Discourse and Intercultural Miscommunication: Arguments for Discourse Acquisition

Polina V. Vinogradova

Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia (Saint Petersburg, Russia) /
University of Northern Iowa (USA)

Introduction

Regarding second language acquisition, researchers discuss a rather wide range of theories and language phenomena, investigate the nature of grammar and lexicon acquisition, and study pragmatic issues of language use. Moreover, the cultural underpinnings of language use appear to be closely connected to aspects of second language acquisition. It is a rather common situation in which a non-native speaker (NNS) is able to use grammar constructions appropriately, has a reach of vocabulary, and seems to have a very good command of the foreign language in general, but fails in his/her efforts to communicate effectively with native speakers (NS). In the effort to explain this failure authors have turned to the relationship between discourse construction, communication styles, and cultural values (see e.g., Aston, 1995; Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1995; Scollon & Scollon, 2001; Enninger 1987; Wierzbicka, 1986,1991). Moreover, cultural values are reflected in discourse, as language that is uttered by people in the process of communication is most likely to carry some cultural information. The goal of this paper is to look at some cultural aspects of discourse construction and discuss their role in intercultural miscommunication in order to state arguments for discourse acquisition. This paper attempts to draw connections between language discourse and cultural values and beliefs. Moreover, it addresses aspects of intercultural communication, values of individualism and collectivism that influence the latter, and aspects of discourse. The way discourse reflects cultural values and reasons for intercultural miscommunication are also discussed in this paper. Finally, the question of discourse acquisition is addressed and some suggestions for future research in the area of second language acquisitions are stated.

Aspects of Intercultural Communication

Communication is a necessary part of human everyday life. People communicate constantly in different ways and with different goals. Due to technological, economical, and political changes the world community seems to be getting smaller and people seem to communicate more not only within one cultural setting, but cross-culturally as well. Communication is a rather complex process with a variety of

forms and strategies. Moreover, communication is a structured goal-oriented process. Haslett (1987) defines communication as "an organized, standardized, culturally patterned system of behavior that sustains, regulates, and makes possible human relationships" (p. 4). Furthermore, the establishment of human relationships in order to obtain some new knowledge seems to be the most fundamental goal of communication. The authors claim that ways of establishing human relations vary from culture to culture and depend on cultural values and beliefs (Clyne, 1996; Haslett, 1987; Novinger, 2001; Samovar & Porter, 1982, 2000, 2001; Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988). Communication in general, and intercultural communication in particular can have oral or written form. Furthermore, oral communication can be verbal and non-verbal. Scollon and Scollon (2001) and Haslett (1987) agree that the role of verbal communication that is language itself is crucial in intercultural and interdiscourse communication. Nevertheless, nonverbal communication plays a rather important role. While the language is "the symbolic code" (Haslett, 1987, p. 5) that people mainly use to carry the meaning, non-verbal communication plays a supporting role. Scollon and Scollon (2001) also mention that non-verbal communication seems to be more meaningful for interaction within one culture than in an intercultural setting. Among the kinds of non-verbal communication that are significant for intercultural communication are body movements and gestures (kinesics), the use of space (proxemics), and understanding

and use of time. Every culture seems to have its own ways of carrying out verbal and non-verbal communication that are influenced by cultural values and beliefs. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw general patterns and group the cultures in terms of differences and similarities in communication strategies and patterns. Moreover, Ting-Toomey (2000) suggests that in order to understand the latter, it is "necessary to have a framework to explain why and how cultures are different" (p. 388). The authors suggest such a framework to divide cultures into individualistic and collectivistic ones (Clyne, 1996; Novinger, 2001; Samovar & Porter, 1982, 2001; Ting-Toomey, 2000; Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988).

Individualism and Collectivism as Cultural Values

Regarding intercultural communication, Ting-Toomey (2000) argues that the understanding of differences between individualistic and collectivistic cultures can become a starting point in understanding the processes of intercultural communication. Moreover, it seems that the understanding of individualistic and collectivistic cultural values explains many phenomena in intercultural miscommunication. Cultures of Western countries such as the United States of America, Great Britain, and Australia are considered to represent individualistic societies, while Asian countries, such as Japan, China, and Korea are considered to have collectivistic cultures (Bhawuk, 1998; Ting-Toomey, 2000; Samovar & Porter, 2001; Novinger, 2001). The authors suggest

four main attributes that help to define individualistic and collectivistic values of a culture (Bhawuk, 1998; Ting-Toomey, 2000; Samovar & Porter, 2001; Novinger, 2001). Moreover, these four concepts seem to influence cultural discourse patterns in the most way.

