Intercultural Differences and Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This practical work is an attempt to show learners of English that fluency in a foreign language is not the only means of smooth communication. It states that culture is a group-specific (constant) and language has at least two main varieties (spoken and written) (variables**).** A discourse in this work, moreover, is a spoken or written communicative situation involving two or more parties in a specific spatial and temporal enclosure. Against that background, it highlights the need to use the in-discourse gap-fillers. Accordingly, the work shows that grammatical correctness is not enough to conduct appropriate communication. So are the culture-specific implicit lacks of clarity, intolerance, and non-observance of cultural differences.

Key words: Disruptions, In-discourse, Gap-fillers, Grammatical Correctness, Implicit Clarity, Intolerance, Widening Scope, Inter-societal Customization and Non-observance

INTRODUCTION

It is undeniably true that intercultural communication cannot be done seamlessly with the hiccups of mismatch communication and to exemplify this case, this work will start with the following real life example where the communication between the two discourse participants did not go well.

On one occasion during his stay in Manchester (UK), a PhD Arab student was asked to give an oral presentation to his fellow students in the presence of a number of English professors. The student, in one way or another, kept repeating himself lexically and grammatically. His professor was worried because according to Clark and Krych 2004 ''Intercultural conversation, like any form of face-to-face communication, is evanescent and requires on-line monitoring and immediate response.''

The Problem and its Causes

After a thorough investigation and monitoring of his oral performances, it turned out that in order to produce his new thoughts during his talk; he fills up the gap between any two utterances by lexically repeating the earlier utterance. This way of oral communication particularly repeating the verb has been unknowingly borrowed from his native Arabic and it is an inbuilt trait in Arab speakers according to Van De Wege 2013 and Holes(2004). Temporally, this tool in spoken discourse continuity usually lasts for few fractions of a second and mainly can be attributed to the following assumptions on the part of the speaker:

(i) The fastness of his thoughts is of no match to the speed of his linguistic performance in English, i.e. his\her thoughts flow is faster than the speed of his lexical and grammatical actualization of these thoughts,

(ii) The process of strict lexical and grammatical selectivity may be the obstacle or the speed getting slower when it comes to discourse actualization,

(iii) The linguistic culture of the speaker where repetition or reiteration is hailed as a means of adding to the meaning of the utterance may be another reason. Mona Baker (2010:210) alluded to that "It has been suggested that Arabic and English differ in the level of tolerance towards lexical repetition). Normally, Arabic tolerates a higher degree of lexical repetition than English. There is a proverb in Arabic which can be put roughly into English: When you repeat, you would be better understood.

(iv) Unfamiliarity with the host linguistic culture where the discourse tools as gap-fillers in oral discourse are much dissimilar to those used in his native linguistic culture as Ting-Tommy claims (1999)'' Intercultural conversation can be uncoordinated and unsynchronized due to differences in communication styles, insufficient language fluency and high levels of anxiety in the second-language speaker.'',

(v) Speaker sporadic silence during spoken discourse may be stigmatic in some cultures and usually met with audience disapproval and misjudgment of the speaker. This may preoccupy his mind causing him to believe that his ability and standing will be downgraded when and if he does so,

(vi) The thrill and/or the fright of the occasion as well as the timing and the environment where it takes place could be behind that repetition which is unfamiliar to the host and/or foreign listeners, Ting-Tommy (1999).

Needless to say that the spoken discourse of the speaker's source language has a set of discourse tools employed to keep discourse continuity. These are the tools the speaker tries to follow unknowingly when he is put in a situation where he is to speak in a second or another language. So it goes without saying then that each language has its own set of these tools to ensure the continuity of its spoken discourse.

The Proposed Solution

To solve this problem, it has been suggested in this work that the speaker needs to moderate his\her discourse to communicate his message to an audience who is composed of different cultures. He also needs to have full command on the culture of the host language whenever he is confronted with breakdown in communication or miscommunication.

