Culture, Language, and Communication

Chapter 9

THE DUAL EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE AND HUMAN CULTURE

The dual evolution of language and human culture
- Cultural influences on verbal language
- Cultural influences on nonverbal communication
- Intracultural and intercultural communication
- Bilingualism and culture
- Conclusion

Language is universal psychological ability in humans
- Language forms basis for creation and maintenance of human cultures
- Language differences reflect important differences between cultures

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON VERBAL LANGUAGE

The Structure of Language
- All languages have:
  - Lexicon
  - Syntax and Grammar
  - Phonology
  - Semantics
  - Pragmatics
- Phonemes: smallest, most basic units of sound in a language
- Morphemes: smallest, most basic units of meaning
Cultural Influences on Language Acquisition
- Culture influences language acquisition at very early stage
- Culture influences all aspects of language
- Through use of language, individual transformed into agent of culture

Language differences across cultures
- Culture and Lexicons
  - Self-Other Referents
    - In U.S., use "I", "we", but in Japan how to refer self and other dependent on the relationship between you and the other person
    - This reflects importance of status and group differentiation in Japan

Language differences across cultures
- Counting Systems
  - Different objects counted by different suffix in Japan
  - Basis for number
    - In Japanese (and many languages), bases for numbers on the words for one through ten

Language differences across cultures
- Culture and Pragmatics
  - Drop of pronouns
    - Less individualistic cultures tend to drop pronouns
  - Language use and communication styles
    - Collectivistic cultures use principle of equity involving greater social penetration when communicating with ingroups
    - Cultural differences in apology, self-disclosure
  - High vs. low context cultures

Language and Thought: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis
- Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: speakers of different language think differently because of differences in languages
- In support of Sapir-Whorf: Navajo children more likely to categorize objects by shapes than European or African American children
- Challenging Sapir-Whorf: Dani speakers did not have lower ability to discriminate or remember colors than Americans even though they only have two color terms (dark and light)
CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

- **Nonverbal behaviors**: all behaviors that occur during communication that do not include verbal language
- Nonverbal channels are more important in understanding meaning and emotional states of speakers than verbal language
- Important to be more attentive to nonverbal cues that occur in communication

The Types of Nonverbal Behaviors

- **Culture and Gestures**
  - American A-OK sign is an obscene gesture in many cultures of Europe

- **Culture and Gaze**
  - Contact cultures engage in more gazing and more direct orientation when interacting with others

- **Culture and Interpersonal Space**
  - Arabs and Latin Americans interact with others at closer distance than Americans

The Functions of Nonverbal Behaviors

- **Nonverbal behaviors**
  - serve as emblems, speech illustrators, conversation regulators, and convey emotions

INTRACULTURAL AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Definition of communication

- **Message**: Information and meaning exchanged during communication
- **Encoding**: Process by which people select, imbed messages in signals, and send signals to others
- **Signals**: Specific verbal language and nonverbal behaviors that are encoded when message sent
- **Channels**: Sensory modalities by which signals sent and messages retrieved
- **Decoding**: Process by which people receives signal from encoder and translates those signals to meaningful messages
Cultural Influences on Encoding
- Cultures differ in how nonverbal behavior is used in communication

Cultural Influences on Decoding
- Cultures influence decoding process through ethnocentrism, cultural filters, emotions, value judgments, stereotypes, and expectations
- Decoding rules

Intracultural communication
- Communication between people of the same cultural background
- Interactants share the same ground rules; they encode and decode using the same cultural codes
- Can be negative because of expectations created by cultural filters and ethnocentrism

Intercultural communication
- Communication between people of the different cultural background
- Interactants do not share the same ground rules; they encode and decode using different cultural codes
- Can lead to
  - Uncertainty and ambiguity
  - Conflict

Barriers to Effective Intercultural Communication
1. Assumptions of similarities
2. Language differences
3. Nonverbal misinterpretations
4. Preconceptions and stereotypes
5. Tendency to evaluate
6. High anxiety or tension

Improving Intercultural Communication
- Mindfulness and uncertainty reduction
  - Mindfulness offsets uncertainty and anxiety
  - Uncertainty reduction leads to focus on the content of signals and messages
- Face
  - Should be mindful of face (public appearance of person) in collectivist culture
- Emotion Regulation
  - Controlling negative emotions aroused from conflict is important

BILINGUALISM AND CULTURE
Psychological Differences as a Function of Language

- Bilinguals have two mental representations of culture encoded in their minds.

- Reasons for language-related shifts in personality:
  - Culture-affiliation hypothesis: Immigrant bilinguals tend to affiliate themselves with values and beliefs of culture associated with the language currently speaking.
  - Minority group-affiliation hypothesis: Immigrant bilinguals adopt behavioral stereotypes of majority culture about their minority as their own.

Perceptions of Bilinguals

- People have negative impressions and stereotypes about people communicating in their second language.

- Foreign language processing difficulties: Cognitive difficulties while processing information due to lack of fluency in speaking a language.

- Foreign language effect: Temporary decline in thinking ability of people using foreign language.

Monolingualism and Ethnocentrism

- Most Americans are monolingual, which is associated with ethnocentrism.

- Americans need to begin study of language and culture for a better understanding of the world.