First of all, it is the concept of self that represents the social role of a person in the society. While in individualistic societies people value independence and personal space, try to keep a distance between each other and even within the family, in collectivistic societies personal space is much smaller, and the relationship within the family is very tight. Moreover, in individualistic societies children are encouraged to make independent decisions and live on their own as soon as they finish high school. In this situation representatives of a collectivistic culture can consider parents from an individualistic culture as not caring. The role of parents in a collectivistic culture is to support children in any difficult situation, give advice, and sometimes even decide for children, as parents are considered to know better. Moreover, parents in collectivistic cultures expect their children to "pay them back" (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p. 143) by taking care of them when children grow up.

The second aspect that illustrates the difference between collectivistic and individualistic cultures is difference in goals. Individualists give priority to their personal goals, while collectivists choose group goals at the expense of their personal ones. In this respect representatives of collectivistic society can interpret the

behavior of individualists as selfish and self-centered, while selfishness and self-centeredness are given negative connotations.

The third important concept is hierarchy or power distance. While collectivistic cultures are rather hierarchical societies and have large power distance, individualistic cultures value and promote equality between people and have small power distance. Moreover, the position in the hierarchy of collectivistic societies depends not only on social status, but on education, gender, and age as well. For example, individualistic behavioral patterns of equal interaction with authority and colleagues in a business setting will seem to be inappropriate and rather disrespectful towards authority to representatives of a collectivistic society.

The last aspect that is necessary to discuss here is the value of time. As Ting-Toomey (2000) points out, individualistic societies adhere to a monochromic time schedule, while collectivistic societies tend to have a polychronic time schedule. In individualistic societies the value of time is expressed by keeping schedules and deadlines. Moreover, negotiations about the deadline or explanations of reasons for missing it are rather rare and not appropriate. In collectivistic societies involvement of people and results of activities are more important than completing something on time. Collectivistic societies tend to pay more attention to the process than to the product in this regard. This is why the behavior of some representatives of collectivistic

cultures might seem to be irresponsible to people from individualistic cultures as the former might blame circumstances for not doing something on time.

The collectivistic/individualistic framework seems to depict cultural differences and explain reasons for intercultural miscommunication. Nevertheless, since oral communication is a combination of verbal and non-verbal communication techniques that reflect cultural values and beliefs, the reasons for miscommunication might appear to be more complicated. Moreover, the understanding of cultural differences and cultural sensitivity do not completely reduce intercultural miscommunication.

Aspects and Types of Discourse

Regarding the question of intercultural miscommunication it seems reasonable to identify discourse as an important part of communication and pragmatics in particular. While the latter studies the successful use of a context in order to draw conclusions about meaning, the context itself is necessary for interlocutors to understand the discourse (Ellis, 1999). Moreover, the context can be linguistic, physical, and cultural. While linguistic context means the way words form sentences, physical context involves people and objects present at the time of communication (Ellis, 1999). Cultural context in this regard can be understood as values and beliefs that conversational partners carry. Everything mentioned above influences discourse that goes beyond lexical and grammatical units.

Discourse takes care of the way language users carry meanings of their messages in written or oral speech. Moreover, discourse systems help listeners to interpret oral and written messages (Enninger, 1987). Furthermore, discourse is a highly organized structure with its elements tied to each other in a particular way. In order to grasp meanings of messages and to interpret them, language users need to be familiar with the rules of discourse organization. Scollon and Scollon (2001) argue that there are two main approaches to identify discourse. The first one seems to be rather narrow and takes care of discourse as "the study of grammatical and other relationships between sentences" (p. 107). The other approach to the identification of discourse is broader than the latter and helps to study "functional uses of language in social context" (p. 107). Ellis (1999) gives a more detailed definition of discourse within the broad approach and understands it as "a general term that applies to either written or spoken language that is used for some communicative purpose" (p. 81). He claims that discourse is a semantic concept that incorporates interactional, cognitive, and linguistic principles. Moreover, discourse is an organized and functional structure and reflects the relation of language to the environment. The functional principle of discourse is reflected in the fact that it provides context for communication and is concerned with ways of speaking, variations that exist in a language, and stylistic aspects of the latter (De Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999; Ellis, 1999; Enninger, 1987; Roy, 2000; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). For example, it is possible

to study and analyze discourse systems of different culture groups. Moreover, it is possible to study discourse systems of different professional areas, different generations, or gender groups within one cultural group.