The Goal of this Work

This work aims at drawing the attention of the learners of English where Arabic is spoken widely to the fact that grammatical correctness or fluency is not the only means of smooth communication with an audience of different cultures and to draw their attention to the importance of the delivery mechanism of English.

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF CULTURE AND DISCOURSE

A discourse generally speaking is a spoken or written communicative situation involving two or more parties in a specific spatial and temporal enclosure. Many acadrmicians like M.A.K halliday(2002) discuss the differences between text and discourse and specifies the characteristics of each. Discourse can be detected in a wider context than text by culture.However in sociological terms,in particular, discourse, according to Nicki Lisa 2018, refers to "how we think and communicate about people, things, the social organization of society, and the relationships among and between all the three." Our main concern in this work however is on spoken and written discourse (for examples of discourse in social terms, see Appendix A). Culture, in view of this study, is a set of values, traditions, and behavior characterizing a certain social group. These three characteristics are inherited from one generation to another. Or it is a system of shared knowledge which is reflected in a social group behavor, customs and habits and values whose members acquire from the whole components of their environment.

It is undeniably true that cultures differ and vary and this fact is truly reflected on discourse. This fact, therefore, needs to be taken into consideration by learners of English as a foreign or a second language. They at least need to focus on the main points which lead to miscommunication and discourse discontinuation. These gaps happen through either the oral, or written languages leading to misinterpretations or failures to satisfy one part of the discourse participants(in our case: audience or speaker).

IN-DISCOURSE GAP-FILLERS

On a related front, discourse participants may need a way out to customize their participation to avoid problems of all sorts of miscommunication. One way out is to use a gap filler to soften the impact of the discourse disruption. This can be done by using linguistic or extralinguistic means to make the participant contribution finding its way easily and smoothly to the counterpart's mind. For example to the best knowledge of this author, lexical and/or grammatical repetition of earlier utterance between couples of utterances by non-natives is almost rare in English spoken discourse. For whatever reasons this repetition is made, what is needed in this situation is an intervention to fix it. So, here softeners are needed. These tools vary according to the speed of the discourse actualization and their discourse categories. For considerations of space, time, and clarity, these will be dealt with here in some considerable details. In terms of discourse categorization, they can be divided as follows:

A- speaker's airways noises: These include some noises familiar to the English native speakers and English-oriented non-native speakers during a spoken discourse. Here the speaker needs fractions of a second after the end of an utterance to select his next linguistic items for the next one. These fractions are usually filled by noises like: ummm, ahhh, burr. These sometimes are substituted by body parts' movements like: hand, head, lip, shoulder movements---etc.

In the view of this author, these noises and/or movements keep the audience engaged with the speaker and the discourse. This is by giving them some short lapses which dispel boredom acting like commercials on TV. In addition, these discourse "commercials" promote the speakers qualities of persuasion and ability to dispel boredom. Moreover these noises and movements are encouraged and acceptable in Anglo-Saxon societies where freedom of expression is enjoyed by individuals and valued highly. The absence of the actualization of this type of the freedom of expression will help make the spoken discourse and the interlocutor foreign to the audience of a liberal society as was the case with the above Arab PhD student. On other hand in non-liberal strict societies, these are considered degrading and lessening the self esteem of the speaker.

B-one- word discourse gap-filler: Words like "well", "yea" or "gosh" at the beginning of an utterance can be interpreted as outlets to help give the speaker some time to select the items he/she needs to express him/herself. These are empty and meaningless words or expressions and they are not part of the discourse message unlike expressions like "true", "untrue"" 'correct" and "incorrect" at the beginning of a stretch of language. The latter are correctness determining expressions of earlier utterances and parts of the message. This category also includes the various opinion expressing items which usually occur at the beginning of the utterance like: "certainly, definitely, probably, possibly, perhaps---etc".

