

Analysis of Factors Causing Lacuna in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: Intercultural communication is becoming increasingly significant today. However, understanding across cultures cannot be easily reached due to the uniqueness of each culture. In some occasions, culturally specific information is missing in another culture and is difficult to be understood by non-members of the given culture, this culturally specific information is regarded as “lacuna”. In order to alleviate misunderstanding in intercultural communication, the problem of lacuna should be addressed. This article discusses lacuna concerning its causal factors. In this study, four factors, namely, geographic factors, religious factors, customary factors and historical factors, are categorized and elaborated so as to enhance communicators’ awareness of the cross-cultural differences and gaps. What’s more, based on the guiding principles of appropriateness and effectiveness proposed by Messner & Schäfte, this study provides strategies to deal with the barrier of lacuna in intercultural communication, such as identifying possible barriers caused by the four factors analysed previously, applying the technique of empathy, or using the strategy of self-monitoring, etc..

Key words: Lacuna; intercultural communication; causal factors; strategies

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication is becoming increasingly significant today. With the development of technology, people enjoy greater mobility; they can travel from country to country for the pleasure of enjoying exotic sceneries. Besides, while our political well-being is connected with that in other countries, countries are economically dependent on one another, therefore, intercultural communication and understanding is much more crucial than before. However, understanding across cultures cannot be easily reached due to the uniqueness of each culture. In some occasions, culturally specific information is missing in another culture and is difficult to be understood by non-members of the given culture, this culturally specific information is regarded as “**lacuna**”. In this essay, the phenomenon of lacuna will be discussed in the field of intercultural communication.

1.1 Intercultural Communication

Communication is the activity of conveying information through the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, visuals, signals, writing, or behavior. Intercultural communication, as a form of global communication, refers to “communication between persons of different cultures---persons with different cultural beliefs, values, or ways of behaving” (Joseph, 1992, P255). With the different background, people perceive the world in a different way. The unawareness of the differences or the misunderstanding of each other’s cultures may lead to various problems and prevent successful communication among cultures. From the media’s daily reports, you can find problems such as racial tension, religious disagreement, etc., which are evidences of the failure to communicate interculturallly.

1.2 Lacuna

Lacuna, or sometimes referred as “vacancy” “gap”, can be defined as the unique cultural or language phenomena which exist in one culture, but whose equivalence cannot be found in another culture because of different social customs, beliefs, ideology, geographical features, etc. The concept “lacuna” was first

proposed by the American linguist Charks Hockett in 1950s, who used “random holes in patterns” to describe the language phenomenon when comparing grammatical patterns of two languages. Previous studies on “lacuna” mainly focus on the culture-loaded words, lexical gap and problems in cultural translation, such as Lado (1957), Susan Bassnett & Andre Lefevere (2001), Tian Huaye(2012). Some studies, such as those conducted by Liu Yuelian(2008), Liu Hong(2005), Zhang Ping (2010) etc., have discussed the relationship between lacuna and intercultural communication.

In the light of previous researches, this essay will discuss the concept of “lacuna” by exploring its causal factors from the perspective of intercultural communication, with the aim to provide a clearer understanding of lacuna and suggest strategies to cope with the lacuna in intercultural communication.

2. Factors Causing Lacuna in Intercultural Communication

In the process of interpersonal communication, the meaning intended by the sender “depends not only on messages (whether verbal, nonverbal, or both) but on the interaction of these messages and the receiver’s own thoughts and feelings” (Joseph, 1992, P153). Moreover, the receiver’s thoughts and feelings in receiving the messages are affected by his/her own cultural background, as people “receive messages through the filters imposed by a cultural context” (Joseph, 1992, P256). Therefore, no information can be fully and exactly understood by the receiver in the communication, to some extent (Zhang, 2010). In the special field of intercultural communication, it is the lacuna that causes a dominating barrier.

In order to alleviate misunderstanding in intercultural communication, the problem of lacuna should be addressed. The following will try to discuss lacuna concerning its causal factors. In this study, four factors are identified and elaborated, namely, geographic factors, religious factors, customary factors and historical factors.