Since discourse is an important part of human communication and the latter can be carried out by the means of written or oral interaction, there are different ways of discourse realization. Discourse in written speech is realized in the text. Ellis (1999) identifies the text as a "string of language that carries the purpose of discourse" (p. 82). Moreover, the text is a written form of interaction between a writer and a reader with its specific functional goals. Since the text is a written form of speech, it is static and rather complete. Furthermore, the reader receives the information in rather large portions, can adjust the pace, and has opportunities to use different reading techniques to explore the context in order to achieve understanding. Regarding the aspect of cross-cultural miscommunication the focus on written discourse does not seem to be of the primary interest in this particular paper. The major focus here is discourse in oral communication. It can be realized verbally via monologist or dialogic speech and non-verbally via gestures and body movements. Regarding the question of intercultural miscommunication, it seems reasonable to overview possible structures and types of discourse systems.

The authors agree that discourse is a well organized and a rather hierarchical structure (De Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999; Ellis, 1999; Roy, 2000; Scollon &

Scollon, 2001). Regarding the structure of discourse Scollon and Scollon (2001) argue for four basic elements that exist in any discourse system. Firstly, forms of discourse serve as symbols for members of any discourse system helping them to identify their co-members or outsiders. Secondly, people within one discourse system as a group share the same ideological position. Thirdly, members of one discourse group socialize through some particular preferred forms of discourse. Finally, there appears to be a particular system of face relationships in discourse within the group and between the members of the group and outsiders. All these elements of discourse are tightly connected and influence each other. Moreover, they reflect values and beliefs of a cultural group that uses a particular discourse system. Regarding discourse systems, Scollon and Scollon (2001) propose a very interesting division of discourse systems. First of all, discourse can be voluntary and involuntary. While the former incorporates professional discourse and appears to be goal-oriented, the latter deals with gender, age, and culture discourse. Furthermore, members of involuntary discourse do not normally have any influence regarding the choice of sharing some particular characteristics. They share these characteristics simply as a result of being members of a particular group. Since the major interest of this paper is cultural discourse that appears to be involuntary, it seems to be reasonable to discuss discourse systems within the latter and analyze their connection with cultural values and beliefs. The authors suggest two major systems of discourse connected with

culture: Utilitarian and Confucian. While the Utilitarian system reflects Western cultural values of individualistic societies, the Confucian system reflects cultural values of Asian collectivistic societies. The major differences between Utilitarian and Confucian discourse systems can be seen in face systems of discourse and topicality.

Discourse as the Carrier of Societal Cultural Values

As mentioned above, face systems reflect relationships that exist within a particular cultural group and between members of the group and outsiders. The first aspect within face systems that is always reflected in discourse is kinship. While in Asian collectivistic societies kinship relationships are very important and connect members of the society, in Western individualistic cultures kinship relationships do not seem to have any significant influence on bringing members of the society together. Moreover, cultures that are characterized by strong kinship relationships can also be characterized as hierarchical societies. The presence of hierarchy and collectivism in Asian cultures and the lack of the latter in Western cultures are reflected in discourse. The members of hierarchical collectivistic societies first acquire discourse patterns of showing respect to the ones above and later acquire discourse patterns of guiding and leading the ones who happen to come after. Since Asian collectivistic cultures are hierarchical societies, the members of these cultures expect this hierarchy to be reflected in discourse. Besides kinship, hierarchy in the society is based on age, social position, education, experience, and

gender. Since kinship does not have a significant influence on the members of Western individualistic societies and, moreover, independence and equality seem to be among the main societal values, these societies are less likely to be hierarchical. In the process of language acquisition the members of Western societies acquire discourse patterns that reflect their cultural values.

The second aspect within face systems is the concept of the self in a particular cultural group. While in individualistic cultures members of the society perceive themselves as individuals with minimum commitment to and maximum separation from the group, the members of collectivistic societies perceive themselves as committed to the group they belong. Moreover, group interests seem to be more important than individual interests for the members of a collectivistic society. All these cultural values will be reflected in the discourse in the process of communication. For example, a member of an individualistic society will express his/her opinion emphasizing him/herself as a unique source and carrier of the information. At the same time a member of a collectivistic society will represent her/his opinion as an opinion of the group s/he belongs to.