C-phrasal discourse gap-filler: Each one of these provides a longer breathing space for speaker to prepare him/herself for the next utterance. These may be divided into

(i)Redundant more self-committal phrases preceding statements like: "From my point of view, in my view, in my opinion, to me----------------etc."

(ii) Redundant less self-committal phrases like: "to the best of my knowledge, the best I can say----------------------------etc"

D-clausal or sentential discourse gap-fillers: these utterance openers are the longest breathing spaces needed to prepare the speaker to the next utterance which is usually a statement of the speaker view. They are employed when the topic in the field of discourse is controversial and a commitment for the contributed view embodied in the statement is needed. These, however, are not always openers. They may be needed after mentioning one part of the utterance. Sometimes, they are needed at the end of the utterance to put the speaker on the safe side of the problem of defenseless generalization. They can be best exemplified by sentences like: I am of the view that------ or I believe----. These temporally may have the same value as the previous ones but the choice is the speaker's and usually determined by habit.

In terms of speed of their discourse actualization, they can be divided as follows:

a-normal speed discourse continuity gap-fillers: they are uttered with normal speed and habituality may play an important part in resorting to them in the course of the discourse. Here the speaker's thoughts flow is almost parallel to the linguistic actualization. The discourse interlocutor/speaker is characterized here by normal alertness and a very good mastery of linguistic follow- up. What he/she needs here is a one-word gap filler, a noise in the airways and/or a body part movement.

b-high speed discourse continuity gap-fillers: these fillers are almost not needed and redundant but the interlocutor resorts to them to enliven and/or dramatize the discourse. Here the speaker's flow of thoughts is,as was the case in the previous category, parallel to the linguistic actualization. The difference is his/her performance here is speedier than the previous one. As speed is the most important characteristics of this category, noises and/or movements are usually employed by the speaker/interlocutor

c-low speed discourse continuity gap-fillers

APPROACH

As seen by this work, culture is a society –specific while language is of at least of two varieties.

In this work, four genuine examples of discourse clash will be studied in depth. In these four instances two parties of two different languages are involved in the discourse. In each example one type of the two communicative language varieties is used (oral or written). In two examples of these, the spoken activity is between a speaker and a listener while the other two discourse activities script is involved.

Accordingly culture is considered here as a constant factor while each language variety is taken as a variable in each discourse activity. Two interlocutors of two different cultures are involved (an Arab and an English person).

The discoursal varieties in this work includes
a- Oral language used in the spoken discourse
b- written language executed by using alpnebtical representation

As for the cultural varieties, they cover natives and users of
a- Anglo-Saxon culture
b- Arab- Islamic culture

Moreover the discourse here involves two dissimilar parties in a communicative situation: a producer and a recipient using different communicative tools in various spatial -tempo situations. Participants in these situations will be measured and characterized.

Four real life recurring examples will be analyze individually by specifying the
1- first and second parties (individual or group) in terms of being natives or non – natives
2- language variety used in the discourse
3- interpretions by the two parties
4- reason of the cultural clash
5- interventionist tool used.

These four examples have been checked by bilinguals from both languages and all agreed about the places where the communication between the two parties have broken down. Moreover they suggested the same or similar means as have been found out by this study.

Let us have some examples of clashes in communication.

THE ANALYSIS

Example One

When an English native speaker engages in a conversation with an Arab friend and asks him\her: Do you speak English? The scathing answer comes: yes of course and this is a type of disrupt interruption according to Ng. Brookk and Dunne 1995. It implies the English interlocutor is ignorant-this is a pointed answer and doesn't satisfy the questioner's expectations. The proper answer which may satisfy his expectations could be an understatement: I think so. The problem here lies in the word choice (oral language)…. This response failed to meet the native expectations (where the receiver feels that he is implicitly denied a privilege of speaking a foreign language and the speaker is implicitly accused of being ignorant). On the other hand

English words like: unique, zip, kiss and air are preferably avoided or substituted by their synonyms if possible by English interlocutor in spoken situation involving Arabs.

