

**TUTORIAL**  
**4.17**

# Culture/Language Acquisition 2

This tutorial continues to discuss the important principles of Culture/Language Acquisition, in particular what level of fluency and understanding should we be aiming for? How well do we really need to communicate to have an effective role in a community? Looking into the complexity of the communication landscape in our own language and culture is the first step to understanding the fluency level required when learning another language and culture.

## Introduction

*“Some of the most remarkable events in this world pass unnoticed because they occur so frequently. It should by any standard be considered remarkable that human beings can communicate their inward thoughts to each other at all, other than by facial expression and gestures. After all, any given language uses a very restricted range of sounds, whereas the number of meanings that people communicate is infinite. Yet, with a range of between twenty and forty distinctive sounds available to them, people communicate this infinity of meaning effortlessly, constantly, and completely, heedless of the magnitude of their achievement.” - Kathleen Callow, Man and Message*

Most of us talk to other people quite often every day - achieving this remarkable thing called human communication - probably without giving the actual process of communication a second thought. And we have been doing it since we were children. That picture changes dramatically when we find ourselves in a cross-cultural situation and begin to try to communicate in another language and cultural context - even simple things like trying to find a bathroom suddenly become an adventure in misunderstanding, and it is clear that communication isn't such a natural or easy thing at all!

In this tutorial we want to focus on some of the complexities that exist in communication in your *own* language and cultural situation, and to look at some of the “nuts and bolts” of what is actually going on when people are talking. Understanding the great number of interrelated things that are going on in order for clear communication to take place in your own language will open the way to seeing what it might take to become an effective communicator in another language and culture.

## Components of interpersonal communication

We are going to look more closely at some of the things that are going on when people communicate with one another; when they have conversations, give instructions, teach, speak or in any way converse. Your goal isn't to try to memorise all of these things, but simply to try to broaden your view and think about the whole *landscape* in which communication takes place and how effective communication is a bigger picture than just putting words into sentences. You will notice that it is more than just the *words* a person is saying that actually communicate to another person, but communication is affected by many other things, such as the context of the conversation, the relationship the speakers have, the information they share and how they go about organising what they say in particular ways to achieve their purpose.

As you work through this tutorial, take the opportunity to observe in an informal way, some of the underlying things that are happening in real conversations around you in order for the miracle of communication to take place.

### The context

The first thing to notice about a conversation is the context in which it is taking place - the background or 'landscape' in which it is happening:

- Where is it taking place? (The physical location and cultural setting, the time, any other significant situational cues - what the occasion is...)
- Who are the speakers? (Gender, age, dress, status...)
- What do you know about the relationships between the participants? (Family members, strangers...)
- What tone of voice is being used? (Normal conversational level, yelling, whispering, authoritative, gentle...)
- What is the major issue being addressed?
- What are the social circumstances surrounding the conversation or speech? (The social scene in which it took place. Were there other listeners, did anyone interject, were the speakers trying to keep their conversation private in any way?)
- What reasons, values and beliefs are referred to, or implied?
- What overt indicators are there of any emotional reaction to the things that are said, by the participants or listeners? (facial expressions, non-verbal communication...)
- Are any of the participants members of a subculture or social group within the community?
- What role or position does each person seem to be taking in the conversation? (Commanding, persuasive, passive, receptive, submissive, resistant...)

The background 'landscape' of a conversation is the first thing to notice, but there are also other important elements that will help you to understand the communication that is taking place.

### **The level of shared understanding**

Everything we say is effected by *who* we're saying it to, how much shared information and shared experiences we have. The way I communicate - how much, how fast, what style, what tone, mostly how much I leave out and put in - is all determined by the relationship and understanding that I share with the person I'm talking to.

When people communicate, they may already share a vast amount of information that forms a foundation for their conversation, things that they already know and therefore don't need to articulate. This shared information could include the details of the surroundings, relevant events both recent and more distant, shared plans and purposes, shared social or family relationships, weather patterns, common household objects and utensils, common behaviour patterns, specialised knowledge, experiences and attitudes related to that place - these and countless other factors in daily life are shared by people in a community. When you observe a particular conversation, try to identify whatever you can about the shared information or areas of common interest that exist between the participants. In other words, what is the shared base for conversation? The following questions will help you.

