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Criteria of Mutual Understanding in Cross-Cultural Communication

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In this article the phenomenon of linguacultural identity of the subject of communication is considered as the main factor having an affect on the mutual understanding in the process of interaction. Linguacultural identity is seen by the author as an identity being formed on the basis of recognition and usage by the subject of communication models of discourse events accepted in certain culture and acquired by the subject in the process of socialization. A criterion of mutual understanding is seen as an ability of the subject of communication to transform his or her linguacultural identity.

Key words: cultural identity, communication behavior, cross-cultural communication, discourse event, ethnocentrism, ethnorelativism, identity crisis, language consciousness, linguacultural identity, mutual understanding, transformation of linguacultural identity.

Point of View

In various scientific works devoted to the problem of human behavior in the process of culture cognition, understanding and creation, it has become traditional to speak about close language and culture connection. It is also accepted that language is one of the most important indications of the person's identity.

Culture is created in the process of interacting individuals. This or that person belongs to a particular culture not only due to some system of knowledge, which he or she shares with the other people, but also due to algorithms of activity accepted in the community and realized in various situations with the purpose of reaching some definite results. Common knowledge and algorithms of activity (or interactional knowledge)

shared by the members of the same community provide harmonic interactivity and mutual understanding in the process of intracultural communication.

The problem of reaching mutual understanding (intracultural as well as cross-cultural) is usually regarded by scientists as the problem of cultural identity of the communicants (Adler, 1972; Assmann, 2000; Leontovich, 2005; Sadokhin, 2005; Shemanov, 2005, Grishaeva, 2007). The system study of different works devoted to the phenomenon of cultural identity makes it possible to regard it as an identity set on the basis of recognition and accepting by the subject of cognition and communication appropriate cultural norms and models of behavior, values and language, on the basis of

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self-identification with certain values and norms historically accepted in culture and acquired by the subject in the processes of socialization and inculturalization.

The process of identification may be realized in the frames of ethnocentrism (as ineffective) or ethnorelativism (as an effective attitude). **Ethnocentrism** is a tendency to see others and their behaviors through your own cultural filters, often as distortions of your own behaviors; the tendency to evaluate the values and beliefs of your own culture more positively than those of another culture (De Vito, 2002). **Ethnorelativism** is a behavior of acceptance and integration into another culture without giving up one's own cultural values and beliefs. Each of them is characterized by several stages.

Ethnocentrism. 1. *Denial*: a person doesn't really believe in cultural differences; a person tends to impose his or her own value system on others, knowing that he or she is right and the other people are mistaken. These people are not threatened by cultural differences because they simply don't accept them. Generally, people at this stage have had limited contact with people from the other culture. 2. *Defense*: a person believes that cultural differences do exist, but they threaten the person's cultural identity. A person views other cultures negatively and prefers having little or no contact with those who are different. 3. *Minimization*: People at this stage are still threatened by differences that's why they try to minimize them. A person believes that the differences are real but not especially deep or significant because all the people share many of the same values and beliefs.

Ethnorelativism. 1. *Acceptance*: a person accepts differences as being deep and legitimate. He or she realizes that people from the other cultural community are different from him or her and accepts the inevitability of other value systems and behavioral norms. He or she still

considers some of these norms hard to deal with or accept, but they do not threaten him or her and person doesn't judge them as wrong or bad. A person does not normally adopt his behavior, but becomes more tolerant and sympathetic towards the other culture. 2. *Adaptation and integration*: at these stages, behavior as well as attitudes changes. A person has gone from being neutral about difference to being positive. He or she doesn't only accept cultural differences, but is willing and able to adjust his or her own behavior to conform to different norms. He or she is able to empathize with people from different cultures. As a result a person becomes bi-cultural or multi-cultural, easily adjusting his or her behavior to suit the norms of this or that culture. It doesn't mean that a person gives up his own or birth culture's values and beliefs, but he integrates aspects of other cultures into his or her consciousness. In the integration stage, certain aspects of the other culture or cultures become a part of a new transformed identity.

Development of anthropological paradigm in linguistics and cultural researches of the XX century, understanding intercultural communication as a dialogue between cultures, development of the cognitive linguistics and the discourse theory have provided the possibility to consider problem of the interrelationship man – language – culture from some other positions: cultural identity is defined not by the language itself but by the specific ways of its usage for different cognitive and communicative aims in a particular cultural and linguistic environment.

This or that language is regarded as a cultural code and a specific channel to establish mutual understanding among people. That suggests ability to use a particular language in accordance with conditions in which it is functioning as a specific cultural code. It also means that it is impossible to decode the sense of the text correctly having not enough knowledge of the culture itself.

