

Linguistic Relativity and Cultural Communication

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The Problems of Globalization

It is said that we are now living in the age of globalization.

Globalization is an extension of the emergence of world economic systems, but sociologists are more concerned with cultural globalization. There is a profound sense of globalism brought about by tourism, by world sport, world news, McDonaldization, AIDS, human rights and so on. (Turner, 1994, p. 9)

It is an age-old idea that the world should be one. Plato and Aristotle once thought that Greeks were superior to barbarians. But,

Alexander, who was not quite a Greek, tried to break down the attitude of superiority. He himself married two barbarian princesses, and he compelled his leading Macedonians to marry Persian women of noble birth. His innumerable Greek cities, one would suppose, must have contained many more male than female colonists and their men must therefore have followed his example in intermarrying with the women of locality. The result of this policy was to bring into the mind of thoughtful men the conception of mankind as a whole; the old loyalty to the City State and to the Greek race seem no longer adequate. In philosophy, this cosmopolitan point of view begins with the Stoics, but in practice it begins earlier, with Alexander. It had the result that the interaction of Greek and barbarian was reciprocal: The barbarian learnt something of Greek science, while the Greeks learnt much of barbarian superstition. Greek civilization, in covering a wider area, became less purely Greek. (Russell, 1945, p. 220)

Russell indicates that communications and interactions among cultures, in the form of intermarriage in Greek times, led to a cosmopolitan point of view. We may see the cosmopolitan as an earlier form of the global.

But a culture is usually with the bias of universalization. Each culture has its ultimate concern, and its answers to the concern make up a worldview. And each culture is inclined to see its worldview as universal. The Christian thinks that Jehovah God is the creator and law-maker of the whole universe; Chinese think that the sage's teaching sheds light on every corner of the world like the Sun. The bias

of universalization results in fierce conflicts between cultures. There arises a set of long-disputed issues: Is there eternal and universal human nature or natural law which would resolve the conflicts? If there is, what is it? Is it human reason formulated in Cartesian philosophy and displayed in experimental science? Is it human morality articulated by categorical imperatives or the sage's teaching? Is it an objective law of nature to be represented in the human mind?

As is pointed out by Richard Rorty, the notion of philosophy as the ultimate foundation of cultural communication has been discarded by pragmatists and so-called postmodernists. Philosophers are no longer believed to be men who will discover a set of universal principles on the basis of which local views of all culture will be evaluated 'objectively' (Rorty, 1979, 1997).

From the point of view of traditional philosophy, the merits of a culture can be measured by its degree of approximation to the objective truth and ideal morality. The measurement presupposes that we can know objective truths, including truths of the natural world and truths of human beings, in advance, and then apply these truths to cultural appraisals. The contribution of a culture to a globalized culture, which comprises all local ones, lies in how many objective truths it has discovered. That kind of view has two further presuppositions. One is the metaphysical presupposition that all cultures share the same worldview. The other is the linguistic presupposition that all languages associated with different cultures represent the world in the same way.

Linguistic Relativity

The principle of linguistic relativity, worked out by Benjamin Lee Whorf, states that the structure of a human being's language influences the manner in which he understands reality and behaves with respect to it. Whorf has investigated Hebrew, Aztec, Maya, Hopi and other alien languages, and noticed that these languages seem to be built on a different plan from that of English and other languages which he called 'SAE' (standard average European) languages, and that languages with different collocations of semantic ideas might provide different 'segmentation of experience'. He put much greater emphasis on Hopi, a language, he thought, with a grammar much more complex and subtle than that of Aztec or even that of Maya. He sees that a language segments experience or cuts up the world in a special way, not only by its 'lexation' but also by its grammatical structure.

The notion of linguistic relativity is the suggestion that all one's life has been tricked by the structure of language into a certain way of perceiving reality, with the implication that awareness of this trickery will enable one to see the world with fresh insight.

