
EDITOR'S FORUM

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: AN EDUCATOR'S PERSONAL POINT OF VIEW*

by Jay Fox

Ladies and Gentlemen, Aloha. As I begin my brief task this morning, I feel very much like the novelist E. M. Forster must have felt when a friend once told him, "One must face facts." "How can I," he replied, "when they're all around me?" In the area of intercultural communication one wonders which of the many "facts" one should face. Quite frankly, one wonders what the facts really are.

It has only been within the last two decades that substantial research into intercultural communication has begun, and even today, compared to many other disciplines, there is not a great deal of enlightening material on the subject. I often ask those pulse takers of the trends in higher education--the book salesmen--what they have for college students on the subject and they have had little to recommend. The field is rapidly growing, however. Ironically much of what has been done is available in scholarly journals in a jargon that doesn't communicate very well to the uninitiated. An example of the problems of the style of such writing was brought painfully to my attention last week when I was skimming an article in the new Britannica on semantics in communication. For a few moments I did not realize that I had passed on to the next alphabetized entry and was reading an article on semi-conductor devices in electronic transistors. The diagrams on input and output looked very much the same as the previous article and the text seemed similarly abstruse. Since I have already started off on this ostensibly critical note I must digress to share with you a definition of input I read recently in a copy of Yale Alumni Magazine in a doctor's office:

Input n. (fr. in+put): Ideas solicited by deans, department heads and the like from colleagues assumed to have expertise in a given field. Upon receipt, input is converted into feedback. Feedback is then reconverted into input, the two processes thereby forming a cycle which is sometimes terminated by action.¹

I wrote this definition, by the way, on the back of the only paper available in that office, a leaflet which carried the heading, "Today in Hawaii there are some 2,500 blind or visually handicapped people. Are you one of them?" and I suppose that leaflet has something to do with

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¹ *Yale Alumni Magazine*, October 1974, p. 23.

this conference, too, because many people are blind to the complex problem that is intercultural communication.

Hopefully, I can share with you--not as an expert in the field but as a sympathetic observer--my personal point of view as a teacher and administrator in international education.

Perhaps you need to understand what I have in mind when I use the term "intercultural communication." A definition of communication itself could lead to a long discourse, but for the sake of brevity I will use the definition that "communication is the act of understanding and being understood by the audience."² Other dimensions are added too if we think of communication as an art and as a process. By culture I mean the sum total of experience, knowledge, values, attitudes, and world views acquired by a group of people living together. Thus when someone in one culture sends a message to a receiver who understands in another culture we have intercultural communication. Although there are other terms being used today, such as "interracial communication," I prefer "intercultural" because I believe differences in culture often have little to do with differences in race. Then, too, race has always been a very elusive system of categorization to me.

As you might suspect, communication problems develop because of the variances between cultures. I have always been surprised that there are not more overt clashes on our Brigham Young University-Hawaii Campus considering the variety of cultures we have represented. Assuming that culture and country are somewhat related (although not necessarily so) we have, according to our registrar, on campus this year students from the following countries:

The United States, Canada, Brazil, England, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, The Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, South Vietnam, Tahiti, Tonga, Western Samoa, New Zealand, Fiji, Australia, American Samoa, The Marshall Islands, The Caroline Islands, Laos, and Indonesia. There are represented at BYU-Hawaii Campus, then, students coming from at least twenty-five different cultural backgrounds. There are even more when you consider that the United States, for example, represents different cultural groups itself. The state of Hawaii is certainly culturally different from the state of Utah, for instance. How successful are the local people here in Hawaii for example in keeping shoes on your children--or yourself for that matter--when you visit the mainland?

Each group has its own perceptions, its own world view, its own concepts of time, and its own need for certain ways to use and organize

² K. S. Sitaram, "What is Intercultural Communication?" In *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, ed. Larry A. Samover and Richard E. Porter (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing; 1972), p. 19.

space. Each takes offense at some gestures and, of course, the intercultural differences are multiplied by all the idiosyncrasies of individuals in each cultural group.

We do not say enough about the burden this places on teachers who must have culturally different students in their classes. Just last week I received a firsthand report from a faculty member who had a Japanese student come up to him after a class to ask the faculty member to please stop being so "passionate"-- that was the word he used--in teaching certain principles in the classroom. The Japanese student was reacting to what seemed to him to be an overbearing attitude of having the subject "crammed" down his throat. The instructor was condemned because the student felt it was offensive to someone of his culture. The teacher, feeling very introspective after the discussion, was then approached by a Fijian student who claimed that the power and zeal of this teacher was just what the Fijian students needed to motivate them. The teacher was in that unenviable position of being, as one of my friends is so fond of saying, "damned if you do, and damned if you don't."