2.1 Geographic factors

Geographical environment and climate conditions will not only influence people’s appearance but also their living styles, thus cause lacuna to people in other cultures. To take the “Daylight saving time” for example, most countries observe the Daylight Saving Time, which is the practice of advancing standard time by one hour in the spring of each year and of setting it back by one hour in the fall in order to gain an extra period of daylight during the early evening. However, this is a cultural lacuna and is very likely to cause confusion to people in equatorial and tropical countries (lower latitudes) who don't observe Daylight Saving Time, since the daylight hours are similar during every season in their country and there's no advantage to moving clocks forward during the summer.

On the other aspect, the geography of an area helps to form its specific culture as the uniqueness of an area’s geographic feature might eventually be reflected in their language. For example, considering the geographical feature of China as a whole, its west is high while its east is relatively low; as a result, most rivers in China flow in to the East Sea. Because of the geographical feature, there are expressions such as “付诸东流”, which describes that things discarded into the river run towards the east and will never return again, meaning “all in vain or completely failed”. Expressions like this are likely to be a cultural lacuna, which are difficult for foreigners to understand unless they can associate the expression with the geographic feature concerned.

2.2 Religious factors

While geography concerns the physical features of an area, religion refers to the spiritual aspect of a culture. Differences in religious beliefs can affect people’s values, attitude towards life, and even living styles. For example, a Buddhist will believe in eternity with the idea of “reincarnation”, which is the concept that the soul or spirit, after a person’s biological death, begins a new life in a new body that may be

human, animal or spiritual depending on the moral quality of the previous life's actions. Therefore, Buddhists tend to lead a relatively restrictive life, to perform kind actions, with the hope that they can reincarnate to be better after their death. However, this concept is an “absolute vacancy” (Liu, 2011) to those who do not have any religious belief. However, it can also be a “relative vacancy” (Liu, 2011) for people who have their faith in other religions, that is, a similar concept instead of an equivalent one, can be found in other religions. For instance, the similar concept of “afterlife” can be found in Christian belief, which also believes that one will not simply disappear after death, yet it differs from “reincarnation” in the way that it considers after one dies, his/her soul will float to the hell or the heaven.

2.3 Customary factors

Custom, specialized in one culture, is directly linked with people's living styles. It refers to a habitual or usual practice, which is an accepted way of behaving or doing things in a certain community.

The varied customs in different areas are usually the source of intercultural communication barriers, as demonstrated in the following example. An American invites a Filipino coworker to dinner. The Filipino politely refuses. The American is hurt and feels that the Filipino does not want to be friendly. However, the Filipino is also hurt and concludes that the invitation was not extended sincerely, for in their custom, a invitation is expected to extended several times before accepted. In this case, the Filipino's custom of extending invitation is lacunate in American culture, which leads to the misunderstanding. The lacuna in intercultural communication can also reflected in the following instance. Once a group of Chinese students are required to read Doris Lessing's autobiography written after her winning of the Nobel Prize in 2007:

“...No doubt this is a real memory, because everything is high around me, the loo handle miles above my head, my father who is ill, in a version of *couvade*, is...”

When they come to the word “couvade”, the Chinese students are firstly confused and later feel amused to find out that “couvade” is a practice in which a man, immediately preceding the birth of his child, takes to his bed in an enactment of the birth experience and subjects himself to various taboos usually associated with pregnancy. However, this is conducted among some peoples, as the Basques of Spain, but is totally exotic to people in other cultures who may find it amusing and peculiar.

