Intercultural Communication: Defining Culture to Recognize Cultural Tendencies versus Stereotypes

Stephen B. Ryan

(Intercultural Communication)

1.0 Introduction

As the world moves closer to becoming more of a global village, more people from diverse cultures than ever before are coming into contact with one another. We face the challenge of communicating effectively with people who possess culturally-based values which underpin their communication preferences. However, "the difficulty with being thrust into a global village is that we do not yet know how to live like villagers; there are too many of us who do not want to live like "them"" (Samovar & Porter 1994:6). Advances in cross-cultural communication research are vital not only to help people of different cultures feel comfortable with each other but also to avoid misunderstandings that may result in negative stereotypes or premature judgments of "the other" speaker regardless of nationality or culture.

The field of Intercultural Communication (IC) addresses these issues by asking the following question, "How do people understand one another when they do not share a common cultural experience?" (Bennett 1998a:1). While mono-cultural communication is based on similarities in language and behavior patterns, IC focuses on differences. One of the goals of IC theory is to encourage the understanding of the differences between two speakers from unique national cultures in order to build a solid foundation for future interaction and, thus, preempting serious misunderstandings.

In this paper various perspectives to the field of Intercultural Communication are discussed along with assumptions of IC theory in general. The term *intercultural communication* shall generally refer to interactions between people of different nations (Lusting and Koester 1993:61) while *cross-cultural communication* shall refer to specific concept(s) between cultures. Examples given in this paper can be described as being cross-cultural because they compare a particular concept between Japanese and Amer-

icans.

2.0 IC Paradigm

Bennett (1998b) organizes the field of IC into a paradigm. The first category can be labeled a *positivist* (etic) approach. This is the traditionally held "outside-in" viewpoint of culture. That is, culture is nationalistically derived and top-down affecting daily intercultural communication. Because one is Japanese, for instance, (s)he is expected to be relatively polite and use silence more frequently than an American. An etic nationalistic culturally derived viewpoint maintains that culture affects the way we speak in all situations. While this view may hold varying degrees of truth, it is problematic if it is the only consideration in IC research because it fails to account for a context of behavior as it emerges and for specific social contexts. The positivistic approach has also been called "large" culture (see Holliday 1999).

The next category is commonly called *relativist* or an (emic) "inside-out" approach to intercultural communication. The approach is nearly the opposite of the positivist stating that it is our social behavior in any particular large or small IC context that determines our viewpoint and communication habits. In other words, our communication behavior is more determined by the social context itself. Our social identity is relative to the social context of interaction. For instance, we behave and interact differently in a formal business meeting than we do a local pub surrounded by friends. This "context" of interaction shapes our behavior.

Finally, the most recent theory can be labeled a *constructivist* paradigm as it assumes that reality exists because we are doing it or constructing it. A cultural identity is a process that you keep doing or is dynamically constructed. We generate "culture" by creating a boundary to associate and differentiate concepts like ethnicity, national culture, sex, etc. Tseng (2002:11) follows this line by dividing culture into individual and the outside social culture. In this view, meaning is dynamically constructed by the interaction between these two categories. This cultural viewpoint, Bennett contends, is one in which culture has no real definition. A constructivist interpretation has become more accepted recently because it is less fixed than a positivist (i.e. stereotyped) viewpoint, and resists labeling and can take into account the individual. One could argue, however, that this approach seems to be more determined by the complexities of a

individual personality than a culture and that it does not account for the unrecognized knowledge of culture-specific content schemata or the values of our society. Much of our language use is based on formulaic scripts for a particular context that is "activated" to smooth conversation. For instance, Americans may say, "Have a nice day" to say goodbye and not to be friendly. These L1 scripts are generic in nature and often go unrecognized by the speaker. But what about the language learner who is not accustomed to these cultural scripts? Lustig and Koester suggest that "the reality you create is different from those who use other languages with other categories" (1999:191) because the categories we use to sort and code what is happening around us mostly come from our (L1) language.

All three approaches to discussing IC have merit and each area is not easily delineated from another. At times, we may be using our larger nationalistic values to communicate or, at others, allowing the context itself to take precedence. Given the paradigm above, there seems to be a struggle between recognizing attributes of the speaker-hearer dyad and the inherent features of each particular speaker itself. It is a matter of research interest that will determine ones approach. For instance, those interculturalists interested in the practical aspects of cross-cultural training will be more apt to draw from a positivistic viewpoint while those with social-psychological interests may emphasize the social or constructivistic view. Regardless of approach, it is important for the interculturalists to make explicit what they regard as "a culture".

