

## Meaning Overlap and Cross-Cultural Misunderstanding

Although Belgium is a small country, it has three official languages: Dutch, French and German. Because of this, but also because of the language variety in Europe, the needs for foreign languages in Belgian companies are very substantial. Most managers need to know three foreign languages, which means that they have to be able to function, i.e. to negotiate, in different linguistic and cultural environments. But knowledge of languages seems to be insufficient, as cross-cultural differences become more and more important in the business world: they lead to business misunderstandings, and many business opportunities are lost because of these misunderstandings. The issue of cross-cultural communication is becoming as much a source of concern for companies doing business across frontiers as the question of language, so that one can speak of "cultural risk management" as the management problem of the nineties.

On the other hand, "the work on communicative competence suggests that knowledge of a second language involves not just linguistic knowledge, but knowledge of a set of rule-governed language systems, or a complex of such systems: learning a language involves not just learning the phonology, morphology, sentence syntax or semantics, but also the pragmatics, discourse rules, rules of sociolinguistic appropriateness, and rules for verbal and non-verbal conversation strategies" (Spolsky, 1987: 38).

Acquisition of a second language can thus be considered as a series of barriers to overcome (Lambert, 1972), with language and culture as the two main barriers. Language gets easier with experience. Culture is more resistant and often the more difficult barrier to overcome. It means that the learner has to assimilate aspects of a different culture, aspects that influence language and behaviour. Advanced learners can come very close to natives in terms of vocabulary, master the same vocabulary, but differences in performance exist on measures within the cultural cluster. One could say that a comprehensive measure of bilingualism should

include both clusters: vocabulary and culture.

Although culture cannot be separated from language, "for as soon as we start to talk about one we are almost inevitably talking about the other too" (Condon & Youssef, 1975: 34), culture has often been sacrificed to language learning and teaching. Galisson (1989) recommends a "behavioural threshold level" for the learner in order to help him understand native speakers. The learner is a potential user of the language in a social group, in which he will have to communicate with other persons. Language has a role in establishing and challenging an individual's sense of cultural and ethnic identity (Giles & Coupland, 1991). Cultural training is mostly separate from language training, but should be integrated, which implies more than teaching facts about the country and the people of the foreign language. Language influences the way we behave and how we perceive things. This means that culture is also inherent in the language itself, its structure, its vocabulary, its idioms, and should be taught at the same time.

The structure of a language frequently reflects a culture's major themes. For example, most languages distinguish between a formal and an informal way of addressing someone (Dutch *u-jij*, French *vous-tu*, German *Sie-du*, Spanish *Usted-tu* etc.), but the differences lie in the moments of shifting from one form to another; on the other hand, the complex structure of addressing a person in Japanese reflects the equally complex social hierarchical structure.

Vocabulary also is an important aspect of culture, as it is adapted to natural and cultural environment: there are of course more words for "snow" in the Eskimo language than words for "camel", and vice versa in the languages of the Sahara. New objects or ideas taken over from another culture are often taken over with their name in the original language, for example the Indian word for and concept of "bungalow".

Problems most often arise when the meanings of the words are concerned: different terms are used to say the same thing, words are used in different ways, the concept of "village" is different in Europe and in India, or "freedom" in the United States of America and in Europe. Culture can thus be called a system of shared meanings.

In order to find out what words mean in different cultural groups or languages, one can organise discussions between groups, which is a very lengthy procedure. A simpler and more convenient procedure is the word association test, where subjects respond to the stimulus word by giving the first word that comes to their mind (discrete association), or by giving a number of associative responses in a specified time period (continued association). To the word "table", the most frequent response will be "chair" in many languages. The stimulus "house" will evoke different responses in different languages: English: home; French: toit (roof); Dutch: tuin (garden); German: Hof (court). Abstract concepts will usually give different responses in different languages, but bilinguals tend to answer like natives in both languages (Lambert & Moore, 1966).