With a detailed description of the grammatical and semantic structure of the Hopi language, Whorf concludes:

All this ... is an illustration of how language produces an organization of experience. We are inclined to think of language simply as a technique of expression, not to realize that language first of all is a classification and

arrangement of the stream of sensory experience which results in a certain world order, a certain segment of the world that is easily expressible by the type of symbolic means that language employs. (Whorf, 1956, p. 55)

Whorf shows us that the Hopi language gets along perfectly without tenses for its verbs and it has no general notion or even intuition of TIME as a smooth flowing continuum in which everything in the universe proceeds at an equal rate. The Hopi language contains no words, grammatical forms, constructions or expressions referring directly to what Europeans call 'time', or to past, present, future, or to enduring or lasting. It contains no expressions and grammatical forms referring to motion as kinematic rather than dynamic, i.e. as a continuous translation in space and time rather than as an exhibition of dynamic effort in a certain process. It contains no linguistic forms which refer to space in such a way as to exclude an element of extension or existence that Europeans call 'time', and so by implication leave a residue that could be referred to as 'time'. Hence, 'Hopi language contains no reference to "time" either explicit or implicit' (Whorf, 1956, p. 58).

Whorf argues that every language 'conceals a metaphysics'. The Hopi language implies a metaphysics different from what is concealed in SAE. In the Hopi view, time disappears and space is altered. Concepts and abstractions connected with Hopi vocabulary and grammatical forms constitute an alien metaphysics. From the Western point of view or in contrast with SAE, this metaphysics appears as psychological or even mystical in character.

They are ideas which we are accustomed to consider as part and parcel either of so-called animistic or vitalistic beliefs, or of those transcendental unifications of experience and intuitions of things unseen that are felt by the consciousness of the mystic, or which are given out in mystical and (or) so-called occult systems of thought. These abstractions are definitely given either explicitly in words—psychological or metaphysical terms—in the Hopi language, or, even more, are implicit in the very structure and grammar of the language, as well as being observable in Hopi culture and behavior. (Whorf, 1956, pp. 58–59)

Whorf finds that the Hopi metaphysics imposes upon the universe two grand cosmic forms, MANIFESTED and MANIFESTING (or UNMANIFEST), two terms he has coined to describe the grammatical structure of the Hopi language; the former locates in objective realm and the latter subjective realm. The manifested comprises all that is or has been accessible to the senses, things and events in the physical universe, without attempts to distinguish between present and past, but excluding everything that Europeans call future. The manifesting comprises all that Europeans call future, and furthermore, the mental. The mental is that in the HEART, not only the heart of man, but the heart of animals, plants and things, and in the heart of nature, in the very heart of the Cosmos itself. The manifesting realm embrace not only the future in terms of SAE, but also all mentality, intellection and emotion, 'the essence and typical form of which is the striving of purposeful desire, intelligent in

character, toward manifestation—a manifestation which is much resisted and delayed, but in some form or other is inevitable' (Whorf, 1956, p. 60).

Every language contains terms that have come to attain cosmic scope of reference, that crystallize in themselves the basic postulates of an unformulated philosophy, in which is couched the thought of a people, a culture, a civilization, even of an era. In English, they are the words 'reality', 'substance', 'matter', 'cause', 'property', 'space', 'time' and other terms appear in the category listed by Aristotle and Kant. Such a term in Hopi is the word most often translated as 'hope'—*tumatya*—'it is in the action of hoping, it hopes, it is hoped for, it thinks or is thought of with hope', etc. Most metaphysical words in Hopi are verbs, not nouns as in European languages. The verb *tumatya* contains in its idea of hope something of the English words 'thought', 'desire', 'cause'. The word is really a term which crystallizes the Hopi philosophy of the universe in respect to its grand dualism of objective and subjective; it is the Hopi term for subjective (Whorf, 1956, p. 61). The Hopi see this burgeoning activity in the growing of plants, the forming of clouds and their condensation in rain, the careful planning out of the communal activities of agriculture and architecture, and in all human hoping, wishing, striving and taking thought.

The lesson Whorf has learned from his linguistic study is that, in Edward Sapir's words:

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group ... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (Whorf, 1956, p. 134)

Two points in Whorf's study are very instructive. Firstly, there are different metaphysics underlying different languages. Secondly, despite the difference in metaphysics, different languages are equally valid in describing the observable phenomena of the universe. It is certainly against Whorf's wishes to condone any easy appeal linguistic relativity as a rationalization for the failure of communication between cultures or between nations. Rather, he hopes that a full awareness of linguistic relativity might lead to humbler attitudes about the supposed superiority of standard average European languages and to a greater disposition to accept a 'brotherhood of thought' among men. And moreover, Whorf avers that the investigation of the 'logics' of alien languages will contribute to Western people's understanding of their own thinking habits. Whorf points out that the Hopi language is capable of accounting for and describing correctly, in pragmatic or operational sense, all observational phenomena of the universe: 'So it is possible to have descriptions of the universe, all equally valid, that do not contain our familiar