I wonder what we can do to make students sensitive to the fact that a teacher dealing with different cultures may have to be simply himself in the classroom and it is they, the students, who must adapt to his culture and personality. I wonder, too, how often students appeal to their culture as a sanctuary from things they personally dislike.

In case it might console the Japanese members of the audience, I should tell you about a faculty member from another college in the state who misjudged a Japanese waitress recently. We were seated at a round table at which there were two men, myself and this other faculty member, and seven women. When the main course was served, it was given first to this other faculty member who quickly questioned why he was first. He just as quickly answered his own question by theorizing that it must be because he was the oldest male member at the table and that Japanese women respect and defer to their male elders. Knowing I would be given this presentation this morning, I asked the waitress why she had served him first, to which she replied, "He was the only one who had moved his salad plate out of the way so I could put his dish down."

All too often each of us is guilty of this type of misjudgment based on a particular cultural group. In such instances the problem is the word *is*. General semanticists have warned us for years of saying "He is a Jew," "She is a Negro," with the assumption that we can equate a person with an abstract label. They remind us that Jew₁ is not Jew₂ is not Jew₃ etc., nor is Jew₁₉₅₀ Jew₁₉₆₁ or Jew₁₉₇₅. People are individuals after

all and no amount of similarity among members of one group ever exceeds the differences among the members of that group.

Yet we persist in using labels. I have heard faculty members say, "She is a Polynesian and must be told everything to do because they all come from authoritarian homes," or "He is a loud Samoan and I embarrass him in front of the class to discipline him because he expects it." Yet these very students have come to me and said that they neither expect nor appreciate such treatment.

Several years ago we interviewed groups of Samoans, Tongans, Chinese, and American students to see if they all felt similar problems in learning English on campus. I recall coming away from those sessions with the distinct impression that each person had his own problems in responding to and learning a language that superseded any pattern shown in his cultural group. Just last fall I had an experience which made me feel as if I were fitting someone's label. I was out cutting my grass when a very noisy car sped down my street. I instinctively shouted "Slow Down!" to the fellow driving. He looked at me but increased his speed even more. About a half an hour later as I was cutting the lawn on the side of the house, I could hear over the roar of the mower someone calling. I looked up and saw the same car stopped in front of the house. The driver was yelling, "Hey, you damn Haole (a Caucasian)--you don't own the streets! Hey, you damn Haole--you don't own the streets!"

I very reluctantly walked to the car and met a very big Polynesian fellow who quickly told me that the streets in Laie used to be private but now they belonged to the city. He said, "I don't like you yell at me that way." Well, my mouth had gone dry at that point and I actually felt a little weak all over. I thought "this guy is going to beat me up, or if he doesn't do that he will be back to rob our house." The only way we were able to conclude the argument that developed was for me to plead mercy for our four children whom I did not want to see mangled by a speeding car and to offer him my hand while saying "No offense intended." Never exchanging our personal names, we slapped the palms of our hands together in the local way and he left.

We had both done what semanticists call reification; we had attempted to "thingify" abstract labels. We had in fact come to the confrontation with the label "Haole" and "Polynesian" in our minds and had looked on one another as the thing that fit the label. I to him was an arrogant Haole and he was to me a ruthless Polynesian. In allowing ourselves to act this way we had both deluded ourselves as do all those who confuse words and things, or in this case words and people.

Reflecting on this experience later, I wrote this little poem to remind myself to avoid this confusion in the future.

TO THE NEW ARISTOTELIAN

You have the fallacy of is.
 A Filipino is
 A Samoan is
 A Haole is or isn't.
 But what is he after all
 But you and me and
 One of us.

Thomas Carlyle, in *Heroes and Hero Worship*, commenting on our confusion with words and things when we attempt to label "components" in our own personalities says this:

What indeed are faculties? We talk of faculties as if they were distinct, things separable? as if a man had intellect, imagination, fancy, etc. as he has hands, feet and arms. That is a capital error. Then again, we hear of a man's "intellectual nature," and of his "moral nature," as if these again were divisible, and existed apart. Necessities of language do not perhaps prescribe such forms of utterance? We must speak, I am aware, in that way, if we are to speak at all. But words ought not to harden into things for us. It seems to me, our apprehension of this matter is, for most part, radically falsified thereby. We ought to know withal, and to keep forever in mind, that these divisions are at bottom but names: that man's spiritual nature, the vital Force which dwells in him, is essentially one and indivisible? that what we call imagination, fancy, understanding, and so forth, are but different figures of the same Power of Insight, all indissolubly connected with each other, physiognomically related; that if we knew one of them, we might know all of them.³

