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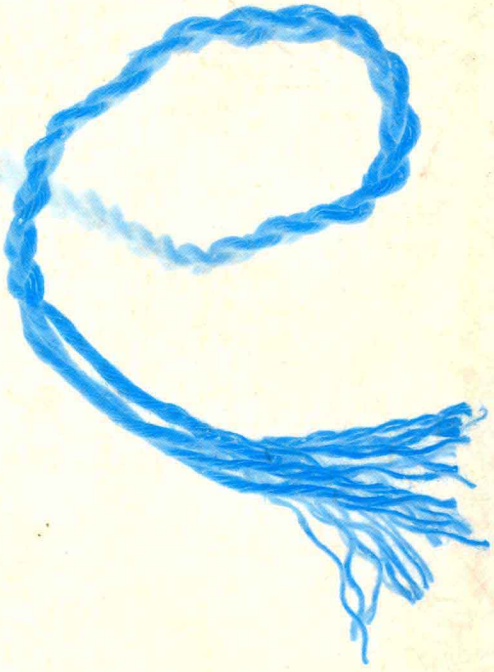
english: one language, different cultures



edited by Eddie Ronowicz
and Colin Yallop

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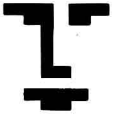

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Introduction

Eddie Ronowicz

The history of foreign and second language teaching is also a history of consecutive changes in the stated objectives of teaching accompanied by sometimes dramatic changes in the form and content of teaching materials. During the twentieth century, these changes, which were initially based on the intuitions and experiences of eminent language teachers, came to be increasingly influenced by advances in linguistic research on language and language acquisition, and more recently also by the results of discourse analysis and findings in related humanities and social sciences. As a result, during the 1970s and 1980s the communicative approach to language teaching was widely accepted by the teaching profession and a new generation of textbooks appeared, which still followed a linguistic syllabus, but also introduced the learners to language functions and some non-linguistic elements of communication. It seems that now, thanks to a growing body of pragmatic and cross-cultural research, we are about to witness another addition to the list of objectives of language teaching: the achievement by the learners of cross-cultural competence, i.e. the ability to relate to differences between the learners' native and target cultures and thus enhance the effectiveness and quality of communication (cf. Crozet and Liddicoat, 1997, p. 3).

Robert Young is probably right when he says that in the case of untrained members of different cultures trying to communicate, only 'the kind of understanding two well-disposed strangers might have or develop were they to be thrown together on a long train journey' can be expected (Young, 1996, p. 13). The expected level of understanding between trained members of different cultures – for example, between students of English as a foreign or second language and native speakers of the language – should be much higher than that, however, provided cross-cultural aspects of communication are included in the teaching programme. The main problem facing an

English language course designer wishing to introduce cross-cultural elements is when and how to do this. One has to agree with Crozet and Liddicoat (1997, p. 18) that 'culture has to be integrated into the language classroom from the very first day of language learning' and that 'culture must be taught in conjunction with language, not as an adjunct'. They are also right in suggesting that 'there is a need to develop new materials for language teaching ... which enable the learner to gain exposure to the target culture and to have opportunities to reflect on her/his own culture'. The text quoted above is, in fact, an introduction to an interesting collection of papers suggesting various ways of integrating cross-cultural elements in language teaching (Crozet and Liddicoat, 1997).

On the other hand, culturally determined aspects of communication not only constitute a huge body of knowledge, which is accumulated by native speakers throughout their lifetime, they also play a part in almost every instance of language use, which raises at least two practical problems. First, if all the necessary cultural comments were to be provided in each lesson or unit in the textbook, the books would probably grow to twice the present size. Secondly, while some of the cultural comments will be relevant to just one language item or communicative situation illustrated in the course, the majority of them refer to more than one item, to situations and communication strategies involving the use of a number of diversified vocabulary and grammatical structures in a single exchange.

It seems therefore that cross-cultural elements integrated into elementary and intermediate teaching materials will certainly ensure that language is taught in appropriate cultural context and they will sensitize learners to the fact of the existence of cultural differences. However, many important aspects of cross-cultural communication will not even get a mention in materials at this level. The reason is simple enough: elementary and intermediate learners do not have enough proficiency in the language either to notice all such nuances even if they are exposed to them or to apply such knowledge consistently while they are struggling with the language itself. Thus even if teaching texts and exercises include elements of the cultural context of their use, they cannot cover all or even most of the cultural information that may be relevant to the topic in question. Students will have to be told about those additional cross-cultural aspects briefly when the occasion arises and then constantly and consistently be reminded of their existence by their language teacher. It follows that language teachers should be the carriers and distributors of this additional information to students and that training practising and

prospective teachers in cross-cultural communication is at least as important as the production of new materials.

