

## *Sociolinguistic and didactic considerations on English-Spanish cross-cultural awareness*

J. A. G. ARDILA  
Universidad de Extremadura

Jane NEVILLE  
Canterbury, Kent

### ABSTRACT

Foreign language teaching has become one of the main beneficiaries of many linguistic theories stemming from the realms of anthropology and ethnolinguistics. However, albeit such theories are now believed irrefutable, they are, nonetheless, neglected in many university syllabi. Certainly, not only should socio-cultural awareness be instructed in advanced language courses, furthermore paralinguistic features are indeed necessary in order to teach how to communicate effectively in a foreign language. This article draws from sociology in order to denounce the astounding paralinguistic disparities between the English and the Spanish languages, and to urge university syllabus-makers (especially of Spanish/English for business) to account for them.

### 1. INTRODUCTION: CULTURE AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS

The methodologies that have impelled Foreign Language Teaching (FLT) in the past two decades have not been reluctant to appreciate the importance of culture. The incidence of culture and ethnic identities in communication is allowed for by schools of linguists such as ethnographical semanticists and the advocates of hermeneutics. Moreover, it has recently captured the eye of a significant number of linguists who have found culture to be truly relevant to several aspects of language. In the field of FLT, the more specific the coveted proficiency of the target language is, the more significant the target culture becomes. However, as the curricula are designed, culture does not seem to be partaking of FLT at the beginners' levels; in Language for Business

Purposes (LBP) cultural instruction is vital for the graduates to obtain a convincing outcome in the real-life business world. The aim of this essay is to argue that students of LBP who have not been trained to be aware of the cultural aspects of their target languages will hardly present themselves to clients convincingly enough to gain their ends. In our subsequent contrastive deliberation, we shall take the Spanish language as a case example from the so-called Expanding Circle.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed the interest in culture fostered by applied linguistics is reaching out to fathom formerly unexplored aspects of communication. However, although linguists such as Yamuna Kachru claim that “successful communication may depend upon sociocultural factors” (Kachru 1997: 173), cultural realizations are, in this author's words, “just beginning to dawn”. The education of LBP students is often deemed inappropriate or incomplete as to the needs of present –day international markets– owing to educationalists' and educators' neglect of the cultural aspects of languages, and to the primitiveness of the thriving endeavours to make this a scholarly subject.

Recent research carried out on the issue focuses on written communication. Advocates of the Contrastive Rhetoric Hypothesis maintain that cultural patterns hinder non-native speakers from mastering discourse coherence, for example Kaplan concludes that foreign speakers' cultures cause them to organize their discourses on the grounds of “a rhetoric and a sequence of thought which violate the expectations of the native reader” (Kaplan 1972: 14). Indeed the lack of coherence that stems from the lack of a thorough knowledge of the target culture results in an out-of-focus message that may often be unintelligible to the native addressee. Such impediments have triggered off a polemic regarding the legitimacy of non-native authors in intercultural crossover (Shills 1988: 560). Paikeday quotes David Crystal, who declares that he knows:

... many foreigners whose command of English I could not fault, but they themselves deny they are native speakers. When pressed on the point, they draw attention to... their lack of childhood associations, their limited passive knowledge of varieties, the fact that there are some topics which they are more 'comfortable' discussing in their first language (Paikeday 1985: 68).

Lexical paraphernalia such as idioms or cultural references may certainly impact intercultural communication. As Halliday points out, a first language is learned “in the context of behavioural settings where the norms of the culture are acted out and enunciated” (Halliday 1973: 23). Therefore, the less time a non-native speaker has spent in the foreign culture, the farther from the native model their messages are likely to be, which is rather consequential, since native speakers may be unable to understand them. For the above reasons, Smith and Nelson (1985) warn that intercultural crossover is liable

to damage intelligibility, comprehensibility and, most especially, interpretability.

In sum, all messages from a non-native source are amenable to distortion. Likewise, not only does culture cause unintelligibility in a message; its non-verbal hints can also originate further unintended significance. Quinn and Holland's definition of culture highlights the importance of all elements involved in the 'context of culture' (Firth 1964): Quinn and Holland conjecture that culture is whatever people "must know in order to act as they do, make the things they make, and interpret their experience in the distinctive way they do" (Quinn and Holland 1987: 23). Those non-verbal aspects that culture bestows upon language are most relevant in FLT, and although it is unfeasible to furnish learners with the whole lifetime of cultural experiences, instructors can attempt to present them with a description of non-verbal communication.