3.0   Defining and recognizing culture

Because Intercultural Communication emphasizes the influence ones culture has on their language and perception in varying contexts, defining culture becomes vital.

There are several key operational definitions to culture. Why make explicit our definition of culture? First, it is necessary in order to have consistency in future research, avoid misinterpretations and ensure that IC studies are replicable (Hatch and Lazaraton 1991:15). Second, clarity is paramount so that the field can move forward avoiding unnecessary repetition.

Unfortunately, culture is a complex academic term that often defies a commonly accepted definition. What exactly are we talking about when we say "culture"? Let us examine a few definitions. A standard dictionary definition in the layman's sense focuses

on a "way of life... of a group of people at a particular time" (Cambridge 1995: 334). When two native speakers talk of "culture" they generally refer to a way of life somewhere.

A more specific definition of "culture" is as follows: Culture is the *customs and beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular time*" (Richards, et. al., 1992:334). Yet, "particular group of people" and "at a particular time" are still vague for academic purposes as they do not identify the size of the group and the exact meaning of a particular time.

Matsumoto (2000) defines culture as "...*an organized system of rules shared by a group of people and transmitted from one generation to the next*". In this definition, "customs and beliefs" are more specifically defined as an "organized system of rules" underpinned by the stability of time over a generation of more. This definition lends stability to culture (i.e. generations) and limits one to a society's larger cultural values and tendencies. The group of people can then be as large as necessary since there is time enough to pass down these values. Singer (1998:52) focuses more on a perceptual approach and states that culture is a "*pattern of learned group-related perception...that is accepted and expected by an identity group.*" Identity groups are mostly formed by common tasks or jobs, ethnicity, religion or political preferences. This definition regards time as less stable in a cultural definition because identity groups can be formed relatively quickly. This definition would seem to lean towards a social orientation or "emic" interpretation to culture.

However, we have to be wary of making cultural interpretations based on group-related patterns of nationalistic culture to avoid unnecessary stereotyping. To avoid this, the recent emphasis on culture has been away from explicit definitions and towards "a set of implications that result from culture's function as the human beings unique way of coping with the environment...and surviving" (Fisher1997:43). Fisher states further that there are three implications to a culture: a set of customs, an organization and a system of customs in the mind (1997:44-45).

3.1 Time

If we do accept the cultural definitions similar to those above, then what seems generally agreed upon is that culture has some pattern or organization of culturally defined rules that a group of people value at a particular time which affects communicative behavior. "Particular time" is an important aspect of a cultural definition because it lends stability to this organization. Time, whether our culture prefers a lineal (Amer-

ican) or cyclical (Japanese) interpretation for example, provides stability to the definition and keeps us from discussing individual preferences or personalities of purely psychological nature. However, it seems worthy of recognition that the concept of time itself is problematic because it is valued differently among different groups of people. For example, American culture places value on the future and on what actions will bring about the desired result. Time is divided into past, present and future in our English language system of rules. This is because Americans are action oriented and tend to judge each other based on the results of their efforts. Emphasis is placed on how the present can be improved to a make a better future. This assumes another cultural concept; we can control our destiny to a degree and change our future by our own efforts hence the cliche, "actions speak louder than words". To accomplish this orientation to future and time, Americans use deadlines (Stewart and Bennett 1991:74). The use of deadlines allows Americans to co-operate towards a common goal and set aside their personal differences.

Japanese, in contrast, seem to value time into two parts: past and the ongoing present being or becoming (Yamada 1997:28). Japanese prefer a more personalized approach and de-emphasize deadlines. Japan, because of its long and rich history, does not place value on the future nearly as much as American culture. Members of a group in Japan will often choose a representative to express the collective opinions of their group. This makes work and communication more personal and interdependent than the American preference for a deadline.

3.2 Group size

Another assumption in a culture definition that needs consideration is the size of the group. How large is "a group"? If it is possible to consider as few as two persons as a group and a culture in itself, then we are at the fluid constructivistic end of the paradigm. However, if we are interested in patterns of behavior then the group becomes much larger and a longer time frame is needed to add stability. This moves the definition up the paradigm towards a more stable positivistic interpretation.

In sum, the two central questions regarding any cultural definition are: 1) How large is the group and 2) how much time is needed to legitimize behavior as "cultural" as opposed to just individual variation?