- How is 'common ground' sought and found and how is it shared?
- What evidence is there of shared information? (events, people, relationships, knowledge, experience?)
- Does the speaker include oblique references to other conversations or situations?
- Is any of the language used esoteric (difficult to understand by outsiders, or secretive and confidential), or is it language accessible to all members of the community? If esoteric terms are used, are they explained?
- Think about the participants' mutual awareness - each knows, for the given situation, who may speak and who may not, what topics are relevant, what degree of formality or casualness is required, how long the conversation may reasonably continue. Note any clues in this communication situation that point to the level of mutual awareness and how the participants feel about one another. (Love or resentment, trust or have reservations, like or dislike, sense of humour, sense of self...)
- Identify possible indicators in the way the speakers are communicating that they might be adjusting to the closeness or distance from the other person. For example: the form of speech, the content, style, register, amount of detail, asserting, envisaging, imagining, the way they refers to people, how the message develops, the pace of information, the examples or illustrations

used, themes, the viewpoint expressed and with how much certainty, the evaluations made, attitudes, tone of voice, type of language - all may be indicators of adjustment to the person or people being spoken to.

### **The purpose**

Our purpose in communicating shapes everything we say. When we listen to someone we always unconsciously ask: What kind of talk is this? Is the speaker telling? Explaining? Ordering? What does he want us to do? If the hearer can't answer those questions - he can't process the communication - a listener is always unconsciously trying to 'work out' the underlying purpose of the speaker.

- What seems to have prompted the talk or conversation? Is it to exchange information (informational)? Is it to effect change (volitional)? Is it to share emotions and attitudes (expressive)?
- What might be the speaker's purpose in communicating? What does he want the audience or other participant to hear and understand?
- Does the speaker state his purpose clearly? Is it clear only by implication?
- What does the speaker expect listeners or other participants to do after listening to him?
- Is it clear from his talk what the speaker's position is? Where and how does the speaker's position become clear?
- In what specific ways does the speaker indicate his purpose?
- What relationship do you think the speaker might be seeking to establish with his hearers?
- What does the speaker seem to presume listeners wish to know more about?
- How does the speaker attempt to achieve his purpose in communication? Was he successful? Why or why not?
- Does the hearer indicate that he is monitoring or trying to understand the speaker's purpose? (If it's not clear, we may say so: "I'm not sure what you're driving at", "So where is this taking us?", "Why do you ask that?". Uncertainty about purpose makes for awkwardness, hesitancy, etc. Conversation can flow naturally and freely only in the context of some area of shared purpose.) Look for any indications of the hearer searching for the speaker's purpose.

### **The hearer**

When we communicate, we monitor the hearer's knowledge, comprehension, reactions, and social status. We adjust the shape of the message: slow it down, speed it up, fill in background information, put in signposts - because we know that if the hearer doesn't understand the message, he/she can't retain the message.

- Think about the effect of the speaker's talk on the listener. Can they follow him easily (comprehension)? Are they reacting to what he is saying (acceptance)?
- Was he misunderstood, and if so, what specifically did he do about it? (Repeat himself, slow down his speech, restate it in a different way, use illustrations, examples or questions to further explain any point...)
- How did the misunderstanding seem to affect the participants emotionally? (Did they seem embarrassed, irritable, defensive?)
- Did his speech initiate a reaction of any kind and if so, what did he do about it?
- Notice how questions are asked, how incorrect answers are dealt with and how questions are answered.
- How do the relationships between those involved in the conversation affect the way the speaker adjusts the shape of his message?
- How direct is the mode of address and what do you think this indicates?

### **The main idea**

A key characteristic of communication is that we store life's experiences in our minds in organised ways and the way we express what we want to communicate is also organised in similar fashion. One of the keys to whether or not our message gets across will be whether or not people share the same frames of reference needed to process the information and whether we've said enough to make those frames of reference clear to our hearers.