## 2. INTER- AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS

Cultural aspects can be portrayed under two similar –yet differing– approaches: an intercultural or culture-free approach; and a cross-cultural or culture-bound approach. Thus, as mentioned above, the more specific a course is, the more relevant the cultural aspects become. Richard Fay (1997) explains that he has preferred to give his International Studies courses an intercultural approximation that target the so-called 'third culture' (Furnham and Bochner 1986: 28), since his learners are non-native teachers of English from all over the world<sup>2</sup>. Yet the proliferation of LBP in most EU countries demands a cross-cultural knowledge whenever one is dealing with a particular nationality. Numerous courses have recently focused on one foreign language; for example many Continental universities offer English for Business; similarly, British students can enroll in courses of Spanish for Business. Therefore, a cross-cultural instruction is much more advisable than an intercultural instruction, which is general and culture-free, because prospective businessmen are not going to work in the third culture but in a culture of the Expanding Circle they have previously chosen.

Indeed negotiators must be aware that the sociocultural context in which they are dealing will inevitably affect any negotiation process (Freedman 1990). Ellis and Johnson (1994: 215) wonder whether the LBP instructor should be teaching skills rather than just language. Students of Spanish for Business in Britain must take some courses whose syllabi consist of acting out roles in order to improve their linguistic competence in 'the company situation' (Hollett 1992), for example to start a meeting, present and support opinions, balance points of view, make suggestions, present alternatives, accept and reject ideas and proposals, build up arguments, summarize and

conclude, and so on (O'Driscoll *et al.* 1987). There are several methodologies which can be followed in role-plays; Lees (1983: 8-11) divides the role-plays into three parts: pre-negotiation meetings, the negotiation (which encompasses entrance, seating, social conversation, language, behavior and tactics), and debriefing (consisting of written/oral follow-up). Cotton and Robbins (1993) suggest video recording; Casler and Palmer (1989) propose watching real-life business activity on video so that students can observe authentic non-verbal communication.

Undoubtedly, non-verbal aspects of language are dramatic in communication<sup>3</sup>, and always affect the source as well as the message.<sup>4</sup> Communication and culture are strongly tied together, so much so that, as Fay suggests, "all cultural activity communicates and all communication is culturally-loaded" (Fay 1997: 323). Furthermore, Samovar and Porter declare that:

Communication may be defined as that which happens whenever someone responds to the behavior or the residue of the behavior of another person. When someone perceives our behavior or its residue and attributes meaning to it, communication has taken place regardless of whether our behavior was conscious or unconscious, intentional or unintentional (Samovar and Porter 1994: 7-8).

Richard Gross emphasizes the power of non-verbal communication<sup>5</sup> by claiming that it is "important largely because of how it contributes to the source being perceived as attractive and trustworthy" (Gross 1992: 522).

At this point, it is important to clarify the differentiation between unfocused and focused interaction (Goffman 1969): unfocused interaction occurs when people in a determined situation are aware of each other's presence; whereas in a focused interaction, or 'encounter', interlocutors behave casually and spontaneously. Unfocused interaction takes place in 'front regions', i.e. social occasions where people follow the norms of an established protocol. Good professionals operating in front regions must be aware that appearing 'attractive and trustworthy' depends on the many connotations of their non-verbal behavior. Not only is this true with regard to people who handle foreign clients, but also within one's national boundaries —mental health coordinators in Britain instruct their carers in non-verbal communication, as it is deemed of the utmost importance in handling clients with learning disabilities. As mental health carers need to be appraised of all the connotations of non-verbal communication whose reckless command may jeopardize success in their work, businessmen handling clients from a foreign culture should be aware that neglecting non-verbal communication is likely to distort the intended message they want to get through.