All the responses to a stimulus word make up the network of meaning of that concept: they are the words that become available to a native speaker when he hears or sees the stimulus word. A word refers to a meaning, but also to a network of meanings to which the word belongs. This network not only allows him to predict what is coming in the sentence or the discourse (word field), but also gives him all the meanings of the concept in this language (network of meanings). Lambert & Moore (1966: 318) interpret the associational responses "as particular connotative meaning networks, parts of which may be activated whenever their appropriate stimulus words are either decoded or are about to be encoded. The networks not only convey emotional connotations but also direct the train of thought as particular stimulus words are encountered." That the networks of meaning are not the same in different cultures will be shown by the associations given by North-American, Japanese and French subjects to the word "marriage" (Takahara, 1972). In table 1, the semantic concepts show clear differences between the cultural groups.

Table 1: Associations to "marriage" in three cultures

USA	Japanese	French
equality	family	sexuality
togetherness	children	passion
partnership	obligations	
love	end of the line	

If the networks of meaning are not the same for two conversation partners, words have different meanings and different emotional value. Communication between two linguistic communities or groups can only be effective if sender and receiver have a system of concepts that make relations between word meanings in the same way. This means that an overlap between the network of meanings of the two parties is necessary for effective communication: the larger the overlap, the more chances of effective communication. Without overlap, there can be practically no understanding, and partial overlap will probably lead to misunderstandings and poor communication.

Of course, in the above example, the three cultural groups present rather obvious differences. Let us take the two important linguistic groups in Belgium: the Dutch and French communities. According to Hofstede (1982, 1991) they form one cultural entity with the same profile on the four dimensions he distinguishes (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism vs collectivism, masculinity vs femininity). The continued word association test was used to find the reasons for a poor evaluation of knowledge of Dutch by Belgian francophone managers: these managers use Dutch in organisational context with high frequency (at least once a week), but 60% of them declare that they experience difficulties in using this language. 109 French-speaking subjects were asked to associate in Dutch to 100 stimulus words, related to professional situations where Dutch is used, as was shown by a needs survey. The responses were then compared to those given by Dutch-speaking managers in Belgium, these responses being the norms for that population of managers.

The similarity index according to Ellegard (in Evrard, 1966 and Di Giacomo, 1980) for the two lexicons gives an idea of the extent of common vocabulary in the two groups of subjects. The mean similarity score is 0.40, a perfect overlap being 1, with a maximum of 0.65 for stimulus word "vervoer"

(transport), and a minimum of 0.19 for stimulus words "maatschappij" (society) and "probleem" (problem). Differences in networks of meaning or semantic fields are shown in table 2 for some words (translated), with the similarity index for the stimulus words in the second column.

Table 2 *Word associations of Belgian managers*

stimulus	sim. index	Dutch	French
development	0,20	study evolution	extension growth
conversation	0,26	communication contact	discussion negociation
initiative	0,29	action	idea
bank	0,31	financ. institution finances	account credit

The word association test shows that words do not always have the same meaning from one language group to another. This may partly explain the communication problems that francophone managers experience when using Dutch. The fact that these words in the same language (Dutch for both groups) do not have the same meaning for the two groups can probably be explained by the way Dutch was learned by the francophones. Vocabulary of a foreign language should be learned in series of networks of meanings, according to native speakers' associations, and if necessary in contrast with the learners' own native networks of meaning. This presumes that foreign languages are taught by native speakers who are aware of their own networks of meaning, and if possible also know the corresponding networks in the learners' language. The fact that this is not usually the case in Belgium, where francophones teach Dutch in francophone schools, leads to situations where French-speaking managers who use Dutch at work, and have often been doing so for many years, have to admit that this is still difficult for them. The overlap of networks is too small for many of the words they have to use in an organisational context, and this fact will often lead to misunderstandings.

It has been shown that language and culture are closely related, and should be taught simultaneously. Learning the language, its structures and its words, is learning about the culture of that language. Language learning essentially is or should be acquiring cultural awareness at the same time. This implies that language teaching should be done by native speakers,

who are aware of cultural differences, and possibly know the cultural differences between the target language and the learner's language, so that he or she can teach vocabulary in networks of meaning or semantic fields. Words should be learned, not on their own, but embedded in the network of words given by native word association.

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