Another aspect that carries differences between Utilitarian and Confucian discourse systems is topicality. The major requirement for successful discourse is the awareness of the topic by conversational partners (De Cillia, Reisigl, & Wodak, 1999; Ellis, 1999; Haslett, 1987; Scollon &

Scollon, 2001). Some authors point out two different means of topic introduction (Ellis, 1999; Scollon & Scollon, 2001). While Asian cultures prefer inductive (topic-delayed) pattern, Western cultures are most likely to use deductive (topic-first) pattern in discourse. In the inductive pattern of topic introduction the speaker first prefers to state main arguments for the topic s/he chooses and states the topic itself afterwards. Furthermore, doing so and watching peers' participation in the conversation before the topic is identified the speaker can understand what attitude her/his conversational partners have to the topic. In the deductive pattern of topic introduction the topic is identified at the very beginning of the conversation so that the participants can see the relevance of the arguments to the topic. Nevertheless, Scollon and Scollon (2001) argue that these patterns of topic introduction exist in all societies, but they are not equally distributed. As mentioned earlier, there are a variety of discourses within every cultural group (e.g., gender, age). Furthermore, the distribution of inductive/deductive patterns of topic introduction might vary within a cultural group depending on the pattern preference in discourse of people of a certain age or gender. For example, members of a Confucian discourse system seem to generally prefer the inductive pattern. Nevertheless, deductive patterns of topic introduction appear to be more preferable for the teenage discourse group. An interesting fact that Scollon and Scollon (2001) point out is that in inductive pattern the person who initiates and starts the conversation is the one responsible for the topic introduction. Moreover, the person

to start the conversation is more likely to be the one who has a higher hierarchical position. The participants in the conversation know that sooner or later the initiator will introduce the topic. This is not true of the deductive pattern. There are no similar regulations regarding the initiation of the conversation and topic introduction. While one person might initiate the conversation, another person might introduce the topic. This may be one cause for intercultural miscommunication.

Intercultural Discourse as an Aspect of Intercultural Miscommunication

Communication and discourse as its part occur within one cultural group as well as between cultural groups. Furthermore, language as the tool for communication tends to carry information as well as reflect relationships within a particular cultural group and between conversation partners. Moreover, people tend to use one discourse pattern when communicating within their discourse group and different discourse pattern when communicating with members of other discourse groups. This is especially true about collectivistic societies. As noted above in the discussion of aspects of intercultural communication, collectivistic societies are group-oriented. Their members try to establish long-lasting relationships and these relationships appear to be very important as a group forms within a cultural group. The members of the group do not communicate with the non-members the very same way as with the members. Thus, the discourse patterns of in-group communication differ from discourse patterns of communication

between members of different groups. Moreover, since collectivistic societies are hierarchical ones, this hierarchy is always reflected in the discourse. Furthermore, as Scollon and Scollon (2001) point out, if a member of a discourse communicates with a non-member the same way as with another member, other members of the discourse group might consider it as a betrayal. Regarding individualistic societies, this phenomenon does not exist to such extent. Since an independent person is the major unit of the society and equality of members is emphasized, there is not much difference between the discourse people use to communicate with the members of their discourse group (e.g., based on gender, age, education, occupation) and the discourse people use to communicate with the non-members of their group. Furthermore, members of collectivistic and individualistic societies assign different roles to the language as a tool for communication. For example, while in collectivistic cultures people see the role of language in "ratifying or affirming" (Scollon & Scollon, 2001, p. 154) vertical and generational relationships that already exist, individualistic cultures see the language as the tool for "ongoing negotiation of the relationship" (p. 154).

One of the crucial points regarding communication is the representation of assumed knowledge. Ellis (1999) states that while communicating people present knowledge that is "assumed but not visible" (p. 91). The representation of this assumed knowledge does not seem to cause problems when communication occurs within one cultural discourse group