It will obviously be useful to British professionals involved in business transactions with Spanish companies (and vice versa) to have been trained in intercultural awareness, but they would find it decidedly advantageous to be

cross-culturally knowledgeable of Spaniards' mannerisms in focused interaction. Culturally-determined rules are indeed different from one country to the other. Spain belongs to the Expanding Circle and, while the culture gap between the British and the Spanish cultures is not as dramatic as it may be between the British and other cultures (*vid.* Lee 1969), each one of them possesses a number of non-verbal aspects that are arcane to the other. Peter Bull (1983) warns that beyond the limits of Anglo-American culture one will encounter countless examples of bizarre gestures that have an explicit signification—which is most noteworthy given that gestures and bodily posture serve to fill out discourse (Giddens 1993: 92). Notwithstanding how close a culture may seem, non-verbal communication always makes a difference.

Fay offers a list of eight non-verbal aspects of language (cf. Lyons 1996: 14) that he names the eight '-ics:

Proxemics (interpersonal space); kinesics (facial expressions, gestures, i.e. "body language"); chronemics (meanings and understandings attached to time); haptics (tactile communication, i.e. "touching"); oculusics (eye movements); vocalics (non-verbal aspects of the voice); olfatics (meanings and understandings attached to smells); physical appearance (meanings and understandings attached to appearance, e.g. what does blonde hair "mean"? (Fay 1997: 323).

Fay warns that meaning is attributed rather than sent, and that all these eight '-ics participate—even more than language—in communication (for example, one may talk politely, but if his/her face denotes an uninterested disposition, the addressee will perceive an unkind attitude). In our proposed comparative case example of British and Spanish cultures, almost all of Fay's non-verbal aspects of communication differ from one culture to the other—as we shall explain forthwith.

### 3. PARALINGUISTIC FEATURES OF THE SPANISH AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGES

Although classed within the Expanding Circle, it is obvious that Spanish culture is farther from British than other European nationalities. A proxemic comparative analysis of these two cultures evinces the difficulties their negotiators are likely to encounter if placed in the same scenario. Of the eight non-verbal aspects that we are about to discuss, proxemics is undoubtedly the one people are more punctilious about. Festinger, Schuchter and Back (1950) concluded that physical proximity—or 'exposure' (Zajonc 1968)—determines the 'level of intimacy' (Argyle & Dean 1965). Too much intimacy turns out to be a teething problem in business negotiations: Felipe and Sommer (1966) warn that over-friendly attitudes are distrusted immediately; and Gross advises

that "sometimes mere physical closeness (especially if accompanied by body contact) can be unpleasant and cause us to dislike the person concerned" (Gross 1972: 14). In fact, everyone learns a number of proxemic rules with regard to the appropriate physical distance in unfocused and focused interactions. Edward T. Hall (1959) concluded that there are four main zones of 'personal space' in Anglo-American culture: 'intimate distance', i.e. 0 to 18 inches; 'casual-personal distance', i.e. 18 inches to 4 feet; 'social distance', i.e. 4 to 12 feet; and 'public distance', i.e. 12 feet and beyond. Stepping over the bounds of the appropriate zone the situation requires will cause the addressee to feel uncomfortable. According to Nicholson (1977), there is a point at which feelings of uneasiness arise. This point marks what he has termed the 'body-buffer zone'; whenever this zone is encroached, the interlocutor will resent it. Breaking into the addressee's body-buffer zone will create a distrustful atmosphere that may jeopardize success in any negotiations.

Watson and Graves (1966) observed discussion parties from different nationalities. Their study proves that cultures can be classed into two groups according to their proxemic rules; 'contact cultures', such as South-Americans and Arabs, 'touch' their addressees much more than 'non-contact cultures', such as Scots and Swedes. It is true that Spaniards' personal space does not coincide with that of the British, and, therefore, the former may be considered a 'contact-culture' and the latter a 'non-contact' culture. Spaniards' intimate distance finishes far before the 18 inches mentioned above. This means that Spaniards break through the 18-inch limit without violating their body-buffer zones. In an unfocused interaction between Britons and Spaniards proxemic dissimilarities might cause the British to feel uneasy about the Spaniards' 'boldness', and the Spaniards might think the English are rude, or at least cold<sup>6</sup>.

