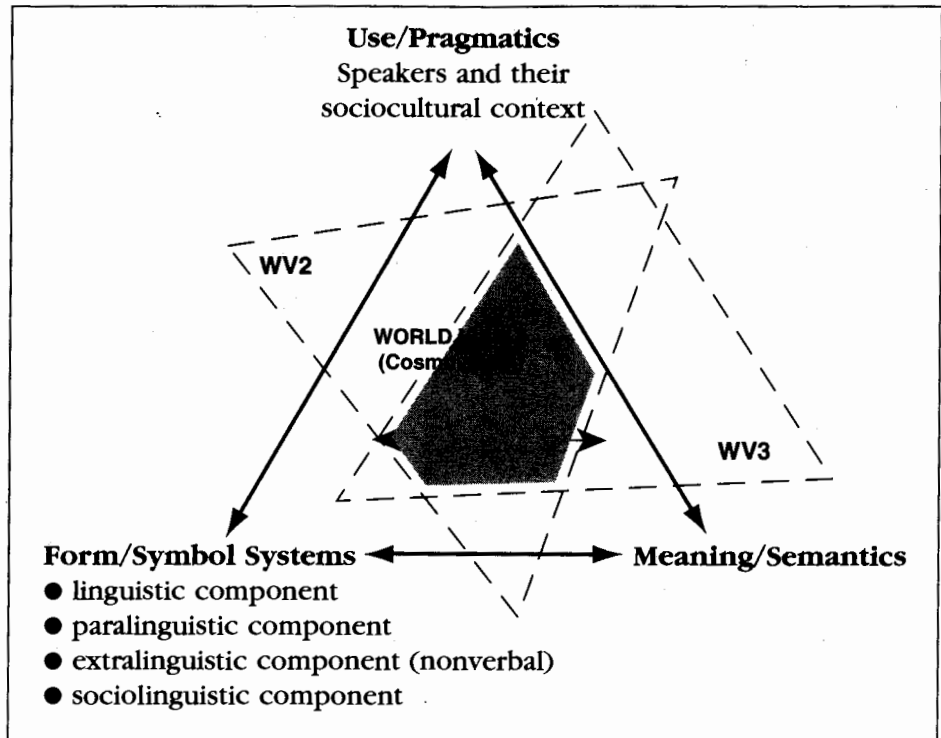
Language and World View

inextricable phenomena of language and culture conceptually and operationally.

Language, that is, communicative competence (our expanded definition of language), reflects and reinforces a particular view we hold of the world. In linguistic terms, the influence of language on culture and world view is called *language determinism and relativity*; that is, the language we acquire influences the way we construct our model of the world (hence, determinism). And if this is so, other languages convey differing visions of that same world (relativity). This long debated theory, known as the Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis, raises intriguing issues related to cross-cultural effectiveness (Steinfatt, 1989; Whorf, 1956). To this, Hall (1976) adds: "Man is the model-making organism par excellence . . . grammars and writing systems are models of language," while cautioning that "all models are incomplete. By definition, they are abstractions and leave things out" (pp. 10-11).

How effectively and appropriately can an individual behave in an intercultural context with—or without—ability in the target language? Notions of "effectiveness" and "appropriateness" suggest two views of the issue. Whereas effectiveness is often a judgment from one's own perspective, appropriateness is based on judgments made from the host's perspective. Although communication across cultures may occur in one's own language (especially where English or another dominant language is involved), there is a qualitative difference between communicating in one's own language and in the language of one's hosts. Whichever the case, second language (L2) proficiency is critical to functioning effectively and appropriately in cross-cultural situations, plus the added benefit that exposure to a second linguaculture (LC2) affords an opportunity to develop a different or, at least, an expanded vision of the world. Needless to say, developing a LC3 or LC4 is even better in that it demands reconfiguring polarizations that sometimes occur in the mind of bilingual-bicultural individuals.

The following illustration delineates how components of each linguaculture form a cohesive world view and how world views differ from each other:



These interrelated components form the basis for each world view construct, but because they vary in detail from culture to culture, they result in a differing realization of the world for each group of speakers. This explains why developing a LC2 (i.e., becoming bilingual and bicultural) involves more than mastery of language as tool (the surface features), but grasping how the components themselves are reconfigured. The result is a transformation that affects one's view of the world, changing and expanding it. Although each world view differs (in particular aspects), the shaded areas where triangles overlap suggest aspects shared by all human beings (universals). Despite the marvelous diversity and creativity across the linguacultures of the world, the overlap hints at the existence of universals across all, an aspect that researchers have begun to investigate more

The Potential— Transcending

seriously in recent years. These universals may result from our common humanity, ensured by similar biological and physical possibilities and constraints.

Success with our native linguaculture (LC1), unfortunately, does not always ensure equal success with a LC2. In fact, an individual's LC1 is often the biggest impediment to acquiring a second. Establishment of one paradigm, especially in adult learners, commonly prevents developing a second, at least not without serious question, deep scrutiny, and reflection, unlike in young children raised bilingually and biculturally (Fantini, 1985). For older individuals, developing intercultural competence comes with a cost, with challenges, shocks, and reservations; and as anyone who has undergone an intercultural experience knows, the choices we make bear consequences, for ourselves and for those with whom we interact (Adler, 1976).

Developing intercultural competence for ourselves and for others is a shared challenge—for language educators and interculturalists alike—but its attainment promises rewards. Intercultural competence offers the possibility of transcending the limitations of one's singular world view. "If you want to know about water, don't ask a goldfish" is a frequent quote heard among interculturalists. Those who have never experienced another culture nor labored to communicate through a second language, like the goldfish, are often unaware of the milieu in which they have always existed.

Contact with other world views can result in a shift of perspective, along with a concomitant appreciation for the diversity and richness of human beings. This paradigm shift is the kind that one writer portrayed as an historic revolution, one that occurs in the head and the mind, as personal transformation and "change from the inside out" (Ferguson, 1980, pp. 17-20).

As language educators, we may indeed have a significant role in that revolution. A concern with cross-cultural effectiveness and appropriateness—coupled with second or foreign language development—will, I hope, lead beyond tolerance and understanding to a genuine appreciation of others. For this to happen, we need to develop the awareness, attitudes, skills, and knowledge that will make us better participants on a local and

global level, able to understand and to empathize with others in new ways. Exposure to more than one language, culture, and world view, in a positive context, offers such a promise.

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