《報　告》

Business Communication in the Age of Globalization :

Ways to Achieve Smoother Communication across Nations and Cultures

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Abstract

Many people seem to believe that since English is playing an increasing role as a global language, it would be possible to communicate with people around the world, as long as they can speak English. However, it would be a mistake to assume that simply because one can speak English he or she will easily be able to communicate with people around the world. Even if one masters English, people from different cultural spheres will not be free from possible misunderstandings, unless they can grasp the true meaning of a word in a given culture. Often the scope of meaning of a given word is so varied that the meanings of the same word in two cultures scarcely overlap, even though the translation seems to be the same. This paper provides global managers with some practical communication strategies when associating with counterparts or subordinates from totally different business and cultural backgrounds.

Introduction

A few years ago, one of my students, whose mother is American and father is Japanese, told me an interesting story. One day she and her mother went out to a town for shopping. The mother was driving the car, and she stopped the car at an intersection. Seeing the traffic light change, my student told her mother, "Mom, the light is blue." Giving her daughter a dubious look, the mother solemnly said, "No, the light is green, not blue."

This happened because Japanese people call green traffic signals "blue." Actually, the Chinese character for the color "blue" includes the character for green. When we say "a blue mountain," we don't literally mean a blue-colored mountain. A blue mountain in Chinese and Japanese is a mountain covered with trees and bushes full of green leaves.

My bilingual student could easily translate a language, but she was unable to translate a culture. Symbols, such as colors, are important parts of cultures. The major point of discussion in this paper is that language and communication are two different things. One of the main difficulties in negotiating business across borders lies in communication problems produced by cultural differences.

The purpose of this paper is to propose some ways to achieve smoother business communication and to avoid possible misunderstandings between business people across nations and cultures. The paper first discusses the scope of the meaning of a symbol, and then, argues the matters of code, concept, and

translation. The relationships between concepts and hidden cultural values are briefly discussed. This paper assesses the role of English as a global language from multicultural and economic perspectives. On this basis, it advocates an acceptance of the reality that English serves as a modern "lingua franca" that facilitates communications and economic success. Yet, the paper also claims that English has its own limitation in which "the message sent is sometimes not the message received."

Symbols and meanings

As Womack and Miura (1996, p. 3) have noted :

> People communicate by using symbols. A symbol may be a word (written or spoken), a musical note, a gesture (a policeman directing the traffic), a color (red for stop or danger), or any other symbol that *by general agreement* stands for something we want to communicate. "*By agreement*" suggests that communication is a two-way process, one that requires the cooperation and attention of the person or persons being communicated with. The idea or thing the symbol stands for is called the *referent*. When the receiver of the communication does not correctly relate the communicator's symbols to their referents, poor communication will result.

The national flag of Japan signifies that Japan is the country where the sun rises. For the Japanese people, the sun signifies the great blessings of the merciful Sun Goddess. The sun is the symbol of mercy and a rich harvest－without it one cannot expect any crops, or even live.

For the people in the Arab world, however, the same sun, scorching all day long, is really a detestable celestial body. The celestial body the Arabs think merciful is the moon, particularly the crescent, which blesses them with cool nights after the sultry sun dies away. The crescent is used as an emblem of Islam and also as a symbol in the national flags of nine countries. It is said that in the Arab world merchandise using the sun as a trademark does not sell well. Incidentally, a few Japanese manufacturers, whose trademarks are the sun, have failed in their marketing endeavors to Middle Eastern countries (Suzuki, 1999).

Regarding the color of the sun, Japanese people generally perceive it to be deep red. Westerners, however, generally believe the sun to be yellow, which signifies love, peace, intelligence, a rich harvest, etc. So, in western countries "yellow" is the accepted answer to the question, "what color is the sun?"－not "red" or "orange," as Japanese people think.

We often take our cultural perceptions for granted, believing our own view to be correct and widely accepted. These assumptions can lead to surprising results. The following is an interesting example of conflicting cultural beliefs and their effects on international business.

Recently, a Japanese trading company received a sizable order for a giveaway item－a piggy bank in the shape of a post box from Japan Post. The order specified the shape, size, target price, etc. In order

to get the lowest possible cost, the company sent a trial order to a Chinese toy manufacturer by fax. In a few weeks they received a sample. To their surprise, the postbox-shaped piggy bank was green, not red, as they had automatically assumed it would be (personal communication, July 28, 2005).

As you may or may not know, postboxes are different colors according to country, such as blue in the US, white in Singapore, etc. However, we are apt to forget this kind of fact, and liable to assume that foreign counterparts see the world the way we do. We must remember what the old saying "so many people, so many minds" teaches us, as a constant reminder of the prevailing differences across cultures and nations around the world.