I am often disappointed in the way in which we look on people as things, as labels, when we criticize and find fault with people who date or marry "interracially" as it is often termed. I do not mean to say that we should not carefully consider the advice given by counselors who warn us of the serious adaption problems that often come when two people from different cultures come together, but I hope we do not confuse so called "race"--what is often nothing more than the phenotype of color--with culture. If we do we are guilty of a reification process I call color coding. Color equals race equals different cultures equals problems

³ (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1890), pp. 118-119.

is the logic we often follow. When we do this we are truly fitting the description of the way in which man sees as recorded in I Samuel 16:7. "Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature" the Lord said unto Samuel, "for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart."

Of course there are many intercultural and intracultural communication problems that result from a misuse of words, "the old, old words worn thin, defaced by years of careless usage,"⁴ as Joseph Conrad reminds us. As often, however, I suspect that it is not only the misuse but the misunderstanding of words that is one of the problems. What is going on in a student's mind who doesn't interpret the very sounds of the utterances he hears? He ends up asking where "The Virgin of Menace" is playing instead of *The Merchant of Venice* as one student recently did. Or he nods his head in class, seeming to understand and agree, but is often in the situation of a little friend of mine who hearing a lecture in elementary school on the dangers of taking things from strangers or getting into their cars only appeared to have understood. The lecture was reinforced at suppertime by his parents and he nodded in agreement that he would never take anything from or do anything with strangers. At bedtime he said "Daddy, I have only one question about what I heard today." His Dad said, "What is that Tim?" And Tim asked, "What is a stranger?" Teachers have a responsibility to explain and students have a responsibility to inquire. Culture and language are so closely intertwined that it is extremely difficult to separate them if indeed they can be.

Another of our problems at many United States institutions is the attempt to respect the cultural backgrounds and languages our students bring to our campuses while recognizing the need that most of us see to have students perform well in English because it is the language of instruction. As far as I'm concerned one language is about as good as another. Each language has its own system, its own way, and I am no imperialist about English. What I say here about English applies to any language which is the medium of instruction at an educational institution. But I also strongly believe that success in learning at U.S. schools is directly related to the ability the student has in English because it is the medium for all but our modern language classes. I hope we are not hurting anyone psychologically or culturally when we ask him to use English on campus, because many of us believe that ability in the language will increase as it is used. Why not look on the years spent at schools which use English as an opportunity for non-native speakers of English to learn and use English.

⁴ "Preface," *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1960), p. 27.

Lest I say too much on this subject, let it suffice to say that if you accept the premise above, our special challenge is to find ways to motivate students to want to learn English and yet preserve the cultural ties they fear they are breaking when they use English with their friends who do not speak English as a first language. It is perhaps our greatest challenge when we remember that people usually learn a language well when they wish to be identified with the culture of that language. Yet we are not ready nor do we necessarily want our international students to be Americans and we are thus in a definite way working against ourselves.

In all of these considerations we must be careful not to let our own ethnocentrism of regarding our culture as superior to others carry us too far and distort our perception of things. J. Reuben Clark, Jr. has pointed this out very well:

We must give up this idea too many of us have that our way of life and living is not only the best, but often the only true way of life and living in the world, that we know what everybody else in the world should do and how they should do it. We must come to realize that every race and every people have their own way of doing things, their own standards of life, their own ideals, their own kinds of food and clothing and drink, their own concepts of civil obligation and honor, and their own views as to the kind of government they should have. It is simply ludicrous for us to try to recast all of these into our mold.⁵

We all need time to reflect on these things, yet even here in the multi-cultural milieu of Hawaii we are victims of a time conceptualization that constantly interferes with our communication effectiveness. Many of us are participants in a Western view of time that divides the world of events into past, present, and future, in which Time moves toward an end goal goaded by the desire for more and more production, in contrast to some Asian beliefs in a never-ending cycle in which things do not move toward some "far off divine event"⁶ as the Judeo-Christian tradition teaches. Surely we could find out a great deal about how powerful this concept is in encasing us if we compared it to a non-Western tradition.

On this subject of time and culture, I had that Thoreau-like experience of dating "a new era in life from the reading of a book" a few months ago when I read Friedman and Rosenman's book published in

⁵ *Dialogue*, 8 (1973), back cover.

⁶ Tennyson's closing to *In Memoriam*.