The situation is different with advanced and tertiary students of English. They have sufficient communicative competence to read books, watch films or notice differences when travelling to countries where English is spoken as a native language. As a result many of these learners will, like immigrants and other visitors at the same level of proficiency, develop what Larson and Smalley (1972) called 'culture stress' and a resulting motivation to find out more about those differences. Moreover, as our students' language competence and ability to participate in genuine communication grow, they are increasingly exposed to situations in which correct full comprehension and adequate responses depend as much on understanding cultural rules of communication as on understanding the words they hear. This phase of learning also corresponds to what Brown (1987, p. 135) calls the critical period for intensive, formal study of cross-cultural differences in foreign language learning, i.e. the period in which learners will be most receptive to this information and in which it will significantly enhance their overall proficiency in English.

This book, which is directed mainly at tertiary students of English as a foreign or second language and English language teachers, assumes exactly that kind of willingness to spend some time exploring cultural differences between native speakers of English in various countries and provides the necessary tools to pursue further study of differences between English-speaking and other cultures and the effects these differences have on language communication.

This introductory chapter begins by looking at the relationships between language, culture and communication and their consequences. We then examine in some detail one of the most serious obstacles in cross-cultural communication – namely, stereotypes which most of us develop of other cultures. Chapter 2 looks at the incredible spread of English around the world and the resulting varieties of English and its speakers and allows us to place American, Australian, British, Canadian and New Zealand English in the context of English as a global language. This facilitates the discussion of the cultural aspects of communicating in these varieties, which are discussed in Chapters 3 to 7. Finally, a brief overview of these six chapters will be given.

Language and communication

Communication is one of the most important aspects of our everyday activity. In fact, most things we do are directly or indirectly connected with communication: we acquire (learn) or provide (teach) information, ideas, views, stories, give or follow instructions, requests, or commands, express feelings, emotions, etc. There are a number of ways in which we can communicate, but natural languages, such as Chinese, English, French, Russian, Zulu, are certainly the most frequently used and most efficient carriers of messages between people.

A natural language is sometimes described as a communication tool consisting, in most simple terms, of a vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation and spelling rules, i.e. a list of words and a system of rules governing their use in speech and writing. If every item in the vocabulary had only one, unchangeable meaning, and if the grammar consisted of a finite number of fixed rules for every conceivable utterance, one might say that, in order to communicate effectively, the participants in a communicative act must both be competent in the use of the same vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and spelling rules. This is indeed the case with artificial languages (e.g. computer languages), but not with natural languages, where both the vocabularies and the grammars offer practically unlimited possibilities for producing new, original messages. As Corder (1973, p. 201) rightly points out:

> No one knows 'the whole' of any language, or how to use it appropriately in all possible situations of language use. He acquires those parts of it which he needs in order to play his part in society. As he grows older, the roles that are ascribed to him or that he acquires change and develop, and as they change he learns more of his language (he may also forget some).

If even the majority of native speakers of a language are incapable of using fully the existing vast potential, what about learners of English as a foreign language in their native country? Are they automatically, as it were, in an inferior position at the outset, due to limited exposure (mainly in the language classroom and through books and short visits to English-speaking countries)? Not necessarily so: it must be said to the credit of English teachers around the world and the resolve of their students that quite a few tertiary learners achieve a remarkably high, near-native level of English after some years of intensive study. Compared to native speakers, they do

have an additional problem to overcome though, resulting from the fact that language is more than just a code, or a symbolic system. As Anna Wierzbicka rightly points out, 'Languages differ from one another not just as linguistic systems but also as cultural universes, as vehicles of ethnic identities' (1985, p. 187). Every language functions in a community within the framework of its culture and, consequently, successful communication depends to a large extent on such things as what the content of the utterance actually refers to, which of the grammatically correct words, phrases or sentence patterns suit a given situation, and which do not, when to say things and how or, for that matter, whether to say anything at all. It follows that, to communicate effectively, the learner must be able to combine linguistic competence with the ability to operate within the accepted set of cultural rules of communication of a social group using it (cf. also Ronowicz, 1995).