A person realizes his or her identity being the part of this or that culture. This realization is fixed in language consciousness and is reflected in communicative behavior. We regard language consciousness as mental mechanisms providing speaking activity, and knowledge used by the subject of communication in the process of producing and perception of speech (Popova, Sternin, 2002). Communicative behavior is the sum of norms and traditions of communication accepted in this or that lingual culture (Sternin, 2002).

The interest towards the study of the language consciousness has initiated specialists of human sciences to pay more attention to discourse.

Basis

Modern approach to the discourse study considers discourse as a socially adequate process of speech communication described in terms of socially significant actions and strategies fulfilled by the members of society within the framework of communicative situations definite and relevant for this or that language community and culture (Tzurikova, 2004). Each discourse has a dialogue nature because it appears in the situation of interaction between communicants (Stubbs, 1983).

We consider discourse event as the most adequate unit for discourse description and understand it as the sum of important communicative coherent acts of speech directed on achieving some common communicative aim (Tzurikova, 2002).

Models of discourse events are represented as «expectation structures» which help the person to adopt himself to the endless variety of real communication situations and to choose definite discourse strategies in each particular episode. In other words, each person has some invariants for the definite type of interaction and some knowledge about the principles of their variability. On this ground schemes of mental representation of correspondent interactions can

be accepted as specifically organized sequence of actions which aim is to fix prototypical features of correspondent culture (Grishaeva, 2007).

The subject of communication can recognize this or that person as familiar or as a stranger in his own or alien linguacultural community due to person's discourse activity. Such identity we suggest to consider as linguacultural identity. **Linguacultural identity** is an identity being formed on the basis of recognition and usage by the subject of communication models of discourse events accepted in certain culture and acquired by the subject in the process of socialization.

In the result of mass migration process of the resent decades millions of people have found themselves in new cultures that threaten their linguacultural identity.

Many of them have become marginals, according to R. Park's definition.

The main reasons of the identity crisis in the process of cross-cultural communications may be considered the following:

- a person is unable *to express* his «self» adequately using the means of a foreign language;
- a person is unable *to define* the interlocutor's «self» adequately in case that the interlocutor uses his native language;
- interlocutors are unable *to extract* culturally specific information from the discourse activity of each others;
- a person is not ready *to define* correctly his or her position in a new cultural society (Leontovich, 2005).

Resume

Cross-cultural communication is the process of personal interaction of individuals from different language and cultural communities. The wide-spread belief that people can reach mutual understanding just because they speak a common

language is a dangerous illusion. Being human means working through the difficulties of mutual misunderstanding and usage of incomparable languages. Each language provides a uniquely communal and uniquely individual means by which human beings apprehend the world and one another.

In order to understand a communicant from the other culture a person should be aware of the fact that there are different cultures and different languages, different norms and values, different ways of thinking and expressing the «self». This awareness is defined as the beginning and the most important stage in the process of linguacultural transformation that provides a personality with an ability to restore the inner balance through the search for the correspondence of the image of the world and the environment that has been changed. It also helps a person to adopt himself to the endless variety of real communication situations and to choose definite discourse strategies and models of discourse events in each particular episode. Linguacultural transformation makes it possible to define a new person's role in the changed communicative context and thus to save the integrity of a person.

Inadequate choice of the models of discourse events may cause linguacultural identity crisis and cultural shock of a person.

Thus there are two global tasks standing before a modern subject of communication: 1. a

person has to be in a constant search for his or her identity and has to defend it; 2. a person should have an experience and ability of transformation of his or her linguacultural identity when he or she meets something strange unusual and alien. In other words a person should be able to transform himself and to save his own integrity.

The process of transformation beginning from the stage of misunderstanding and even hostility towards the other culture and discourse activity leads to such a result that a person not only accepts cultural differences, but is willing and able to adjust his own communicative behavior to conform to different norms, to empathize with people from different cultures. Such bi-cultural and bi-lingual person doesn't forget the models of discourse events accepted in native culture but integrates the other culture models into his or her language consciousness. Identity transformation gives a person an opportunity to decode specific cultural information coded in these or those models of cultural events, it also makes possible to reach psychological compatibility with the representatives of the other culture, it helps a person to understand and sometimes to accept new cultural norms and values. Experience of cross-cultural communication grounded on mutual understanding of the interlocutors gives a person a new basis for his or her identity, and broadens the space in which he or she can feel comfortable and understandable.

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