Mohamed Lamine Debaghine, Setif 2 University
Department of English Language and Literature
2020-2021

CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION
MASTER ONE
LANGUAGE SCIENCES

CULTURAL STEREOTYPES

Mark Twain gave an interesting biased view of other cultures and other languages in *A Tramp Abroad.* Twain noted that German is the most difficult language: ***"A gifted person ought to learn English (barring spelling and pronouncing) in 30 hours, French in 30 days, and German in 30 years.".*** So, he proposed to reform the German language, for ***"if it is to remain as it is, it ought to be gently and reverently set aside among the dead languages, for only the dead have time to learn it."*** Twain, like all of us at times, expressed caricatures of linguistic and cultural stereotypes.

In the bias of our own culture-bound world view, we too often picture other cultures in ***an oversimplified manner***, lumping cultural differences into exaggerated categories, and then view every person in a culture as ***possessing stereotypical traits***:

- Americans are all rich, informal, materialistic, overly friendly, and drink coffee.

- Italians are passionate, demonstrative, and drink red wine.

- Germans are stubborn, industrious, methodical, and drink beer.

- The British are stuffy, polite, thrifty, and drink tea.

- The Japanese are reserved, unemotional, take a lot of pictures, and also drink tea.

How do stereotypes form? Our cultural background shapes our world view in such a way that reality is thought to be ***objectively perceived*** through our own cultural pattern, and a differing perception is seen as either false or "strange" and is thus oversimplified. If people recognize and understand differing world views, they will usually adopt a positive and openminded attitude toward cross-cultural differences.

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A closed-minded view of such differences often results in the maintenance of a stereotype—an oversimplification and blanket assumption. The stereotype may be accurate in depicting the ***"typical"*** member of a culture, but it is inaccurate for describing a particular individual, simply because every person is unique.

To judge a single member of a culture by overall traits of the culture is both to ***prejudge and to misjudge*** that person. Sometimes our oversimplified concepts of members of another culture are downright *false*. While stereotyping, or overgeneralizing, people from other cultures should be avoided, cross-cultural research has shown that there are indeed characteristics of culture that make one culture different from another.

Both learners and teachers of a second language need to understand cultural differences, to recognize openly that people are not all the same beneath the skin. There are real differences between groups and cultures. ***We can learn to perceive those differences, appreciate them, and above all to respect and value the personhood of every human being.***

ATTITUDES

Stereotyping usually implies some type *of **attitude*** toward the culture or language in question. There are real differences between groups and cultures. ***Attitudes develop*** early in childhood and are the result of parents' and peers' attitudes, of contact "with people who are "different" in any number of ways, and of interacting affective factors in the human experience. These attitudes form a part of one's perception of self, of others, and of the culture in which one is living. Biased attitudes are based on deficient information, misleading stereotyping, and extreme ethnocentric thinking.

Gardner and Lambert's (1972) extensive studies were systematic attempts to examine the effect of attitudes on language learning. After studying the interrelationships of a number of different types of attitudes, they defined motivation as a construct made up of certain attitudes. The most important of these

is group-specific, the attitude learners have toward the members of the cultural group whose language they are learning. ***The positive attitude*** was found to be a ***significant correlate of success***. It seems clear that second language learners benefit from positive attitudes and that negative attitudes may lead to decreased motivation and, in all likelihood, because of decreased input and interaction, to unsuccessful attainment of proficiency.

Teachers need to be aware that everyone has both ***positive* and *negative* attitudes**. Negative attitudes usually emerge from one's indirect contact with a culture or group through television, movies, news media, books, and other sources that may be less than reliable. Teachers can aid in dispelling what are often myths about other cultures, and replace those myths with an accurate understanding of the other culture as one that is different from one's own, yet to be respected and valued.

BELIEFS

Beliefs are the tenets or convictions that people ***hold to be true***. Individuals in a society have specific beliefs. They are often invisible to those who hold them, they shape behaviours, organizational practices, and guide how people do things. "***To really understand culture, we have to get to the deepest level, the level of assumptions and beliefs.***" (Schein, 1985).

Beliefs are the things members of a culture hold to be true. They are the "facts" accepted by all or most members. Beliefs are not exclusively limited to religion, but they also comprise common sense and everyday knowledge. They are collective social agreements, what is "true" to particular society members is what they ***collectively agree to be true*** at that point in time. Beliefs are relatively stable but still subject to change. Along the same line, ideologies are integrated sets

of beliefs associated by a common theme or focus. They are related to specific social institutions serving to legitimize them. Ideologies are often related to each other in complex Schemes.

INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM

In collectivist cultures, people are more likely to see themselves as connected to others, define themselves in terms of relationships with others, and see their characteristics as more likely to change across different contexts." Collectivists' concept of self includes other people, namely, members of family, friends, and people from the work place. Social distance between a collectivist individual and his or her parents, spouse, siblings, children, friends, neighbors, supervisor, subordinate, and so forth is small. Collectivists view people in their family (e.g., parents, spouse, children, siblings, and so forth), as a continuation of their selves. For example, a mother or father is likely to think of a child as a part of his or her self, and even adult children who have their own children constitute part of their self. Similar closeness is felt for other relatives, friends, and coworkers. A collectivist's sense of self is interdependent, it is defined more by their membership in a group. Upholding social agreement, and getting along with others are more important in collectivist cultures. *"Eastern"* cultures tend to be more collectivist, for example.

Within individualist cultures, people are more likely to "see themselves as separate from others". Individualists' concept of self does not include other people. People in Western cultures (e.g., the U.S., Great Britain, Australia, Europe etc.) have an independent concept of self, and they feel a more pronounced social distance between themselves and others, including their immediate family. An individualist's sense of self is defined more by who they are, minimizing the effect of external factors, contexts, and people. Individualists view themselves in a much more definitive way "this is me, but that is not me." For example, they are likely not to think of their parents, spouse, children, even the closest members of the nucleus family, as a part of themselves. There is

no overlap between their selves and others'. ***"Western"*** cultures are typically more individualist. In a similar vein, assuming that someone is an individualist mainly on the basis of his cultural background, might not be accurate. Everyone falls somewhere on the individualist-collectivist spectrum. Even within a very collectivist culture, you will find people who are more individualist.

References:

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