Party one	Party two	Language variety Type	Interpretation by party one	Interpretation by party two	Reason	Required intervention
Native of English language	Non-native	Oral	Spontaneous enquiry	Denial of a privilege	Misinterpretation (accusation of party one of being ignorant)	Apologetic in-discourse tool (understatement)

Moreover, Arabic words like the Arabic female proper nouns(Ass) and the male common name Mouafuck which is usually shortened in English language environment into a four-lettered swear word).

In this example, it is self evident that a sort of compromise is needed in this intercultural activity by one party or both interlocutors to remove the discontinuity or the discourse disruption- an apology or understatement could do.

Example Two

If an English native speaker is involved in a spoken discourse with an Arab native speaker and the discussion starts with an invitation by the first to a cup of tea or coffee, a little miscommunication problem occurs. The Arab guy will start with a confusing "thank you". The Arab "thank you phrase" is confusing for the English man". It could mean" yes" or "no". If " the thank you phrase" is followed by no other utterance, it means "yes".If it is followed by the utterance "I have just had one" it means "no." Ng, Brook and Dunne (1995) reported that" sometimes an interruption was a means to rescue or promote the current speaker, or to elaborate on the content of the current". Here vagueness in the Arab response leads to disruption in communication and makes the English questioner totally confused.

As seen in the above example, vagueness not ambiguity governs the above intercultural activity because of the terseness of the reply. What is needed to solve this disruption is a further enquiring technique by the requester.

Example Three

English names of stores, businesses, restaurants and the like, if controversial in pronunciation or translation need to be avoided or replaced by synonyms. On one occasion a group of Arab friends came across a cafeteria by the name (Erics2). The name was transliterated into Arabicon the neon board of the cafeteria. The Arabic transliteration of the cafeteria's name (Erics2) sounds vulgar. The name and the the figure(2) refer to the masculine and feminine genital parts in Arabic. Here is an example of a failure by

the receiver to interpret the written language normally as employed by the native language user. Surely this is due to his unfamiliarity of the English language particularly the English proper nouns.

In this example more time and efforts are needed to break the deadlock because the other interlocutor(the business owner)can not be made available easily and not engaging directly in this intercultural activity. To solve this problem, what is needed is rounds of negotiations between the two parties to sort out the misunderstanding. One of the parties involved should offer a comprimse particularly the first party by opting out for another name for the business. Or the second party could make some concessions by sportingly accepting the name written in English only with no transliteration on grounds that it is a business in a touristic area. Besides the English language is an international medieum of communication.

Example four

In some cultures, the relationship between man and woman should be given a special attention when designing a textbook for teaching English as a foreign or a second language in gender-segregated educational institutes. In the Arabic-Islamic culture, usually this relationship should be Sharia compliant and any type of male-female explicit and \or physical relationship before and beyond the bond of marriage is unacceptable and mostly punishable. This type of relation, besides eating pork or bacon, drinking alcohol among many others is taboos in the Islamic culture. On one occasion, a textbook of that type lists the following: ***grammatically correct sentence*** about the use of adverbials in the English simple past tense:

John took his girlfriend for a drink in a nearby bar yesterday

Here the author of the said textbook made two significant mistakes by using two words tabooed in the Arab and Islamic world: "girlfriend" and "bar"

Many similar examples of this type can be sea in the academic world of language and linguistics and causing a lot of problems for instructors. Probably, this problem can be

Party one	Party two	Language variety Type	Interpretation by Party one	Interpretation by party two	Reason	Require tool
Native of English language	Non-native	Oral	Invitation	Confusing reply	Vagueness of response and absence of further clarification	In-discourse enquiring

Party one	Party two	Language variety Type	Interpretation by Party two	Interpretation by party one	Reason	Required tool
Non-native of English language	Native	Written	Spontaneity (unintended vulgarity) resulting from transliteration of proper names	Negative (Vulgarity)	Mispronunciation and wrong punctuation and\or unfamiliarity with the English language	Cooling \ calming down

Party one	Party two	Language variety Type	Interpretation by Party two	Interpretation by party one	Reason	Required tool
Native of English language	Non-native	Written	Cultural intervention or could be Inattentiveness by the first party	Unguarded means of conveying a message	Strangeness of conventions	Promising to rectify,

solved by apologizing and changing, delting or altering the erroneous area. Or by chaning the whole textbook with a more convient one.

