Culture, Language and Literature: Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence through International Literature

Grace Mary. M
Assistant Professor of English,
JP College of Arts and Science,
Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli.
Ph.no:7339489072
Email: gracemary3593@gmail.com

Abstract

The connection between culture, language and literature cannot be overstressed. Culture manifests itself everywhere-language, literature, performing arts, verbal and non-verbal conduct of individuals,etc.We don't merely depict but embody our respective cultures. Cultures can vary in terms of codes, conducts, cuisines and culinary delights, coaxing, customs, conventions, contraception, costumes or clothing, courtesies, conversation or communication, clock-time, concepts, conveniences, calendars, currencies, contracts, contacts, queues and quietness, courting, questions, crossing, consumerism, collaboration and competition, collectivism and crafts.

The current paper throws the spotlight mainly on 'codes' (literature and language),and cursorily,and incidentally only on 'conversations' or 'communi cation' (norms of polite conversation, observance and flouting of the cooperative principle, and speech acts) and 'curiosities' or 'questions' (norms of acceptable and appropriate questions). Lastly, the paper makes a point that diversity of cultures and diversity of norms of verbal and non-verbal behavior require intercultural communication training and that literature can serve as a source rich enough to foster the competence to communicate appropriately in foreign cultures.

Keywords: types of culture, varieties of English, politeness, principle of power, principle of solidarity, intelligibility, comprehensibility, acceptability, appropriateness, intercultural communicative competence.

> Culture is like gravity. We do not experience it unless we jump two metres into the air. It jolts us out of our complacency when we are uprooted from our own milieu and planted into another, either temporarily or permanently. It is so glutinous that it sticks to us from womb to tomb. Although, we can integrate ourselves into our adopted culture to some extent, our own culture stays with us perennially, follows us like our own shadow, wherever we go. Consequently, each one of us is an ambassador of our own culture. Our cultural identity peeps through our personal as well as interpersonal behavior, both verbal and non-verbal.

As Patil (2002) says, culture, like a banana flower or onion, exists in layers. We can only understand it if we peel it layer by layer, cover by cover. However, it is easier said than done. The outer layer is easy to perceive as it comprises concrete and tangible manifestations like art, monuments, food, language, etc. The middle layer consists of norms and values, and hence it takes us some time to unfold it. The inner layer is rather difficult to penetrate because it subsumes assumptions about birth, life, death, happiness, unhappiness, and so on.

Culture is a very complex phenomenon. It takes even the most thoughtful, honest and introspective person many years to understand even a small part of their own culture. How, then, can we be sure about what constitutes another culture? Time and again, we come across people who talk as if we could measure the contents and list the characteristics of another culture as easily, accurately and fully as the contents of a suitcase. This is not to say that we ought not to try to understand more about other people's cultures, but only that we must be very modest and tentative about what we think we have found out. There is an old story about two men on a train. One of them saw some naked looking sheep in a field and said, "Those sheep have just been sheared." The other looked a moment longer and then said, "They seem to be – on this side." It is in this cautious spirit that we should say whatever we have to say about the workings of a culture.

The relationship between culture and language has two main aspects to it. First, it is similar to that between generality and specificity or that between a super-ordinate lexical item and a hyponym: language is one aspect of culture. Secondly, language and culture are as inseparable as dance and dancer. It is this inseparability which offers English language teachers opportunities to familiarize their learners with various cultures, and lexical, idiomatic, grammatical and pragmatic properties of different varieties of the English language. At the same time, the synchronous existence of culture and language poses pedagogical challenges for teachers of English as a second/foreign language. The thrust of this paper is to highlight these challenges, which are compounded when a teacher undertakes the job of teaching English to learners coming from widely heterogeneous cultural backgrounds:

universalist and particularist, collectivist and individualist, other-centred and self-centred, competitive and cooperative, assertive and reticent, prolix and precise cultures.

The most widely accepted views on the relationship of language and culture are probably those of Malinowski (1964) whose focus on the study of culture as a system led him to the conclusion that linguistic behaviour could best be delineated and interpreted in its appropriate socio-cultural contexts. Thus the basic tenet of Malinowski's functional theory that all aspects of culture are interconnected is perhaps the most widely prevalent idea in cultural linguistics. Language, then, is a part, product and vehicle of culture. Therefore, it is essential to take into account the relevant socio-cultural contexts of their communication (Behura, 1986). Implementation and violation of communicative rules and the positive and negative sanctions of language should obviously be considered in specific cultural contexts (Albert, 1972) because language is nothing but a set of social conventions (Lander, 1966). As Grimshaw's (1971) diagrammatic representation of the relationship between language and reality shows, reality creates language and language creates reality; reality creates culture and culture creates reality; and language creates culture and culture creates language. Language, therefore, must be investigated within the social context of the community that uses it.