4.0 Which emphasis?

> "Culture hides much more than it reveals and, strangely enough,
> what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants"
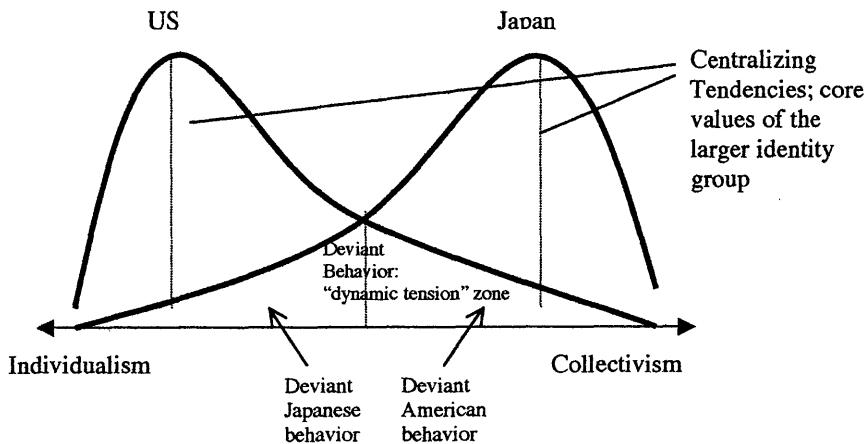> (Hall 1998:59)

The culture definition one chooses will more than likely depend on which school of thought they belong. The field of IC can be divided into two schools of thought (Bennett 1998a:ix):

1) Theory and research school
2) Theory and practice school.

The theory and research school draws off of interdisciplinary fields of anthropology, sociolinguistics or psychology. The second category seeks to improve intercultural communication skills (Hall 1998:ix) and is more appropriate for pedagogical purposes. Those interculturalists interested in practical applications such as IC training and language teaching will more than likely emphasize a positivistic view as opposed to a relativistic one. But, why is it necessary or even desirable to analyze communication from say a positivistic orientation as opposed to a small context-driven one and is there a danger of stereotyping? In intercultural interaction, we often do not recognize our own acquired cultural perceptions affecting our judgement of the other speaker. One of the goals of IC is to raise awareness through comparison of "the other" culture (a mostly positivisitic stance) through intercultural training and research. This raises a thorny issue of stereotyping or ethnocentric derived interpretations for IC researchers.

4.1 Positivistic or Pragmatic?

If we chose to analyze a culture from a more practical view such as language teachers and IC training, it is important to recognize the dangers of this stance as it is necessarily a positivistic orientation. It seems to many researchers today "positivistic" is synonymous with "ethnocentric" a stereotypical view of culture. This may be true to a degree. However, by recognizing the drawbacks of this stance, culture can be effectively taught and understood without unnecessary stereotypes. To do this, specific culturally-based

US　　　　　　　　　Japan

Centralizing
Tendencies; core
values of the
larger identity
group

Deviant
Behavior:
"dynamic tension" zone

Individualism　　　　　　　　　　　　　Collectivism

Deviant　　Deviant
Japanese　American
behavior　behavior

(Adapted from Bennett 1998a:7)

Figure 1. Centralizing tendencies curve

behavior can be usefully described as "cultural tendencies" rather than a prescriptive list of actions of dos and don'ts.

　To emphasize centralizing tendencies of cultures and avoid stereotypes, deviant behavior, or behavior not valued by the larger more stable nationalistic culture, can be described as creating a "dynamic tension" (Matsumoto 1996:16). That is, we realize that our behavior is not acceptable or valued in our large nationalistic beliefs, and may, therefore, change accordingly. Thus, there is a "tension" between how we have learned to behave in the past with our divergent "emerging behavior" (see Holliday 1999) of interpersonal interaction. In figure 1 above, for instance, the US deviants are less individualistic than their larger nationalistic culture values but just right for Japanese culture. The Japanese deviants, on the other hand, are more individualistic than their larger cultural tendencies and are therefore labeled "deviant" in a Japanese context but what one would expect as an American cultural tendency.

　In IC, cultural generalizations are necessary to form a hypothesis about the cultural differences we may encounter in a cross-cultural situation because of the questions we ask. By solely focusing on the context of interaction, we risk a "naive individualism" (Bennett 1998a:6) of interpreting cross-cultural behavior based solely on a participants personality. Common sense is only common to those who belong to particular culture groups (see Lieberman et. al 1989) and is problematic cross-culturally often resulting in

misunderstandings.