since communication partners share the same cultural knowledge, values, and beliefs. Nevertheless, this might be a major reason for cross-cultural miscommunication. Regarding intercultural discourse, assumed knowledge seems to incorporate the values and beliefs of collectivistic and individualistic societies such as goal orientation, value of kinship, concept of self, time, and hierarchy. Moreover, since the English language in this particular case is the tool for communication, it originally carries values and beliefs of individualistic societies (e.g., Great Britain, USA, Australia). In the communication process of this kind at least one conversational partner will be the one acquiring the second language and the discourse pattern of the latter. This can be rather confusing for conversational partners that come from Asian collectivistic societies as they might feel the pressure of changing or, at least, not revealing their Confucian cultural values in discourse. Moreover, native speakers of English communicating with non-native speakers carry their cultural values and beliefs as members of individualistic societies throughout the conversation and assume that conversational partners share the same values and beliefs since speaking the same language. For example, intercultural miscommunication can be illustrated by a hypothetical conversation between a US American and a Chinese business partner. The former would call the latter by his first name, as it is appropriate for an individualistic society. The Chinese businessman might get rather irritated since he is older than the American businessman. In this case both participants carry out the

conversation according to the discourse face systems of their societies. While the American businessman reflects the value of equality in the discourse and calls his partner by his name, the Chinese businessman expects to be called by his last name as a reflection of the value of hierarchy according to Confucian discourse face system. In a situation like this the Chinese businessman might refuse to continue negotiations since he feels neglected and insulted.

Tyler (1995) gives a vivid example of cross-cultural miscommunication resulting from discourse construction that reflects cultural values and beliefs. In her article "Conflicts and Perception, Negotiation, and Enactment of Participant Role and Status" she describes a conflict between a Korean tutor and a US American student. In this case the tutor is a non-native speaker; nevertheless, he is claimed to be rather fluent in English. The highly motivated American student asks the tutor whether he knows the system of scoring in bowling and can help her to work on some computer programs. Since the tutor mentioned sometime before that he had bowled, the student expected a positive answer. Nevertheless, the tutor does not give a direct positive answer to the student. Instead the answer is rather indirect, "Yeah approximately" (p. 136). From the student's perspective and according to traditions in English discourse construction this answer seems to be a rather indefinite one. The student feels that the tutor is withholding the knowledge and is refusing to help her. On the other hand, for the tutor, this is the way to provide a positive

answer within the inductive discourse system typical for Asian cultures. The tutor assumes that it is obvious for the student that this is a polite way of saying yes. Since this is an inductive discourse pattern, the topic is delayed and the answer is indirect. Furthermore, it is possible to say that transfer of a discourse pattern has occurred here. Scarcella (1992) also calls it "discourse accent" (p. 109).

From these examples it is possible to state that the conversation partners did not share the same cultural knowledge, were not aware of cultural differences, and were not culturally sensitive. Moreover, non-native speakers, though being rather fluent speakers of English, have not acquired discourse patterns of the language and used discourse patterns typical for their culture. All these factors contribute to intercultural miscommunication.

Acquisition of Discourse

Acquisition of discourse needs to be discussed regarding intercultural miscommunication and second language acquisition. Discussing aspects of intercultural miscommunication and discourse, the authors (Ellis, 1999; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Scollon & Scollon, 2001) point out that one should acquire discourse systems of the second language (L2) together with the acquisition of L2. Moreover, they suggest that acquisition of discourse in the process of first language acquisition should be studied, as it might be rather helpful in identifying regularities for L2 discourse acquisition. Nevertheless, there are nearly no concrete suggestions

regarding the acquisition of L2 discourse in the classroom. Scollon and Scollon (2001) suggest that when a non-native speaker appears to be in a different discourse setting s/he would be able to notice the differences in discourse and therefore imitate them, and in this way acquire a different discourse system. This approach seems to raise a lot of questions. First of all, a person needs to be aware of the existence of different discourses. Enninger (1987) points out that people tend not to notice these discourse differences or even do not expect them to exist since differences in discourse systems are not obvious. Moreover, in order to be able to notice the differences, the person has to be aware of the possibility that such differences exist and be rather culturally and linguistically sensitive in order to acquire different discourse systems. Finally, people have already been communicating interculturally for quite a while, but the question of intercultural miscommunication or interdiscourse miscommunication constantly arises and is not resolved yet. This is why some extra research regarding acquisition of discourse with a close connection to cultural aspects seems to be necessary. It seems necessary to identify regularities in L1 discourse acquisition, investigate whether there are regularities in L2 discourse acquisition and whether they are similar to those in L1. It also seems reasonable to identify possible strategies for teaching discourse patterns based on discourse acquisition research.

In conclusion, patterns of discourse construction seem to be culturally dependent and their transfer seems to be one of the causes of intercultural miscommunication. Research in second language acquisition with a focus on the acquisition of discourse might identify regularities and lead to suggestions that will be of significant value for language pedagogy.

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