Achebe is a novelist and here he is commenting on creative writing; but what he says has clearly wider relevance and applies to other varieties of English. The point is that all users of language are creative in the sense that they draw on linguistic resources to express different perceptions of reality. English is required to carry the weight of all kinds of experiences, many of which are quite remote from the experiences of the users of the native variety. The new English which Achebe refers to is locally developed.

Ojaide (1987, pp. 165-167), as cited in Patil and Patil (2013) expresses a similar view: "The English I write is neither mainstream British nor American, and I cherish this uniqueness. In addition, I express African sensibility in my writing. This sensibility is different from the Western and the Asian, a little closer to the Asian. Western universals crumble in the African worldview… Knowing my audience and deliberately not aiming at British or American cultural tradition, I emphasize content and meaning in my poetry. I write not to develop the English language, but to articulate ideas as clearly as possible. I do not follow English metric patterns; that is not relevant to my message. For me English is the supra-language on top of my own English Scholarship Beyond Borders: Volume 1, Issue 1. 151 personal language… My writing, though in English, has its roots in Africa, not in England or North America…"

The correlation between the structure of language and the structure of culture are probably best illustrated by the use of pronouns. The relationship

between the social and cultural factors and pronominal usage is by no means arbitrary. These factors find an explicit manifestation in oral communication because the social, cultural and economic structures of a society underlie, determine and are realized in pronominal usage. Further, social stratification is reflected in speech communication; pronominal variants used by the so-called "inferiors" in speaking to the supposedly "superiors" are markedly different from those used by friends for friends within the same social stratum. Studies of pronominal usage (Palakornakul, 1975) have provided ample evidence for this interconnection.

Indians seem to give very important role to positive politeness strategies, i.e. politeness constructions intended to increase companionship with the listener. The function of this strategy is to present information in such a way that although it lies strictly in the speaker's territory of information, it appears to belong to the hearer's territory of information. This strategy tends to make the boundary between speaker and hearer less distinct. Overall, we can derive the following predominant principles of politeness observed in Indian English conversational exchanges: familiarity (treating others like members of the family), sincerity, reciprocity (repaying politeness on the part of others), and indirectness. However, this statement by no means implies that other cultures do not resort to these politeness strategies.

Differences between British and Indian English in the area of speech acts can be linked with different cultural norms and assumptions. A significant difference between British English and Indian English is observed in the domain of complimenting. Unlike British and American compliments, Indian compliments are two dimensional. The person who offers a compliment maximizes praise of the hearer and simultaneously maximizes dispraise of himself/herself. Here is an example from Singh (1959, p.27): "Sardar sahib, you are a big man and we are but small radishes from an unknown garden." This compliment is both an overstatement and an understatement. One remarkable feature of the compliment is the use of the honorific 'sahib'. It is important to note that Indian culture shares with some other cultures this ceremonial show of respect for almost every individual irrespective of their status. The courtesy aspect of Indian culture is manifested particularly in the forms of address. The above compliment is a literal translation of its equivalent in Hindi. A British compliment would not be appropriate in this context. Had the author adopted British norms of complimenting, the compliment would have lost its illocutionary force. Therefore, he replaces the norms of the native variety of English by norms of the non-native variety of English. He warrants the perlocutionary force of the speech act in a way analogous to that in which the Indian speaker would have fulfilled the conditions for his speech act to be successfully appropriate and effective (cf. Broeck, 1986).

In the Indian socio-cultural context involving a host-guest situation, the host is expected to repeatedly coax and the guest is supposed to show considerable coyness. The native English forms such as "Won't you have a second helping?" or "Sure you don't care for more?" will be ineffective or even considered discourteous. The way one treats one's guests is communicative of symbolic messages. It gives off signals of the clearest type as to what kind of person one is. Though to an Englishman, the Indian way of coaxing might sound like some sort of imposition, the overriding rule of Indian table manners is deference. It is rather poor manners not to coax. The example shows that the hosts are required to make a certain amount of fuss and the guests are expected to show a certain amount of reluctance.