contrast of time and space' (Whorf, 1956, p. 58). Whorf thinks that the metaphysics underlying the Hopi language seems to be mystical, but it would be perchance a term of abuse in the eyes of a modern Western scientist, or exactly, from the framework of SAE. He emphasizes that the underlying abstractions and postulates of the Hopian metaphysics are, from a detached viewpoint, 'equally justified pragmatically and experientially, as compared to the flowing time and static space of our own metaphysics, which are *au fond* mystical. The Hopi postulates equally account for all phenomena and their interrelations, and lend themselves even better to the integration of Hopi culture in all its phases' (Whorf, 1956, p. 59).

Whorf's linguistic relativity is further strengthened by Quine's thesis of indeterminacy of radical translation. As Quine's study in radical translation (Quine, 1960, 1972) shows, although observational sentences of one language can be translated into another language on the basis of the concept stimulus meaning, there is no basis on which theoretical sentences will be translated. The reason is similar to that for linguistic relativity: different languages segment the world or the experience of the world in different ways. So terms are 'inscrutable'. A rabbit scurries by, a native informant in a field linguistic investigation says 'Gavagai', the field linguist may translate it into 'Rabbit'. The two utterances as sentences may have the same stimulus meaning, but taking them as words, they can in no way be said to have the same meaning, viz. have the same reference or sense. Quine asks, who knows whether the objects to which the term 'gavagai' applies are not rabbits after all, but mere stages, or brief temporal segments, or all and sundry undetached parts, of rabbits? The stimulus meaning registers no difference. The indecision cannot be resolved by appeal to ostensive definition, for a pointing to a rabbit is at the same time a pointing to a stage of a rabbit and an integral part of a rabbit. The indecision has roots in the metaphysics of the language. The native conceptual scheme may not be the one which breaks reality down into a multiplicity of identifiable and discriminable physical things, it may not be an object positing scheme. With metaphysical difference,

What is really involved is difficulty or indeterminacy of correlation. It is just that there is less basis of comparison—less sense in saying what is good translation and what is bad—the farther we get away from sentences with visibly direct conditioning to nonverbal stimuli and the farther we get off home ground. (Quine, 1972, pp. 94–95)

The Cultural Import of Linguistic Relativity

The thesis of linguistic relativity and indeterminacy of radical translation have vital import for our vision of cultural communication. For one, if not the only one, of the most important constituents of cultural communication consists in linguistic exchange. Cultural communication is done through and in language. If all cultures did share a general framework of language, as is indicated by Noam Chomsky's 'universal grammar', it would be possible to work out a set of universal criteria of progress, progress toward objective truth and ideal morality. And it would then be possible to

assess how much a culture contributes to a globalized, comprehensive culture which would integrate all existing cultures, in the sense that the merits of every culture would be incorporated into the general system of culture.

Linguistic relativity indicates that worldview goes along with language, the world is different for different languages. There have hitherto not been a neutral conceptual or linguistic framework which would do justice to all cultures. It is an open question whether a neutral framework will be worked out some day in the future, yet historical approaches to scientific knowledge have undermined such a hope.

Historicist philosophers of science, especially Kuhn and Feyerabend, characterize science as insurmountably historical. For them there is no universal method and criterion of science which stands valid for all historical ages and all cultures. Kuhn suggests the theories situated in different paradigms are incommensurable, in the sense that it is very difficult to translate the language of one theory into that of another. The difficulty in translation shatters the hope for a set of neutral criteria of evaluation. Thus the concept of science as a way of making progress toward objective truth has been shrugged off by a number of philosophers of science.

To shrug off the conception of progress as gradual approximation to truth, truth of nature and morality, undermines the old idea of cultural communication as exchange of truth: by means of communication, one would learn from other cultures truths not discovered by one's own culture, or correct mistakes in knowledge claims committed by one's own culture. A culture contributes to the communication by its distinctive discovery of truths.

If cultural communication is not the exchange of truth, then what is it? If we have no reason to say one culture is better than another in this or that aspect, then what is important in cultural communication? At first sight, the implication of linguistic relativity seems pessimistic. It seems that it implies that alien culture was not understandable, that one could learn little from cultural communication, and that the conflicts between cultures are not resolvable. However, it is so only from an old-fashioned point of view.