Culture and communication

In its broadest sense, culture may be understood as a comprehensive view of history. It encompasses politics, economics, social history, philosophy, science and technology, education, the arts, religion and customs, which can be studied either as they have developed over a long period of time, or as they are or were at a given point in time. Culture includes the spiritual aspect of a society, embracing its ideological, artistic and religious trends. It may also be understood as a picture of everyday life, including everyday activities and entertainment, clothing, fashions, living conditions, family and social relations, customs, beliefs, morality, acceptable patterns of behaviour and rituals. Finally, social consciousness, which is expressed in the language of events and processes, institutions and organizations, social values and artistic creativity are also part of culture expressed in the language. It is 'seemingly permanent, yet constantly changing' reality, which is ever present to all individuals belonging to the same cultural group (cf. Suchodolski, 1986, p. 5).

Suchodolski's definition gives us a general overview of the concept of culture. Larson and Smalley's explanation of the term 'culture' provides a rather good supplement to it in that they relate culture more directly to human behaviour, also linguistic behaviour. They define culture as a blueprint which:

> guides the behaviour of people in a community and is incubated in family life. It governs our behaviour in groups, makes us sensitive

> to matters of status, and helps us know what others expect of us and what will happen if we do not live up to their expectations. Culture helps us to know how far we can go as individuals and what our responsibility is to the group. Different cultures are the underlying structures which make Round community round and Square community square. (Larson and Smalley, 1972, p. 39)

The political, social and economic history of a given cultural group, as well as its spiritual heritage, form an important source of background information that allows members of the language community to respond correctly to allegories, figures of speech, symbols and behavioural patterns which relate to its history. For example, if one knows the old story of King Arthur, one will comprehend better the idea of a 'Round Table'. While problems like those, which relate to the more distant and well described events in the life of a community or nation, can be solved by studying its history, the learner will find it much harder to comprehend fully the enormously complicated reality of everyday life and social consciousness of that language community. Not only do we have to deal with a multitude of culture specific patterns in communication, but also with the more recent social, cultural, political, economic and spiritual history of the group, especially that covering the life span of the people we communicate with. Having participated personally in a number of events, having had access to everyday local and national news, as well as personal communication with other people, adult members of a language community share a store of information built over a period of many years, and they use it actively in everyday communication.

The most obvious areas of culture-specific communication would be jokes, especially political jokes, but also sayings, metaphors, indeed most references to the not so distant past in the life of the language community. For instance, only a few years ago the then Australian treasurer, Mr Paul Keating, while defending his economic policies in parliament, described a recession the country was in as 'a recession we had to have'. At the time it caused not only outrage, but also a lot of jokes. It was a minor news item in other English-speaking countries, and it will have been forgotten by now, while in Australia it has become part of everyday language and will probably survive for quite some time: a variety of versions of this statement (such as 'the disappointment we had to have' or 'the power failure we had to have') have been used by Australians to add a touch of humour when announcing or discussing a bad piece of news. Unless they know the

story behind it, neither people from non-English-speaking countries, nor most Americans, Britons or Canadians coming to Australia would probably be able to understand why most Australians laugh when they hear it, even if the phrase is used seriously.

There are a multitude of references like this present in everyday communication between members of any language community – some of them easier to follow, others completely inaccessible to non-members. Everyday life and social consciousness are shaped both by older traditions and current events, which influence directly and constantly the ever changing vocabulary and idiom of the language, acceptable and unacceptable ways of linguistic behaviour in various situations, as well as the choice of those elements of the past which are considered relevant to the life of the language community and those which are not.

In terms of language communication we are dealing here with second level or specific meanings (i.e. additional meanings based on current and/or past cultural associations, specific contexts or situations) in contrast to first level meanings (i.e. conventional dictionary meanings of words, cf. Young, 1996, p. 72). First level meanings may in fact be quite similar in two different languages, while second level meanings may differ significantly. For instance, the colour 'white' means more or less the same at the first level in most languages, yet it may have quite different second level meanings in different cultures. For example, in some Western European countries, white is the colour of purity or joy or life, while in many Asian cultures it is the colour of mourning and death. The numbers 4 and 13 have the same first level meanings in English and in Chinese, yet 4 is an unlucky number for the Chinese, while 13 is for the English.

As Young observes, no meanings expressed in language are fixed, or constant. They are:

> always moving and changing, but not necessarily in an arbitrary or senseless way. Meanings and rules of thumb for effective communication grow up in a culture and slip against each other like geological faults. The flow of first level meanings ... has a rate of change different from the flow of second level or specific meanings ... First order meanings are in movement, but their movement is much slower than the rate of change of second order meanings. (Young, 1996, p. 72)

It follows that it is second level meanings, which depend so much on the knowledge of reality and culture of the community, that are the most difficult problem to overcome in intercultural communication.