Now the issue here is that the phrasing of offers in native British English implies that the speaker is trying not to impose his/her will on the hearer, but that he is merely trying to find out what the hearer wants and thinks. In Indian English, as in Indian languages, literal translations of this would sound, as has already been pointed out, inappropriate. To ask the guest if s/he wants another helping is to break the tacit rule of Indian hospitality according to which the host does not try to establish the guest's wishes as far as eating and drinking are concerned. On the contrary, the host tries to get the guest to eat and drink as much as possible and even more. A hospitable Indian host, like the hosts in the illustration cited above, will not take a negative response for an answer. That is why Bhagawat Singhji's wife and her relatives in the above example assume that the guests can have some more, and that it would be good for them to have more food, and therefore the guests' resistance or refusal, which is construed to be due to politeness, should be disregarded.

Literature is a slice of life; it holds a mirror to life. Literature, they say, is a seismograph of the society it portrays. George Bernard Shaw was perhaps one of the best advocates of the 'literature for life' camp. His plays were professedly propaganda plays, which aimed at exposing and correcting social follies and foibles. Charles Dickens' novels depicted the contemporary social realities. Thomas Hardy's novels are yet another example. His fiction reflects the conditions prevalent during its production. These conditions include climatic conditions as well. In fact, weather is an important character in Hardy's novels. As we know, sunny weather being a rare condition in Britain, it is a dominant topic of British conversations. Therefore, there are many words to refer to sunlight – shine, gleam, glisten, glitter, glimmer, shimmer, etc. Summer in India gives you a scorching experience whereas summer in Britain offers you a pleasant experience. That is why in one of his sonnets Shakespeare says to his 'dark lady': "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" In the context of British weather, this line will be interpreted as a positive rhetorical question, as a compliment; but in the context of Indian weather, it will be construed

as a question carrying negative connotations. Thus literature is loaded with cultural connotations and assumptions.

An important feature of the speech act of coaxing is its cultural relativity. Languages and dialects of the same language differ in their interaction-structuring strategies. It is these socio-cultural differences of organizing process that cause problems of comprehensibility in international communication (cf. Loveday, 1983). As Tannen (1984) remarks, all aspects of the content and form or matter and manner of human communication are culture-specific. Cultural relativity is an intrinsic feature of communication. People learn to communicate meanings in their specific social networks, which by their very nature cannot be global but only local. One wonders with Wierzbicka (1985) that in spite of this obviously 'local' nature of communication it is wrongly claimed that there exist identical strategies across languages and cultures.

The tendency to draw conclusions and make generalizations on the basis of observations of a particular language is a consequence of an ethnocentric bias which ignores the anthropological and linguistic reality that norms differ from culture to culture, language to language and even from dialect to dialect. Wolfson (1986) observes that comments which are accepted as compliments by Americans are often interpreted as insults by some other societies. Speech acts differ from culture to culture in a variety of ways: in their content, in their linguistic realization, their distribution, their frequency, and their functions. For instance, compliments in Indian languages including Indian English display a dual feature of addresser-lowering and addressee-raising; compliments in American English do not show this feature.

Let me reiterate the propositions that the present paper states. First, the relationship between culture and language is like that between the reverse sides of a coin. Secondly, the relationship between culture and literature is similar to that of a dance and a dancer: they are inseparable. Thirdly, as Larsen-Freeman (2012a, p. 23) remarks, "When we focus on language in use rather than language as an abstract formal system, we see it rooted in the context and culture of the local speech community to which the participants belong. Given the increasing social and economic mobility of many people these days, English has become an international lingua franca that is not really owned by any one group of speakers." Larsen-Freeman (2012a, pp.23-24) continues, "…gone is the notion of a homogenized language competence and a mono-cultural identity. In its place is the recognition that one speaker's resources overlap with others, but they are also distinctive. In other words, within unity there is diversity." Fourthly, as Larsen-Freeman (2012b, p.32) suggests, "…developing in one's students an understanding of the attitudes, values, beliefs – the world-view…of a particular target culture is …important…all

too often the other aspects of culture are ignored. They are sometimes addressed through studying literature of the target culture."

References:

Achebe, Chinua (1975) 'The African Writer and the English Language', in Morning Yet on Creation Day. London: Heinemann.

Behura, N. K. (1982) 'Functional Perspective and Study of Language', in South Asia Social Scientist, Vol. II, Nos 1-2, pp 27-45.

Frost, Robert (1949). 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'. In R. Frost, Complete Poems of Robert Frost (p. 275). New York: Henry Holt and Company Inc.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2012b) 'From Unity to Diversity: Twenty-five Years of LanguageTeaching Methodology', in Language Teaching Forum, Number 2, pp 28-38.

Ojaide, T. (1987) 'My Poetry: English Language and the African Tradition', in World Englishes, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp 149-158.

Wolfson, N. (1986) 'Compliments in Cross-cultural Perspective', in J. M. Valdes (ed.) Culture Bound: Bridging the Culture Gap in Language Teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.