Linguistic relativity does not imply that alien culture is not understandable, its strict implication is that no criteria transcending above different cultures are available for us to evaluate those cultures neutrally. We do have means to understand an alien culture, we are able to learn its language and therefore have a very pertinent understanding of it. Even though some people are not accessible to an alien culture by studying its language, they may be able to attain an understanding of that culture to a satisfactory extent through being informed by field investigators. Quine argues that observational sentences and truth-functional connectives are translatable (Quine, 1972, pp. 85–88). Whorf thinks Hopi metaphysics is partially describable in English:

In order to describe the structure of the universe according to the Hopi, it is necessary to attempt to make explicit this metaphysics, properly describable only in the Hopi language, by means of an approximation expressed in our own language, somewhat inadequately it is true, yet by availing ourselves of such concepts as we have worked up into relative consonance

with the system underlying the Hopi view of the universe. (Whorf, 1956, p. 58)

Linguistic relativity forces us to give up the illusive ideal of universality. The central idea is that no culture is superior to others for the two systems of describing the universe are equally valid. The concept of universality went along with colonization and conquer. The more powerful tends to see its local insights as universal and impose them on the less powerful by means of violence, but in the name of universal reason and objective truth. If one finds that ones culture is not truer than the other, one may became more tolerant and charitable with other culture, and may be willing to cultivate a sharp sense of 'brotherhood' with the people of alien culture, or a strong sense of cultural egalitarianism. It is the attitude of tolerance and charity and cultural egalitarianism which forms a firm basis on which cultural communication can go on.

Cultural communication is not a process in which all cultures involved converge to a set of *a priori* principles in agreement with natural reason. Nevertheless, some agreements should be reached on how the communication proceeds. Just as mentioned above, in order to conduct communication, the first principle required is tolerance. If the people of one culture think that the religious belief of another culture is evil and its knowledge claims are thoroughly wrong, they will find no need to engage in communication with that culture. What is most probable for them to do is to wipe out the other culture in the name of truth and justice. For Richard Rorty, tolerance is at least a part of the meaning of 'rationality'. He sees that the word 'rational' means

something like 'sane' or 'reasonable' rather than 'methodical'. It names a set of moral virtues: tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force. These are virtues which members of a civilized society must possess if the society is to endure. (Rorty, 1991, p. 37)

I would like to add: these are also virtues the people must possess if they are willing to engage in cultural communication.

Another principle required for the possibility of cultural communication is charity. People in cultural communication have the aim of understanding an alien culture, it requires them to interpret or translate the sentences of that culture into their own. Interpretation requires charity. To be charitable is to

take it as given that most beliefs [of the speakers of the language interpreted] are correct ... what makes interpretation possible, then, is the fact that we can dismiss a priori the chance of massive error. A theory of interpretation cannot be correct that makes a man assent to very many false sentences: it must generally be the case that a sentence is true when a speaker holds it to be true. (Davidson, 1984, p. 169)

It is further presupposed in the charity principle that the speaker, whose utterances are to be interpreted, is rational in most cases: he will be generally adherent to the

basic principles of logic. It is based on the charity principle, that the error can be explained. It is the charity principle that renders alien cultures intelligible.

The third principle is cultural egalitarianism. No culture is superior to other culture or cultures. A culture might be strong in some aspects, but it is so only from some point of view. From a different point of view, the strong points may turn out to be weak ones. Western cultures are strong in so-called science and technology. Yet Western people have come to recognize that science and technology render them very powerful with regard to military force and commodity production on the one side, but lead to pollution, resource shortage and other predicaments on the other side.

These principles are not *a priori*, but contingent on the practice of cultural communication. They became principles only because they are brought about and accepted in the process of cultural communication. The sole justification for them is that they happen to be a consensus among cultures in communication. They will find not justification from natural reason or human nature or nature of history.

The Locality of China

If cultural globalization is the awareness that every culture is only one of the sundry cultural forms in the world and every culture can attain deeper understanding of itself only by means of communication with other cultures, then it is almost tautological that every culture is local. So is Chinese culture. Chinese culture has its special ways of thinking and behaviour shaped by the Chinese language.

The Chinese language provides, for the Chinese people, a conceptual framework within which they think of the universe and social affairs. This framework is embodied in a set of metaphysical and social terms, whereby a worldview is articulated which is fundamentally different from the Western worldview.