Kinesic features and oculosics are commonly referred to as 'body language'<sup>7</sup>. These paralinguistic features encompass (beside oculosics) gestures, postures, facial expressions and coloring. Gestural aspects may be used broadly by one person, but may be very restricted for others who may rather limit their gestures to little more than a twitch unless disturbed or highly excited. Postures are sometimes deliberately adopted to show or disguise an attitude; they are usually adopted subconsciously. Facial expression may be thought self-evident but sometimes is at variance with feelings or intention. Usually, the eyes and gestures will reveal variance. Changes in skin coloring are indicators of emotional change; they can occur rapidly, for example in case of shock, surprise or anger. All these aspects are variably different within the Spanish and the British cultures and do in fact vary from one person to another within the same language and culture. Generally speaking, kinesic features in Spain are much more emphatic than in northern European countries. Some Spaniards' fondness of 'talking with their hands' might appear somewhat informal or threatening in British front regions.

Oculesics concern eye movement, and also differ —although slightly— from the British to the Spanish culture. Negotiators from these two cultures always keep eye contact with their addressees; failing to do so can be interpreted as a sign of impoliteness. Yet it is not advisable to gaze upon the interlocutor for too long: this might be interpreted by some as aggressive and forward.

Chronemics are certainly one of the many setbacks most non-native speakers confront with constantly. There are many examples of interference provoked by chronemics: the foreign student who studies English Literary Studies, has read too much classic literature, and uses vocabulary such as 'beseech' or 'bode'. (We believe a discussion on chronemics is scarcely relevant here, for it is a verbal rather than a non-verbal aspect of communication.)

Haptics condition breaches of formality and respect. Touching a person can be sometimes reassuring and sometimes threatening or perceived to be a threat where none is intended. Protocolary actions like hand shaking may gain much from being accompanied by an appropriate facial expression —which may be thought self evident, but sometimes is at variance with feelings or intention. Touching arms and shoulders may be reassuring to someone who is suspicious or uncertain about the direction the discussion has taken. On the other hand, the head, body and legs are always taboo (Jourard 1966). Haptics concern ways to greet, which is of great importance given that there is always some amount of touching when first meeting someone. While in very formal situations both the Spanish and British cultures shake hands, in more casual meetings, such as dinners or parties, the differences become conspicuous. In this type of frontal regions, the British shake hands whereas Spaniards follow a different pattern: Spanish men shake hands; Spanish women kiss each other twice on both cheeks; and men and women also kiss each other twice. A British woman might feel somewhat uncomfortable and even embarrassed if kissed by the Spanish man to whom she has just been introduced. Indeed kisses between men and women are allowed in British social norms; however, this occurs only when the two persons have already reached a certain level of intimacy.

Vocalics, i.e. the pitch, volume and pace of the voice, may reveal emotional state. Quality of speech is particularly important in telephone communication where the speaker cannot be seen and no other non-verbal communication is possible. One of the major discrepancies between English and Spanish lies in the dissimilarities in prosodic features. English intonation has four levels whereas Spanish has only three. The fourth or highest tone level in English reveals interest and denotes politeness. Spanish businessmen who speak English as a foreign language and have not been warned of the connotations of English intonation will only reach the third level, which is the highest in

their language. Prof Barry Velleman (of Marquette University) always begins his lectures on prosody by telling an intriguing anecdote: a Cuban immigrant decided to open a store in an English-speaking area of Miami. Whenever a customer walked in she would greet with a 'good morning', but failing to reach the fourth level that is employed in salutations; that 'good morning' which barely reached the third level was interpreted by her clients as an impolite welcome and created such a hostile atmosphere that the Cuban lady had to close down her business. Conversely, the sudden variations and alternations in stress of the English language may sound to Spaniards as hyperbolic, corny, and, therefore, suspicious.

Response cries (Goffman 1981), i.e. responses to a minor bodily mishap, cannot be found in most bilingual lexicons and may say nothing to the foreign speaker. There are not many of these response cries in Spanish; yet they appear in English quite often, for example 'oops!' Other English non-verbal sounds are interspersed in discourse; some may be unintelligible to non-native speakers (this is especially true of American English, for example 'u-hu' for 'yes', and 'm-hm' for 'you're welcome' or 'yes' if accompanied with a nod), others can be interpreted as funny (for example 'u-uh' to fill out a suspended speech indicating that the speaker has not finished but needs time to organize his discourse).