CONCLUSION

After having analyzed these recurring English examples of discourses between native English and Arabic speakers who speak English as a second language, disruptions occure for the following reasons:

1. Speakers involved in the discourse needs to be more careful and observe differences
2. Fluency in the second language cannot be taken for granted and cannot solve discourse clashes in intercultural communication
3. Tolerance throughout the discourse is a must by two or more parties
4. A written discourse miscommunication needs more time to be put in place
5. In intercultural discourse communication, inappropriateness and vagueness dominate the situation
6. Presence of mind is highly needed in situation such the ones mentioned in our examples.

How to Remove Discontinuity by Interlocutors

To put it in a nutshell moreover, learners of English in particular need to be reminded to soften their participation\contributions. When the language of the native speaker is used in the discourse, the need for the discourse softeners arises in order to remove discourse blockages and avoid discontinuity. These include

1- Noting the discontinuity situations and working on them by using diluting language stretches like understatements
2- Interfering to disambiguate responses
3- Being considerate of other cultures specialties
4- Showing readiness to customization
5- Using asserting devices like adverbs when needed: precisely, exactly definitely certainly, or adjectives like: true
6- Avoiding using deterrents by using instead phrases like: not really and not exactly
7- Using body and sign language when and if needed.

Proposals for Learners of English

Learners of English as a foreign or a second language:

a. Needs to adjust himself\herself to the new environment of the discourse by using compromising in-discourse gap-fillers

b. Need not to focus only on grammatical correctness. The latter should be coupled with appropriateness of lexeme selection. Moreover it needs to give reasons for inappropriateness.
c. Need to focus on clarity when and if required to ease communication
d. Need to focus on the fact that languages are culture specific and discourse participants should be tolerant when and if confronted with extreme differences
e. Need not to envision English conventions used in Anglo-Saxon societies fit to be used universally. English language textbooks compilers need not to be unheeded about the fact that each society in our world has its own taboos. They need to widen the scope by overstepping language culture conventions\traditions and aiming at inter-societal customization.

Finally in spoken discourse, it is not an uphill task to remedy the disrupted communicative situation. And this disruption remedy may only last for a fraction of a second or less. In written discourse on the other hand, the remedy is so difficult that it may take longer or never take place.

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APPENDIX (A)

1- It is an insult for an Arab neighbor, when it happens an Arab sitting next to an English person in a plane for example, and the latter sitting with his legs are crossed and lower part of his shoe facing his neighbor. In this situation, the Arab becomes furious and may reciprocate. The problem here lies in positioning the body parts (Body language). It is due to misinterpretion of the body language where one party of the situation feels insulted implicitly by a spontaneous body part movement by the second party).

Party one	Party two	Language variety Type	Interpretation by Party one	Interpretation by party two	Reason
Native of English language	Non-native	Body	Spontaneity	Inappropriate body positioning	Intended offence (disrespect for others)

2- It is not dissimilar to the previous one where a body language is used as a means of miscommunication. Here an Arab student hustles a British woman in a public library. When the woman gets annoyed and furious, she goes out of her way and gives him the two fingers symbol of the four-lettered swear word. The newly arrived student thinks that the woman specifies the two clock timing for a meeting with him. (body language). The guy misinterpret the body language.

Party one	Party two	Language variety Type	Interpretation by Party one	Interpretation by party two	Reason
Non-Native of English language	Native	Sign\body	Positive	Intended offence (harassment)	Misinterpretation by party one (consensual dating)