1974 entitled *Type A Behavior and Your Heart*. I wish I had time (ironically we must hurry) to review it for you. The principles of this book "may do more to prevent premature cardiovascular disease than any modern text book of medicine or health book written for the general public,"⁷ is the claim of Dr. George C. Meredith, past president of the American College of Cardiology. Briefly the book postulates a pattern of behavior found particularly among Americans which if present will cause premature heart disease even though we eat a low cholesterol diet and exercise vigorously.

What is Type A behavior? It is a special, well defined pattern marked by a compelling sense of time urgency--"hurry sickness"--aggressiveness and competitiveness, usually combined with a marked amount of free-floating hostility. Type A's engage in a chronic, continuous struggle against circumstances, against others, against themselves. The behavior pattern is common among hard-driving and successful businessmen and executives--but it is just as likely to be found in factory workers, accountants, even housewives. About half of all American males--and a growing percentage of females--are more or less confirmed Type A's.⁸

The book lists thirteen behavioral traits for you to assess in your own life. Over one hundred years ago, Matthew Arnold spoke prophetically of his and our time in describing "this strange disease of modern life, / with its sick hurry, its divided aims, / its heads o'ertaxed, its palsied hearts,"⁹ and this book describes this condition in American culture. It reminds us that "the fundamental sickness of the Type A subject consists of his peculiar failure to perceive, or perhaps worse, to accept the simple fact that a person's time can be exhausted by his or her activities," and then prescribes guidelines for reengineering life by remembering that "life is always an unfinishedness," and that the only way to " 'finish' all the events of life at the end of every day" is "by bullet, poison, or a jump from a high building or bridge."¹⁰

My feeling is that an understanding of a pattern such as Type A, a type based on a philosophy that things worth having are more important than things worth being, will aid us greatly in improving intercultural communications. How often we encounter "Hawaiian time" or

⁷ Meyer Friedman and Ray H. Rosenman, *Type A Behavior and Your Heart* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), dust cover.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "The Scholar Gypsy," *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1965), p. 342.

¹⁰ *Type A Behavior and Your Heart*, pp. 70, 230.

"Polynesian time" here in the state. A realization that we have different cultural clocks programmed into our heads can take some of the frustration out of the incongruity that may result because of different life styles.

At times many of us seem to be caught in this frenzy, and I am sure we could make greater contributions to such things as intercultural communication research if we were not so fragmented in our activities. There certainly is a need for this research because our knowledge in this field is very inadequate. We have here in this audience a great resource for such research. I hope each of us will cooperate and strive to produce conditions that will allow this needed creative research to take place.

The least we can do is to sensitize ourselves "to the kinds of things that need to be taken into account" in an intercultural situation without worrying about the specific things of "what to expect" with a specific culture. "Margaret Mead rates this way as superior . . . because of the individual differences of each encounter and the rapid changes that occur in a culture pattern."¹¹

In summary, then, we need to be sensitive to the variances between cultures because it is out of variances that the problems arise. We need to avoid the fallacy of *is* and accept a non-Aristotelian view of the world. We need to avoid the fallacy of reification and color coding-judging by appearances only. We need to remember that language and culture are so intertwined that they defy separation. Finally, we need to recognize ethnocentrism for what it is--an illusion that our way is best. Remember that the Type A in many of us says that a man's life consists of the abundance of things he possesses--a view not shared by many cultures. But you may say, all of this is so obvious that it goes without saying. My own personal view, however, is that it is often the most obvious concepts that go unlearned and un-lived in this world.

What we might find in our research may be very close to a statement made to me several years ago by a social anthropologist from Cambridge University when I asked him what he thought social anthropologists would come up with in their search for the "cultural or social laws" which he so often said were the quests of the social scientists. He said "I think they will resemble very closely the fundamentals of Christian living."

I would find it difficult to dispute a claim that faith in a just and merciful creator which leads to love for one another, to reverence for life, to belief in the freedom and dignity of people, to humility, and to

¹¹ LaRay M. Barna, "Stumbling Blocks in Interpersonal Intercultural Communications," in *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, p. 242.

honesty, sets a pattern for living that transcends cultural differences and provides the value structure to lessen intercultural problems.

Perhaps then the problem of intercultural communication is already answered in the works of those who have grappled with the problem in earlier times. "These same questions," Thoreau says, "that disturb and puzzle and confound us have in their turn occurred to all the wise men; not one has been omitted; and each has answered them, according to his ability, by his words and his life."¹² The answers are as Robert Frost says in one of his poems, "the truths we keep coming back and back to."¹³ Our task is to find these truths as they affect intercultural communication and to make them meaningful in our time.

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¹² *Walden* (New York: New American Library, 1960), p. 77.

¹³ "The Black Cottage," *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 77.