The reason we organise what we say is that not everything is equally important. There are some things that are more important and some things that are just meant to stay in the background. The important things need to be clearly understood and should clearly be the *theme* of what is being said. Every language has ways of indicating what is important and what isn't, because if people don't know what the theme is, they won't understand what we are talking about! In other words - the message will be blurred, like a sign that sends the wrong message - and people will be trying to sort out the details from the main point.

So, notice how the *theme* is indicated in conversations in your own language by thinking about the following:

- What is the general topic or main idea of the talk or conversation?
- What is the general subject area that it covers?
- What other main ideas are covered?
- Does it seem to be an important conversation? Why or why not?
- How does the speaker indicate his major theme or point and when it is clearly introduced or indicated?

- Has the speaker organised his communication? (Can it be broken into sub-sections?)
- How does the speaker introduce and develop his or her ideas? Does the speaker compare or contrast? Use anecdotes? Develop by example? Tell a story? Appeal to authority (other sources) or to his or her own character/expertise? Describe a process? Evaluate? Notice how these things are organised in the talk or conversation.
- Think about the possible reasons the speech is organised and developed the way it is. What does the speaker do first, second, third, etc. Why?
- Does the organisation seem primarily driven by content, the speaker's argument, or audience expectations?
- What does the speaker emphasise or spend the most time on? Why do you think that is?
- What is considered background information? Identify specific pieces of background information that are mentioned.

### **Dividing the information**

When we communicate, we have ways of processing large amounts of information by dividing it into manageable pieces, so that there is a much greater probability that we will be understood, and our listeners won't get 'lost'. Every language has ways of dividing information into separate pieces. When there's a change in participants, events, time or location there's usually a well-defined indicator or sign that we are moving on to a new piece of information.

- Identify any changes in theme in the conversation. List all of the changes that you notice - participants, events, time, location.
- What signs or codes are used and understood to indicate where a new piece of information is introduced? Identify as much as possible the different ways that a new piece of information is introduced. (Specific words or non-verbal cues?)
- Notice how the various pieces of information are introduced, ordered and presented. What are the relationships between the themes and the order they are introduced and what significance do you think that has?

### **Tying thoughts together**

As well as dividing information into pieces, we also make sure that we tie our thoughts together. People presume that what they are hearing is going to make sense and fit together - they're listening for that as they go along so they know how to process the information and store it. Lack of cohesion is one of the biggest reasons people can't follow what we've said and share it with someone else...

- How does the speaker link the various parts of what he is saying together to make the whole understandable to his audience? He may use particular words at the beginning or end of paragraphs, he

may indicate old or new information, or repeat the names of specific people, places, times or actions to make sure people know 'where they are' and what is going on.

- How does the sequence of ideas flow and how are the various ideas spaced out or separated? What is it that holds them together or relates one thought to another?
- Do the ties used to hold thoughts together influence the meaning one way or another?
- What patterns do you notice in the 'ties' that the speaker uses to hold thoughts together in this example of communication?

### **Keeping track of the actors**

Languages have lots of different ways of 'labeling' the various actors on stage, and English is no exception. It has many forms to refer to the same person - *he*, *that guy*, *Steve*, *the accountant*, *Mary's father*, *our mutual friend*, *Stevie*, etc. - and there are good reasons why and when we would use each one. In another language, careful study is needed so we know why the different forms are used and when, it isn't just a case of learning the words for 'he' and 'she'. For now, notice in conversations in your own language how we keep track of who is doing what. Everyone wants to know who's doing what - it's an important part of the message.

- Who are the participants mentioned by the speaker?
- Are all the participants referred to in the same way? List the participants and the various ways the speaker refers to each one. (Openly by name, obliquely, pronouns, nicknames, implication)
- Think about why the speaker refers to different participants in different ways, or the same participant in a variety of ways? What does it indicate both in terms of the understandability of the message and the feeling of the speaker toward the participants?
- Are there misunderstandings regarding participants and how does the speaker clarify these?