People do not usually realize how much their daily life is influenced by unwritten rules automatically accepted and applied within their social class, their neighbourhood, their country. They not only tend to take them for granted, but also frequently make the wrong assumption that everyone operates within the same system of cultural rules. It is not until they come into contact with another culture, through the media or by travelling and especially by moving permanently from one region to another, from town to countryside or from one country to another, that they realize they have problems with interpreting other people's actions and reactions. They find out that the assumptions which have guided their behaviour at home are no longer valid, in short, that the social environment encountered in this way follows a different set of rules, some of which may be quite difficult to comprehend. Such encounters with situations and behaviours which seem to be out of the ordinary, will inevitably lead to comparisons and value judgements, or cultural stereotypes of members of other speech communities, many of which may be only partly true, and some of which may even be quite wrong. In the case of people who need to spend a longer period of time in a different cultural environment than their own, this may also be the cause of considerable stress, known as the phenomenon of 'culture shock'.

Cultural stereotyping and its consequences

In 1981 I was a research fellow at a large Midwestern university in the USA, which had a lively exchange programme with a number of countries, including my native Poland. For the majority of the Polish visitors, this was also their first visit to a Western country. Like J., a mathematician from my home university, they brought with them many misconceptions about the West and the USA in particular. On the one hand, the West was viewed as a sort of paradise, where people had plenty of money and life was easy and comfortable compared to Communist Poland. On the other hand, since early childhood, all people from countries behind the Iron Curtain were exposed to negative propaganda about social inequalities, the cult of the dollar, the high rate of crime and other darker sides of the capitalist society. This propaganda was partly successful in that J. brought with him some negative opinions about life in the USA and a fairly high level of anxiety at the outset. Additionally, quite by accident, J.'s scholarship was paid a week later than he expected and he had some problems with accommodation. Also other visitors had some minor problems during the first week, many of them caused by lack of

knowledge of the ways administrative matters are dealt with at an American university.

Apart from the group of Poles, there were many young scholars from other countries visiting the university at the same time, all with a fairly good knowledge of English, who had similar little problems. Very soon after their arrival most of the newcomers got acquainted at a party organized by the Dean of Students and found they all shared rather negative attitudes towards various aspects of American culture and way of life. The result of this was, quite predictably, the creation of a sort of 'cultural ghetto' on campus: after they had done their time in the libraries or laboratories, the academics in question frequently spent time together. Towards the end of their six months in the USA they were a rather compact group of people who, outside their professional activities, managed to avoid any meaningful contacts with their American hosts. Having accomplished their research programmes and confirmed and enriched their negative stereotypes about Americans, they went back home where they, no doubt, contributed significantly to the maintenance of a distorted picture of this rich culture.

The behaviour of the above mentioned group of academics can readily be explained. First, they were under the influence of cultural stereotypes about Americans which they brought with them from their home countries. A stereotype is 'a category that singles out an individual as sharing assumed characteristics on the basis of his or her group membership' (Brown, 1987, p. 125). Depending on the type of information available at the time of stereotyping, the result may be fairly accurate in describing a typical member of a given language community, or quite false. It is the false, negative stereotypes which are most destructive and were, in fact, at work in the group of scholars in question.

Secondly, stereotypes breed attitudes and, if the stereotype about a given second language culture is shared by a larger group, e.g. one's peers, these attitudes may be quite strong. In the case of the group of visiting scholars we had a model situation of this type: they were all people in their late twenties or early thirties who had come to the university for the same purpose and they shared similar negative stereotypes about the locals. It was therefore inevitable that, as a group, they developed a strong negative attitude towards their environment.

Very soon after their arrival, when the novelty of the situation wore off, a third factor came into play: culture shock. The phenomenon and its causes are aptly described by Jean Brick:

> Culture shock is the result of the removal of the familiar. Suddenly the individual is faced with the necessity of working, commuting, studying, eating, shopping, relaxing, even sleeping, in an unfamiliar environment, organised according to unknown rules. In mild form, culture shock manifests itself in symptoms of fatigue, irritability and impatience ... Some people may respond by developing negative stereotypes of the host culture, by withdrawing as much as possible from contact with host-country nationals, by refusing to learn the language and by mixing exclusively with people of their own cultural background. (Brick, 1991, p. 9)

The scholars in question were a classic example of all three factors at work – negative stereotypes, negative attitudes and the resulting culture shock.