In Western cultures, the world is structured largely by two classes of categories: one class of categories is that of forms and matters, another is that of substances and their properties. Although the entities classified into these categories are physically connected with each other, they are logically distinct from each other. The form of a thing can never be its matter, and properties are necessarily the properties of some substances. In terms of these categories, all individual things and phenomena observed are explained.

In the Chinese language, no terms correspond to the above categories. The basic terms used to describe the universe are Yin and Yang, and then five Xings. Ying and Yang, if we have to paraphrase them in English, are not only two classes of opposite properties, negative and positive, female and male, hard and soft, manifested and concealed, for instance. They are also two classes of forms, of substances and of matters. So are the five Xings: they are five classes of forms, of substances, of properties, and of matters, they are both active agencies and passive entities acted upon. None of these terms can be translated into English, viz. it is improbable to find correlation between these terms and certain English ones.

The uppermost concept of morality in Chinese culture is 'Ren'. It covers the meaning associated with a number of English terms. It means humanity, universal

love, the mercy of sovereignty to its subject, moral goodness, sacrifice for justice, and so on. It is difficult to find an English term correlative to it.

One may wonder whether a language can be enlarged by introducing foreign words. The term 'Ren' might be adapted to English, for instance. It is a fact that many languages, such as Chinese, Japanese, English, are becoming more extensive by introducing foreign words into them. Yet from a structuralist point of view, a language is a synchronic system of internal relations beyond historical change. When a foreign term is introduced, it is distanced from its original relationships and is defined in the new context of relations. For example, 'tank' is adapted to Chinese as 'tanke', in Chinese it has lost most of its original meaning and refers simply to enclosed heavily armed and armoured combat vehicles that move on two endless metal belts; 'Mini' is a Chinese adaptation of the English word 'mini' (in 'minicar', 'miniskirt', 'minidress', for instance), it arouses fantastic associations which it lacks in English.

From linguistic relativity, it follows that English and Chinese are simply two different ontological systems. To learn a foreign language is to study a different ontology. Therefore, to communicate with an alien culture is not to absorb the truths it discovered, but to learn to see or to think of the world in a different way.

Turner is right in saying that 'Globalization and localization go together'. Otherwise globalization would be universalization which implies cultural imperialism. However, he is wrong in saying that 'wherever you have the emergence of global consciousness, there will be a reaction which promotes an anti-global movement' (Turner, 1994, p. 9). It is on the basis of principles of tolerance, charity and cultural egalitarianism, and with a recognition of the locality of every culture, that globalization and cultural communication are meaningful and productive. Therefore, localization under the above conditions will not resist but promote globalization.

Globalization is neither universalization nor adding together of all localities. It is localities interacting under some principles agreed upon which are expounded above. Through communication, a language will gradually change in its lexation, and even in its grammatical structure. Chinese language is a good example. It has changed radically throughout the 20th century, but without loss of its locality. For the change is largely an internal adjustment, not structural disintegration. In the process of change, some words, ultimate metaphysical terms for instance, come to be used less frequently, and some other words, the words more closely associated with Western science and technology, are used more frequently. Many words are redefined in the changing context of communication.

What is the future of this change? If all languages change in the way Chinese does, will there be a time when all languages will fuse into one and people all over the world will think in the same way and every locality will be swallowed up in globalization? No. Existing systems of language might evolve to be close to each other, but new localities will arise in the evolution. The difference between 'I' (or 'we') and the other will never be eliminated as long as communication is a permanent human demand.

The concept of otherness is an issue associated with postmodern debate. The postmodern critique of universalistic categories goes along with the process of

localization or indigenization. Both indigenization and postmodernism have a fascination for the textuality of knowledge, its local, embedded, contextual quality; and have a doubt about universalization and generalization of religious belief and human nature. Postmodern methodologies are sensitive to the richness and complexity of local meanings of folk practices and beliefs, and particularly sensitive to ironic meaning and intention in everyday practice. Although Chinese is in the process of 'modernization', all ideas, commodities and behaviours, which appear to be introduced from the West, are configured by Chinese culture and language in distinctive manners. Coca-Cola and McDonalds have different meanings in China from that in the USA. China is indeed an other in the Western eyes, and the converse is also true. As long as Chinese people speak the Chinese language, they will think in its own way, and China will be special. China has changed and is changing with modernization, but the direction of change will not be toward westernization, rather an adaptation of some western elements into its local and indigenous context.

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