### **Keeping track of who said what**

We very seldom just talk about people *doing* things, a lot of what we say is about people *saying* things. All languages have complicated ways of signaling who is saying what to whom. Notice how this is indicated.

- How does the speaker signal that some other person said something? Notice how the speaker introduces the quote, how he gives the quote, and then how he indicates that it is finished.
- Are all quotes introduced in the same way? Gather many different forms of quotes from different speakers and in different situations so you understand the variety of forms of communicating who said what.
- Are there misunderstandings regarding 'who said what' and if so, how does the speaker clarify these?

### Keeping it interesting

We want people to stay engaged with what we are saying, so we try very hard to make it interesting. In English, we don't just use metaphors and illustrations - we have lots of ways to stretch words and 'not say what we mean' (look up definitions of each of these):

- Euphemisms
- Litotes
- Hyperbole
- Sarcasm
- Irony
- Metonymy
- Synecdoche
- Personification
- Apostrophe
- Idioms

Almost everything we say is figurative. Very little that we say does not 'skew' - make the form different from the meaning - to make what we say more interesting to our hearers. We have a *million* ways to show feeling, emotion, emphasis, highlighting, evaluations...

- What are the various ways used by the speaker/s to make their talk more interesting?
- Try to identify the speaker's specific purpose in using figurative language at that point. What was he trying to communicate, to highlight, or to emphasise?
- Notice if and how the audience or other participants react to the figurative language used.
- Do some people use more figurative language than others, how does that reflect on their personalities or role or status in the community?

### Observing interpersonal communication

This week, try to actively observe the conversations happening around you, or that you are taking part in. Take notice of:

The communication 'landscape':

- the context,
- the level of shared understanding
- the purpose
- the main idea

The things speakers do to communicate their message -

- dividing the information
- tying thoughts together
- keeping track of the actors
- keeping track of who said what



- keeping it interesting

As you observe people communicating with one another and think about all that is involved, remember that all of these things happen in other languages too, but they happen in *different ways*. One of the major mistakes people make when they learn and try to communicate in another language is that they bring over the forms of interpersonal communication from their own language and culture - they may learn the *words* of the new language but never really learn to *communicate* in the way that local people do. The purpose of us investigating underlying communication patterns in our own language is so that we understand that we will also need to observe and learn these 'big picture' aspects in another language, in order to communicate a clear message.



## DISCUSSION POINTS

### *Culture/Language Acquisition 2*

1. Have you noticed different forms or patterns of communication that non-native speakers of English bring over to their English communication from their original language? Do you notice the same non-English patterns appearing in different people from the same language background? Why would that be the case?
2. Do you have any observations about your own style of communication and how you usually try to get your message across? Are there things you have never thought about before or anything you would like to change to improve your effectiveness as a communicator?



## ACTIVITIES

### *Culture/Language Acquisition 2*

1. Record a short video conversation between two or three people (from TV, online, or an actual event). Watch the video as many times as you need to make notes on each of the components of interpersonal communication mentioned in the tutorial.

2. Read the article “What does ‘Fluency’ really mean” (below). It was written by a language and culture consultant to paint a picture of the end goal of cross-cultural workers for their language learning time, before they were considered fluent enough to enter into “ministry”.

### **What does “Fluency” really mean?**

An understanding of what is meant by “Fluency” is essential if one is to attain that goal in functional ability in another language and culture. In the following article this will be discussed from a practical point of view.

Proficiency in another language and culture really has little to do with test scores and more to do with how a person can actually function in life situations. In light of this you might ask yourself a couple of questions: “What would I like to do when I move to a new country, where people live differently than I do and speak another language than mine? How would I like to be able to eventually function in that new setting?”

In thinking about the goals for your interaction in the host culture, there are several things to consider. As a believer you have a clear purpose for being in the country and a special message to communicate with others. Yet in order to achieve these purposes, you will first need to integrate as well as possible and not always seem like the out-of-place foreigner. While you will always be someone from another place and culture, your goal is to become someone who understands and acts in appropriate ways in spite of your place and language of origin — not always drawing attention to yourself, consciously or unconsciously.