5.0 Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed the field of Intercultural Communication in general by re-stating a paradigm and suggesting assumptions of each. It has been argued that although each area emphasis has its own merit, for IC researchers interested in the more practical aspects of the field such as language teaching or intercultural training, a positivistic view is unavoidable but tenable if we recognize the assumptions it makes. In the language learning context, raising awareness of cultural tendencies is a much needed and useful methodology to smooth communication. However, instructors and researchers alike must be wary of perpetuating stereotypes and instead focus on specific contexts of interaction that learners may encounter. Finally, if we can explicitly note how cultural stereotypes became stereotypes in the first place, then we are better prepared to be more objective and aware when discussing cross-cultural differences.

References

Bennett, M. (Ed.) (1998a). Intercultural Communication: A Current Perspective. In *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication*. Yarmouth: Intercultural Press.

Bennet, M. (1998b) *Paradigmatic Assumptions of Intercultural Communication*. Presentation at 1998 SEITAR Congress, Reitaku University Japan.

Cambridge International Dictionary of English. (1995). Cambridge: CUP.

Fisher, G. (1997). Mindsets. *The Role of Culture and Perception in International Relations*. 2nd Edition. Yarmouth, MA: Intercultural Press.

Hall, E. T. (1998). The Power of Hidden Differences. In *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication. Selected Readings*. Bennett, M.J. (Ed.). Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press.

Hatch, E. & Lazarton, A. (1991). *The Research Manual*. Design and Statistics for Applied Linguistics. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Holliday, A. (1999). Small cultures. *Applied Linguistics* Vol. 20, No.2: pp 237-264.

Lieberman, D., Kosokoff, S. & Kosokoff, J. (1989). Do It My Way: What's Common About Common Sense? — An Intercultural Communication Teaching Approach. Paper presented at the *Western Speech Communication Association Convention*. 2/17-21/1989. Spokane, WA.

Lustig, M. W. and Koester, J. (1993) *Intercultural competence: Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

Matsumoto, D. (1996). *Culture and Psychology*. Brooks/Cole Publishing Co.: Pacific Grove.

Matsumoto, D. (2000), January. *Cross-Cultural Research and Methodology Workshop*. Tokyo, Japan.

Richards, J. C., Platt, J., Platt, H. (1992). *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics*. Essex: Longman Group UK Ltd.

Samovar, L.A. & Porter, R.E. (eds.) (1994). *Intercultural Communication*. A Reader. 7th Edition. Wadsworth Publishing Co.: Belmont, CA.

Stewart, E.C. & Bennet, M.J. (1991). *American Cultural Patterns. A Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Yarmouth, Maine USA: Intercultural Press.

Singer, M.R. (1998). *Perception & Identity in Intercultural Communication*. Yarmouth, MA: Intercultural Press.

Tseng,, Y. (2002). A Lesson in Culture. *ELT Journal*. Vol. 56., No. 1, pp. 11-21. Oxford University Press.

Yamada, H. (1997). *Different Games, Different Rules*. Why Americans and Japanese Misunderstand Each Other. New York: OUP.

Intercultural Communication: Defining Culture
to Recognize Cultural Tendencies versus Stereotypes

Stephen B. Ryan

The field of Intercultural Communication (IC) is a relatively new but fast growing field of research. In a world where more people of diverse languages and cultural backgrounds are coming into contact with one another, IC is primed to play an even more significant role in second and foreign language education as well as cross-cultural training programs.

This paper briefly gives an overview of IC and the assumptions which underpin the primary areas of interest. The definition of culture plays a significant factor into how educators and trainers approach the field. Traditionally held positivistic views of culture as a static entity influencing our language and behavior in all situations clearly need re -examining. However, language educators and cross-cultural trainers necessarily interested in the more practical aspects of teaching "culture" are squarely on the positivistic side of the culture paradigm. Therefore, it is vital that we clearly identify how culture is regarded to avoid perpetuating cultural stereotypes as opposed to highlighting cultural tendencies.

Finally, because Intercultural Communication seeks to identify and raise awareness of cultural-specific types of behavior and language, it can help create a climate of tolerance and trust in face-to-face interaction. To be a true "interculturalist", we not only need to be aware of "the other" culture's tendencies but of our own as well