2.4 Historical factors

Viewing in a vertical way, culture is formed with the development of history. The uniqueness of a culture is very often a result of its historical heritages. The lacuna caused by the historical factors is displayed obviously in historical literary reference, the idioms, proverbs, etc.. For example, the Chinese idiom “四面楚歌”, literally meaning "Chu song from four sides", baffles its foreign receivers. Its historical background is set in China, during the Battle of Gaixia fought in 202 BC during the Chu – Han Contention between the forces of Liu Bang and Xiang Yu. When Xiang Yu and his soldiers were totally entrapped, to further break the Chu army's spirit, Han employed the "Chu Song from Four Sides" tactic. He ordered the Han soldiers and captured Chu troops to sing Chu songs. The Chu songs made the Chu troops remember their families back home, greatly reducing their will to fight. Even Xiang Yu himself thought that the whole Chu had been conquered, while he had been trapped there. At the end, Xiang Yu lost the battle and committed suicide. Therefore, only when the foreigners can fill in the historical lacuna, they can fully understand that the idiom "Chu Song from Four Sides (四面楚歌)" indicates “besieged on all sides, unable to escape”. Examples are abundant showing the lacuna due to historical factors, such as “meet one's Waterloo”, etc..

Due to the four factors discussed above, lacuna in the intercultural communication is generated, hindering people's cross-culture interaction. However, by classifying and analyzing the causal factors, we

can have a clearer picture of the diversity of cultural peculiarities, which is an essential step in promoting mutual understanding.

3. Strategies to cope with lacuna

As scholars address the phenomena of lacuna, they target to find out ways of eliminating it. The Russian scholars have proposed two ways to deal with lacuna directing at the understanding and translation of foreign language discourse (Liu, 2011). In China, Professor Li Xiangdong, aiming at the lacuna appeared in understanding text of foreign cultures, put forward the idea of forming “cognitive card”(Li, 2002). However, these solutions are much too confined to dealing with lacuna of all kinds.

After analyzing the various factors causing lacuna, the study tries to find out ways to alleviate intercultural communication barriers. According to Messner & Schäfer (2012, p41), intercultural communication needs to bridge the dichotomy between appropriateness and effectiveness. With the guidance of this principle, the following explores the strategies to cope with the problems caused by lacuna.

On the one hand, to reach the appropriateness in intercultural communication, first of all, the communicators should be aware of the cultural lacuna and prepare themselves in the intercultural communication. Besides, barriers identified above should be avoided as much as possible, including lacuna caused by geographical factors, religious factors, customary factors and historical factors. Moreover, because of the uniqueness of the culture, meanings are unique. It is recommendable for the communicators to resist their natural tendency to judge others quickly and permanently with their own set of culture. It is better to extend and stretch yourself, and to check your perceptions of another’s meaning by asking questions, seeking elaboration and clarification. In this way, people involved in the intercultural communication can negotiate to reach the appropriateness of sending the intended messages or receiving the correct meaning.

On the other hand, to achieve the effectiveness in intercultural communication, the principles of effective interpersonal interaction can be employed. For instance, empathy can be applied. Instead of ignoring the cultural uniqueness or regarding one’s own culture as superior, it is better to try to put yourself into the position of the person from another culture, to realistically consider the other party’s position and their actions. Second, knowing some of the prevalent barriers and preparing yourself for possible cultural lacuna can be effective in the intercultural communication. In addition, while verbal communication is concerned, it is recommended to paraphrase the speaker’s meaning. When you state in your own words what you think the speaker meant, this helps to ensure whether the understanding is correct or needs correction. Finally, self-monitoring can also be applied. In order to communicate effectively across cultures, it is better for the interactors to adjust their behaviors according to the feedback they get from the other party, thus gradually fill in the cultural lacuna between them. By self-monitoring, the interactors manipulate their interpersonal interactions to give the most effective expression and to produce the desired effect.

4. Conclusion

As discussed above, “lacuna” is the “gaps” in some poorly understood cultural items. The phenomenon of lacuna gives us the possibility to have a look at the process of intercultural communication from a new perspective. It allows a discussion of intercultural communication barriers without approving or disapproving of the practices of a certain culture. In this essay, the phenomenon of lacuna is focused from the angle of intercultural communication. Besides interpreting its causal factors, the essay puts forward some strategies with the aim of providing insights to make the communication between cultures as normal as within a culture.

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