Getting to a point of interacting this way in the host culture does not happen all at once. Becoming “normal” to others around you in that new setting is a gradual process. And you do want to be a normal citizen in the community, even though you come from another country. So what does this goal of “normal” look like for you? What areas should you think about as you grow more comfortable in this way?

One important area to consider in becoming a normal or ordinary member of society has to do with the fact that ordinary citizens can communicate about everyday life events. They can discuss current events with their neighbours or acquaintances and even strangers. Eventually you will want to be able to do this as well in order to fit in with them. True, even after you can manage this process quite well, sometimes these events will be beyond your understanding since the community members around you will enter into cultural domains you are not familiar with. This may even stretch your vocabulary, giving you opportunities to learn more vocabulary and culture. You may find your language deteriorating somewhat in this new situation. But when you have

gained the appropriate ability and find yourself in this kind of situation, you are able to recognise that this area is new to you. So you simply cope by asking the appropriate questions to learn and participate as much as possible in the conversation in spite of your limitations.

Another important area of learning is that ordinary citizens can also build deep friendships because they have the cultural understanding and language ability to do so. They know how intently they want to pursue those friendships and how to do that effectively if the other person shows the same interest. This involves knowing and understanding the life and cultural context of that person in a real, experiential way. Such relationships need to include the ability to talk about life issues that affect that person and the circumstances that they are going through. So as you grow in your understanding and ability to communicate in your new context, you also need to learn to do this.

The fact is that in spite of your efforts to fit in, living in a foreign culture like this presents many instances where you can unintentionally offend others. As you adjust to your new culture, you will learn to recognise when this has happened, or you will know who might be able to help you figure out what has happened and what you should do. In this way you can learn to follow the appropriate actions for reconciliation. Even so, there still may be times when you are unaware of what you have done that caused offence or even of the fact that you have caused offence.

As is the case in all societies, different members of society will hold differing views and opinions. They will have reasons for this, of course, and will express those reasons, even defend them. You, likewise, will desire the ability to give your opinions appropriately and explain the reasons why you hold those beliefs. This would be considered important, “normal” interaction that must take place between friends and acquaintances.

As a believer, you also have the desire to speak into the lives of your friends and influence them for good. You will want them to have the same knowledge about God that you have. In obedience to the commission given to you as His servant, you will seek to make disciples. Through the process of becoming an ordinary citizen you will have gained the ability to teach God’s Word to those who are interested or to give a testimony of your faith to even a stranger, when the opportunity is there to do so.

As a believer you also have the desire to be part of a local church. As a functioning member of the church in that context, you will want to have the ability to comprehend the teaching of Scripture and also to make comment when Scripture is discussed. All of God’s children have been gifted for the benefit of the church, and gaining normal ability will allow you to use your gifts in the context of a local body, even one in your host culture.

Another area that would demonstrate normal ability is the ability to talk about your plans and what might happen if unforeseen circumstances arise. This

might still be difficult for you, but you should be able to do so in certain domains, especially ones you have become very familiar with.

Even though you can do all of these things, you are far, very far, from being “native-like” in your speech and interactions. You may even have some pronunciation issues to keep dealing with. Your speech will be far from perfect or even grammatically correct at all times. Although you won’t have consistent patterns of error in your speaking, you will still confuse grammatical features in the language from time to time. This will particularly be the case when you get into domains you are not familiar with. Your use of subtleties in discourse, body language, tone of voice, and other non-linguistic cues might be lacking to a great degree at times. But in your overall interactions, these “gaps” will not have a great affect on your ability to be a part of normal life, nor will they confuse your listeners to any significant degree.

So how does this sound? Does this sound like what you would like to be able to do? Would you like to be on a path of continual growth and learning in your host culture? If so, you desire what we label “fluency”. What is even more important is your desire to be a functioning member of your host community in a wide variety of areas.