So many traditions have been passed on from generation to generation that it is often difficult to see outside our own cultural perceptions. Take, for example, the moon shadow. I wonder what people see in the moon when it is full. In Korea, people say that there is a rabbit standing still or a rabbit pounding rice cake. Japanese people also say that there is a rabbit pounding rice cake in a mortar. In countries where the mother tongues are European languages, such as English, the shadow is simply referred to as the "Man in the Moon." Other countries and cultures have different perceptions of the moon shadow－along with legends explaining their origin and meaning. Some examples of what people from different cultural backgrounds see in the moon shadow include (Kameda, 1996) :

- Two farmers working in a paddy field (Thailand),
- A lady Buddha in a white costume looking at you (Cantonese-speaking regions in China),
- An old woman milking a goat with her grandchild sitting next to her (the Sindhi people in India and Pakistan).

The next question is about the colors of the rainbow. Japanese people are conditioned to identify seven colors in a rainbow, because Japanese dictionaries define a rainbow as consisting of seven colors. Japanese people learn this through language, from their parents, siblings, and teachers, and believe the number is seven without actually trying to count them.

According to Yoshida et al. (2004), the classification of the number of colors of the rainbow is not universal, but differs from language to language. According to Suzuki (1999, pp. 60–104) and other scholars, there are six colors in English, five in German, four in a language spoken in Rhodesia, three in a tribal language in Mexico, two in a local language in Liberia, etc.

It is not likely that many people in any of these linguistic groups have ever tried to actually count the number of colors of the rainbow. Rather, most people probably learn the number through language, and assume it as fact without examining it critically. Still, people automatically answer "seven," "six," "five," "four," "three," or "two," when asked how many colors there are in a rainbow.

It may be very difficult for one member of cultural group to change this type of frame of reference, which was formed in the past and continues to be held on to. One's observation of fact is highly influenced by images formed within oneself and through perceptions acquired through education and experi-

ence within one's cultural sphere. Before observing "facts," one has already formed an image of what is seen through filtered lenses, created from experiences, biases, values, needs, emotions, attitudes, and the like. Language plays a vital role in forming such images. Because of these biased images, the same object looks different from people to people and country to country.

Code, concept, and translation

As you are probably aware, the universal color for "proceed" is green. But, how in the world can traffic lights, or the three colors ; red, green, and yellow, be universally related to their referents : "stop," "go," and "slow down," regardless of country? Why can we drive a car without worrying about having an accident simply by observing the same traffic light rules in whichever country we visit?

Here is the answer : the International Lighting Commission in Vienna sets the rules for the definitions of the colors used for transportation in general (ILC 2007). What saves our lives while driving a car in whatever country we may visit is the existence of the International Lighting Commission's rule. We call this type of a generally recognized rule a "code."

A code is a system of laws or written rules that should be generally accepted by a society or a group of people. The International Lighting Commission's responsibility is to create the code for the traffic signals, which relates the three colors to their referents : "go," "stop," and "slow down." A code plays an important role in sending and receiving messages. Let us examine how a message is conveyed from a sender to a receiver.

Messages are conveyed through codes. The message can be in various forms－such as a word, a gesture, or music. The sender converts the content or what he or she wishes to express into a "message" by referring to a code, which is a combination of vocabulary and grammar. This conversion of the content to a "message" by the sender is called ENCODING. This message is sent from sender to receiver via a "communication channel." At the end of the process, the receiver follows his or her own "code rules" to decode the message, and thus interpret it. He or she needs to decode the received message by referring to the code in order to understand the intended content of the message. This process is called DECODING (Ikegami, 1992).

However, there is no guarantee that, when decoding the message, the receiver will refer to the same code that the sender used to encode the original message. The receiver often uses his or her own code to decode a received message. This shifted position of a code is often the cause of misunderstanding between the sender and the receiver of a message.

Along these lines, conflict has occurred between Japanese traders and their American counterparts on the trade terms used in a contract. In particular, the term "FOB New York" caused misunderstanding. This was because the Japanese business people referred to Incoterms, while the American business people referred to the Revised American Foreign Trade Definitions for the interpretation of the trade terms

they used (Trade & Investment Q&A, JETRO, 2005/01).

There are six different definitions of FOB in the Revised American Foreign Trade Definitions, none of which are the equivalent of FOB in Incoterms, regarding the responsibilities and liabilities of both seller and buyer. Therefore, even though both parties use the same abbreviation "FOB," the meaning for each is quite different (Revised American Foreign Trade Definitions). This type of misunderstanding can be explained using the hypothesis of shifting code positions.