Olfatics and physical appearance can also impact negotiations between Britons and Spaniards. Although western cultures share similar dress habits and both clothing and perfume brands are usually available in all countries, one must note that some very fine clothes which are not worn in one culture may appear strange looking in the other, for example Chelsea boots, top hats or *mantones de Manila*.

#### 4. THE CROSS-CULTURAL APPROACH TO LANGUAGES FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

Generally speaking, non-verbal components of naturally-uttered languages are a major obstacle in international negotiation. John Lyons claims:

The prosodic features of spoken languages and the paralinguistic gestures that are associated with spoken utterances in particular languages (or dialects) in particular cultures (or subcultures) vary from language to language and have to be learned as part of the normal process of language-acquisition (Lyons 1996: 14).

It is obvious that as Schools of Business train their students to create a comfortable atmosphere for cooperation in domestic meetings, instructors of



LBP must likewise encourage their learners' awareness of the sharp differences between cultures. While an intercultural approach is acceptable in courses of International Business, courses of a specific language must provide cross-cultural instruction focused on the culture of the particular target language. Richard Hill (1998) refuses to judge any intercultural approach appropriate in business. In maintaining that success in international negotiations is only feasible if speakers adopt a cross-cultural approach, Hill makes *tabula rasa* of the intercultural approach:

... if you're British you start with a joke, if you're German you start with a definition... Telling a joke to a French professional or business audience is more likely to lower the temperature than to break the ice! The same goes for the German, who consider that business is... serious business... If they are Dutch they refuse to leave the room until I've told them precisely what the solution is. If they are German, not only do they want to know the solution, they also want to know what each of them has to do to implement the solution. If they are British, and I try to offer the solution, they leave the room. They want to be left with the privilege of making up their own minds... If they are French, on the other hand, they never achieve consensus. They're still arguing enthusiastically when the session comes to an end. And if they're Finns, of course, I'm lucky if I can even get a dialogue going (Hill 1998: 68).

Liz Simpson (1998) argues that cross-cultural unawareness usually causes cultural-mixed teams to split up before they even manage to complete their assignments—which costs companies millions of pounds. She offers another anecdote. In a Dutch-Italian-German team working in a marketing project, the Dutch members began to feel uncomfortable when their debonair Italian coordinator decided to break the ice by taking them for a jaunty ride in his Ferrari—Italians like speed, yet the Dutch enjoy slow safe driving, Simpson argues. On the other hand, it is a customary component of Dutch humor to make ruthless fun of other people, so the Dutch soon began to jeer at the Italian and his driving. The Italian, of course, felt extremely offended. The project, which had cost the corporation concerned a large amount, was cancelled. Cary Cooper's study (cited in Simpson 1998) on the preferences of managerial groups that work jointly together with merger and acquisition (M&A) partners reveals the international bias and fears of businessmen. According to Cooper's survey, all nationalities fear liaison with the Japanese, whom, on the other hand, they admire; the preferences are as follow (the following chart is cited in Simpson 1998: 36):

NATIONALITY	PREFERENCE	RATIONALE
American	British	Professional approach
British	American	Positive attitude
Danish	British	Positive attitude
Dutch	German/American	Professional approach/market access
French	French	Know where you stand
German	German	Market access
Swedish	American	Professional approach

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

EU corporations which have emerged into the pan-European market continue to resent their executives' lack of cross-cultural awareness. With the single currency already established, and the Maastricht Treaty being an inherent part of European history, many corporations are still requiring their executive staff to enroll in courses and simposia on intercultural training or to attend the Institute for Training in Intercultural Management. Notwithstanding their very high costs, these training courses are the only means to achieve decent management quality and ensure productive outcome in multicultural projects. Such a necessity is an obvious corollary of the European university curricula's inadequacies to the reality of international business. On the other hand, the Japanese have endeavored to become more knowledgeable about the cultures they deal with. Organizations such as the Japan-American Society of the State of Washington or the Japanese Language and Culture Assistants Program have organized all types of activities to enhance cultural immersion (McMichael 1990; Amemiya 1995).