As a result, most members of the group, for whom English was a foreign language, failed to make any significant progress in learning either the language itself or culturally determined patterns of communication. It seems that the main reason for this was the integration strategy adopted by the group. As Schumann (1978) explains, in terms of cultural patterns involving lifestyle and values, there are three general integration strategies which the second language learning group might adopt: assimilation, acculturation or preservation. If the group decides to assimilate, then it gives up its own lifestyle and values and adopts those of the target language group (as very young or second generation immigrants often do). If it chooses to acculturate, then its members adapt to the lifestyle and values of the target language group, but at the same time maintain their own cultural patterns for use in intragroup relations (as many first generation immigrants do). Preservation, as defined here, is a strategy in which the second language group completely rejects the lifestyle and values of the target language group and attempts to maintain its own cultural patterns as much as possible (as some older first generation migrants may do, especially those living in ghettos). Assimilation fosters minimal social distance and preservation causes it to be maximal. Hence second language learning is enhanced by assimilation and hindered by preservation (Schumann, 1978, p. 78). Since the group in question adopted the strategy of preservation, the outcome was, predictably, minimal progress in the language and understanding of the host culture.

The situation described above might easily have been prevented if there had been a relevant cultural component in the intermediate or

advanced English courses all members of the group had attended before they became eligible for their scholarships, or if they had undertaken an orientation programme dealing with these issues on arrival in the USA. The obvious failure of these academics (and of many other arrivals in English-speaking countries, especially older immigrants) to at least acculturate in the new environment would be a sufficient argument to include cultural information and practice in second language courses. There is also some empirical evidence available that positive attitudes to the target culture may increase second language proficiency (Oller, Baca and Vigil, 1978).

As the above discussion illustrates, all societies, groups and individuals have tendencies to create stories, interpretations and clichés about their own and other cultural groups, which are not necessarily true or only partly true. Under the influence of their own history and traditions, especially those which carry with them some strongly positive or negative content, people tend to build and maintain *myths* about themselves and others, such as, for example, the image of a typical Australian male as a tough, sun-tanned, resourceful adventurer, which may have been true some 150 years ago, but is quite false today.

Similarly, on the basis of understanding motivations and assumptions driving their own behaviour, people tend to make general statements about themselves and assumptions about the behaviour of others. These are known as *cultural stereotypes* and, like myths, are often only partly true, or even quite wrong for a number of reasons. For instance, in a recent questionnaire we administered to a group of 40 people of different ethnic backgrounds, 61 per cent of people who were born and raised in Australia believed typical Australians to be hard-working, while only 6 per cent of first generation immigrants and long-term foreign visitors believed this to be the case!

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that myths and cultural stereotypes are generalizations and, as such, they are never really true about the whole of a given community, about specific individuals, or about all individuals in a group. In this context it is interesting to note that since cultural stereotypes are highly dependent on the point of view and sources of people who uphold them, it often happens that members of different communities hold different, even quite opposite stereotypes about the same thing. For instance, in the same questionnaire 50 per cent of Australians believed themselves to be patriotic, while 100 per cent of immigrants and foreigners (i.e. people who were born and raised in a variety of European or Asian countries) believed Australians to lack any form of patriotism

whatsoever. Since there is no reason to disbelieve the answers of native Australians, one may speculate that the perceptions of European and Asian immigrants are not so much a reflection of the actual situation as a reflection of the fact that Australians understand and demonstrate their patriotism in a different way than the immigrants expect and therefore such behaviours are not recognized as patriotic. This is exactly how many false stereotypes are born.

English as a global language

Modern English, which began humbly as the native tongue of the inhabitants of England in the fourteenth century (see Chapter 3 for more information on the history of English), has now become the most popular lingua franca around the globe. According to Peter Strevens, the main reason for this incredible spread of English is that it has 'passed through several stages ..., which cumulatively yet inevitably led to the present state of affairs' (1992, p. 29).

The first stage, between 1350 and 1600, may be described as the development of modern English as a national language, 'when the influence of 300 years of Norman French occupation had been assimilated onto a basis of Germanic dialects, with some additions from the Norse of the Scandinavian invaders. For 250 years, until 1600, English was spoken only in England, probably not even by all the 7 million inhabitants' (Strevens, 1992, p. 29).

The second stage, between 1600 and 1750, may be described as the spread of English as a result of exploration and colonization. During this period the seeds of the global spread of English were sown by explorers, traders and settlers in overseas colonies. They still regarded themselves as native speakers (NS) of English from Britain living overseas, even though many of them were obviously more interested in local issues than in what was happening in Britain.

The third stage of the development of English as a global language, between 1750 and 1900, may be described as the development of English as a national language in the colonies. Three important changes took place during this period, which contributed significantly to the spread of English:

> First, the populations of the overseas NS English-speaking settlements greatly increased in size and became states with governments – albeit colonial governments – and with a growing sense of separate identity, which soon extended to the flavour of the English they used. Second, in the United States first of all but