As the hypothesis of shifting code positions suggests, it may be possible to say that words do not have meanings by themselves ; rather, meanings reside in people. It may also be said that the words used for sending and receiving messages represent only a part of the total concept to be communicated. Suzuki (1978, p. 108) compares this issue with an iceberg as follows :

> The tip of an iceberg visible above the ocean is supposed to be about one-seventh of its total volume. The other six-sevenths are hidden under water. The part of reality which can be conceptualized by a word may be regarded as the tip of an iceberg rising above the water. . . . Even if there are two icebergs, A and B, more or less shaped alike above water, it does not necessarily follow, as one can easily understand, that their shapes under the water are also similar to each other.

English as a global language, and its limitations

Business communication in English as a *de facto* global language cannot be free from the communication gaps that we have so far discussed. Even if we use this *de facto* global language, it is often difficult for us to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds, because the language, customs, common sense, etc. all differ from culture to culture and country to country.

For example, a prominent feature of the Japanese language is a pattern that can be described as the "explanation-first" pattern. This tendency was reflected in the results of a study I conducted in Singapore on the communication competency of Japanese managers in English (Kameda, 2000). The respondents in the study were Singaporean managers doing business with Japanese. The respondents were asked their opinion on the prominence of certain features of Japanese communication using a 5-point Likert scale (1＝"strongly disagree" and 5＝"strongly agree"). The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1　Singaporean opinions on Japanese communication style (Kameda 1997) Features of the Japanese Communication Patterns

Features of Communication	
• Facts and opinions are not clearly divided	3.27
• The purpose of a statement is not clear	3.25
• Reason or explanation (cause) comes first and result (effect) comes last	3.45
• Vague and indirect expressions used	3.42
• Tone is often assertive	2.82

Source : Kameda (2000).

It is interesting to note that the highest score achieved in Table 1 was for the third item ("Cause comes first ; effect comes last"). This indicates that the Singaporean managers believed this "explanation-first" approach to be the *most prominent feature* of the Japanese communication style.

In terms of my research questions I found that :

- English education alone cannot be a panacea for the communicative blunders with foreign business people.
- Lack of knowledge of communication seems to be a cause of problems in English such as lack of message clarity, ambiguity in word choice, the length of a sentence, etc.
- Japanese business people are often said to be poor at communicating with foreigners because they are not good at English. However, this notion that presupposes that Japanese cannot communicate well because they cannot speak or write English well is not correct.

Japanese managers' English was not found to be so bad in terms of grammar, usage, word choice, etc. Rather, communication skills were the problem. The mixture of facts and opinions, unclear statements, reverse positions of cause and effects, the use of vague and indirect expressions, all these are culture bound, I believe.

In order to become a truly qualified communicator or cultural integrator, the Japanese managers should be aware that English and communication are two different entities. I object to the common saying in Japan that one cannot acquire a good knowledge of English because one cannot communicate well. I believe that linguistic capability and communication competency are two different things.

According to Yashiro et al. (2006), the fact that English is a common language does not always guarantee that it will become easier for people to realize mutual understanding. There are unexpected pitfalls in the exchanges of emails, faxes, letters, phones, and in face to face meetings across nations and cultures, even if we use the "global language" of English. The following sentences illustrate these points :

- You <u>should</u> report the result of your research to Mr. Toyota.
- Please <u>tell</u> Mr. Honda to call me by two o'clock.
- You <u>had better</u> talk this matter over with Mr. Suzuki soon.

The first example is from a discussion between an American manager and his Japanese subordinate over exchanging emails. When the American manager uses this type of expression, with the word "should," he often receives an unexpected and excessive response from his Japanese subordinate. He finds that the Japanese seem to receive this utterance as a very strong order that must be obeyed by all means, even though the American only intended it to be a simple and friendly proposal.

The second sentence was used in an email by a Japanese businessperson to his American colleague.

The American later suggested to his Japanese coworker that it would be far better to say, "Please ASK Mr. Honda to call me up by two o'clock." He explained that "tell" in this manner sounds like a stern order. The Japanese person had thought it would be a polite expression simply because he used the word "please."

The third expression is often used by Japanese people who believe it to mean something like "wouldn't it be better for you to . . . ?" In fact, however, the expression "you had better. . ." is often received by native speakers of English as a threat. A safer expression would be "why don't you . . . ?"

As Yashiro et al. (2006, pp. 14–15) have noted, the speaker probably thought that he and his counterpart had understood each other very well, simply because they had both used English. Through the use of a common language, they may have felt relieved to talk with each other so that they could avoid possible misunderstandings.

How, then, can people with different cultural backgrounds in a partnership achieve smoother communication? The answer is *empathy*－which literally means "feeling *in* the other." This requires a shared perspective.

In communicating empathically across cultures, the speaker should assume that the receiver of the message might have different understandings of the facts being communicated. The speaker should therefore empathically "expand" the message by providing additional information to ensure that the speaker's view is empathically shared by the listener.