Given the obvious importance of non-verbal communication and the corporations' needs to be represented by culturally-aware executive staff, it would be sensible for university curriculum- and syllabus-makers to introduce cross-cultural training in all LBP courses. The endeavours made in British higher education to furnish learners with a clear approximation to international negotiating places British graduates at the head of intercultural awareness and offers the rest of EU universities a model to borrow from. British courses of LBP focus on a specific language and culture; they involve non-verbal communication, and the students are assigned work placement in a corporation in the country of the target language—which is the perfect complement to cross-cultural training. In addition, where there are universities that send their

students abroad on a mandatory work placement, other universities are already offering International Management courses in conjunction with foreign universities.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> With the purpose of analyzing the study of English as a foreign language, Braj B. Kachru (1985) suggests that the cultures of the world be divided into three categories: the Inner Circle, or cultures that are English-speaking, i.e. Britain, the US, Australia, New Zealand and Canada; the Outer Circle, or cultures that are former colonies of either Britain or the US and where English is not an official language but is largely spoken for many purposes; and the Expanding Circle, in which countries where English has become a second language are to be included, for example European countries, Japan, China, and so on.

<sup>2</sup> The aim of intercultural training is to awaken the learners' awareness that there is a difference between communication among people from the same cultural background and communication among people from different cultures. Jim Baxter's (1983: 318-319) checklist illustrates the type of cultural awareness sought (in this case in a meeting between American and Japanese businessmen):

- Do I speak slowly and clearly enough?
- Do I repeat the exact sentence when repetition is requested?
- Do I include Japanese managers in my conversations with Americans?
- Do I speak standard English?
- Do I use gestures to clarify my points?
- Do I emphasize the 'wh' question words?
- Do I ask yes/no questions for clarification?
- Do I clearly state the connecting words and phrases?
- Do I speak English when Japanese managers speak English to me?
- Do I use easy words?
- Do I avoid using idioms and metaphors?
- Do I allow Japanese managers to finish what they want to say before I speak?
- Do I give encouragement and support to Japanese managers in their efforts to use English?

<sup>3</sup> Culture endows language with 'shared understandings'; Harold Garfinkel declares that "The stability and meaningfulness of our daily social life depend on the sharing of unstated cultural assumptions about what is said and why" (Garfinkel 1984: 95).

<sup>4</sup> Hovland and Janis (1959) consider non-verbal aspects key elements in their chart of persuasive communication:

SOURCE	MESSAGE	RECIPIENT	SITUATION/CONTEXT
1. Status or credibility	1. Non-verbal aspects	1. Level of education	1. Formal or informal
2. Attractiveness	2. Explicit or implicit	2. Function of attitudes	2. Kind and degree of commitment
3. Trustworthiness	3. Level of emotional appeal	3. Resistance to persuasion	3. Laboratory or real-life
4. Non-verbal behavior	4. One-sided vs. Two-sided	4. Latitude of acceptance and rejection	
	5. Order of presentation (primacy-recency)	5. Individual differences	

<sup>5</sup> That Anthony Giddens defines as: "The exchange of information and meaning through facial expressions, gestures and movements of the body" (Giddens 1993: 91).

<sup>6</sup> Their proxemic rules are likely to make the British look distant and the Spaniards (too?) kind. To explain how proxemics are vital in any type of business we would here like to recall another anecdote. Ardila was employed by the Spanish army as staff translator in the 11th Brigade of Infantry. This unit had participated in the U.N. peace missions in Bosnia (which is a contact culture) in 1994; there, they had been under the command of a British division. He suffered many comments from the officers who had been stationed in Bosnia and claimed that, over there, the British were the most hated nationality by both international forces and the native population. They explained the source of such hatred with this anecdote: whenever the British commanders had to meet with Bosnian authorities, the natives felt very much perturbed by the 'distant coldness' of the British. On the other hand, Spanish commanding officers would always begin meetings with the Bosnians by greeting them effusively, inviting them to share the same side of the table and offering great amounts of Spanish food and wine. Bosnians would fear meetings with the British, whereas they were always looking forward to have something to discuss with the Spanish commanding officers.

<sup>7</sup> Fay does not consider oculosics a part of paralinguistic features or 'body language'. Again, cf. Lyons (1996: 14).

Facultad de Formación del Profesorado  
Universidad de Extremadura  
10071 Cáceres SPAIN  
jardila@unex.es

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