The following three sentences are examples of cross-cultural messages that might not convey to the receiver what the sender of the message intends to convey :

- "He has 165 square meters of land in Myoungdong."
- "He stands six feet three."
- "She earns fifty thousand dollars annually."

The intended meanings of these three messages are as follows :

- "He is extremely rich."
- "He is very tall."
- "She earns a large income each year."

These intended messages might not be conveyed to the receiver if he or she lives in a different cultural environment where people use different measuring systems for land, height, or monetary value. There is no guarantee that the receiver will know that real estate in Seoul's Myoungdon district is among the most expensive in Korea. And there is no certainty that someone who is "six feet three" will necessarily be considered "very tall" in all societies. Nor is it certain that all societies would consider a

woman who earns "fifty thousand dollars annually" to be earning a "large income." The listener or the reader of the message might not share the same judgment criteria (Kameda, 2005).

An empathetic speaker would therefore provide sufficient additional information and comment to ensure that the *intended* message is conveyed. The messages would then be delivered as follows :

- "He has 165 square meters of land in Myoungdong. A few square meters of land in that district can cost a few hundred thousand US dollars. He really is a very wealthy man."
- "He stands six feet three. A man's average height in our society is less than six feet. He is very tall in our society."
- "She earns fifty thousand dollars annually. Very few women of her age earn that amount of money. She earns a large income."

Ways to achieve smoother communication

The following are some suggestions to make your global business communication better, and to avoid misunderstandings between you and your counterparts :

1. Try to put yourself in the other's position

Try to be empathetic toward others and give additional information, as much as possible, to increase the shared knowledge of the matter in question or the issue at stake. It is important to try and make what you know known to your counterparts for smoother communication.

As you may know, Americans, in general, are not familiar with metric system－probably nine out of ten Americans do not know how long one meter is. Therefore, when dealing with Americans, a global businessperson should try to change the figures and numbers he or she intends to convey into inches, feet, miles, etc. At the same time, of course, American businesspeople should try hard to acquire the metric system, which is the international standard, as well as other international rules.

2. Remove your own colored glasses in order to see the world

As we have seen so far, our understanding of what is "fact" is highly influenced by images formed within ourselves and through perceptions acquired through education and experience within our own cultural spheres. Before seeing empirical facts as they are, we are apt to form an image of what is seen through filtered lenses. So, when we communicate with other people in English, we should take off our own colored sunglasses and try to see the world from the perspective of others, who may see the world in a completely different way, with lenses of another color.

3. Establish close human relations with your business partners

There is a saying that "successful business communication is 10 percent business and 90 percent human relations." These words should be kept in mind as an important maxim for all international business persons. One of the reasons I insist on the importance of interpersonal relationships between business people across cultures is because, as general semanticists claim ; "meanings resides in people, not in words." As we become close friends with a person, surely we come to understand that person more, as well as his or her words and phrases, and a shared perception can be achieved.

Conclusion

In this paper I have examined some of the complex issues related to using English as a global business language and its relationship to cross-cultural communication. I have argued that the scope of the meaning of a symbol differs from country to country or culture to culture, causing misunderstandings between people with different cultural backgrounds. I have also considered the role of English, a common global language, from the perspectives of code, concept, and translation while discussing concepts and hidden cultural values. Not only beliefs, values, and assumptions, but also business practices are different from culture to culture, and this too affects meanings.

I have assessed the role and limitations of English as a global language, from various perspectives. When people from different cultural backgrounds use English for communication, it is quite possible that the meanings of the English words used are different. An important skill required for global managers today is to be able to speak and write English with consideration for other cultures, and then to act accordingly.

In conclusion, I argue that global companies must manage the use of language in a realistic manner, and I proposed three ways to achieve smoother global communication. There is no doubt that English has become, and will continue to be, a major global language, or a shared "lingua franca" that facilitates communication links among different peoples and promotes global business activities across cultures.

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本論文を「研究」とせず「報告」とした理由

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• その推移

　本研究論文は私が，以下に列挙する学術団体連合会の主催により開催された 1st Asia e-Trade International Forum : E-Trade and Logistics in Asia に招待されて訪韓し，2007 年 11 月 29 日に韓国ソウル市の中央大学（Chung-Ang University, Seoul）大学院棟国際会議場にて行った基調講演：

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の講演原稿に加筆修正をして新たに執筆したものである。しかしながら，上記の基調講演ならびに本論文の骨子は，2007 年 3 月 15 日発行の『同志社商学』第 58 巻 6 号に掲載されている日本語の拙論「国際ビジネスコミュニケーションの用具としての英語とその問題点」の内容と重なるところが多い。そのため，使用言語が英語となっているものの，これら 2 つの論文を別個の研究論文として公表することには問題があると判断した。そのような事情から，本論文を「研究」ではなく「報告」として寄稿することにした次第である。

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　以上。