

Beyond Prejudices and Biases: Search for Sensitivity in Language for Effective Communication

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Abstract: As the world is becoming a shrinking hub of varied ethnicities and people, the global Businesses are increasingly becoming multifarious in terms of their services, employees and customers. Language, at times intentionally or unintentionally, can disrupt delicate balance of interpersonal relationships both within an organization and outside an organization. This paper explores how insensitive use of language can alienate the strong base of cliente comprising of diverse group of people. The paper emphasizes how language sensitivity can be used to augment acceptance, appeal and success of a product, person and organization.

Keywords: Language Sensitivity, Language sensibility, Prescriptivism, Descriptivism, Effective Communication

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If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.

—Nelson Mandela

I. Introduction

My weather is predicted by a satellite. My friends, relatives, colleagues are no longer in a far off land. They are always here with me with a push of button enabling a video call or a video conference. Journeys which took months, weeks and days have now been reduced to just few hours. Thanks to air carriers which move faster than the speed of light. We no longer have to go in remote areas to buy and sell our goods, e-banking and Wallet Apps have given new direction to the ways we handle cash. With international brands knocking our doors and desi brands trying to find a strong foothold in international markets, the world as we know it now has actually become a global village with much higher probability of people with different ethnicity, religion, culture and ancestry living together, working together and dreaming together.

Physically, technologically the world has undoubtedly become a smaller place to live in. However, the pertinent question needed to be addressed urgently is whether we have enhanced cultural sensitivity to tackle and handle such a diverse group of employers and customers in the brave new world. It is a question which has been aptly verbalized by Dean Barnlund, "Can we generate the new cultural attitudes required by our technological virtuosity?" (36). According to Barnlund the answer is not very reassuring: "Each new stretching of human sensitivity and loyalty has taken generations to become firmly assimilated in the human psyche" (36). History is replete with the examples of battles, fights and wars between peoples of different religion, tribes, countries and civilization. Despite advancement in every walk of life, man is still learning to live peacefully and harmoniously with himself and his surroundings.

If cultural diversity has become a norm, cultural clashes are also painful reality which must be tackled to usher in a more peaceful, ennobling and productive society. "Fear of other" has been documented quite fairly in the literary and philosophical realms. However, human behaviour suggests that man continues to be apprehensive about co-existence and 'othering' remains a common practice. "Processes of exclusion by categorization are central to certain ideological mechanism" (Howthorn 249). The use of 'ideological' makes it appear as if 'othering' is restricted to certain ideology, but in reality human psychology suggests that we tend to view people practicing different value systems with our own experiences and predispositions. In doing so we create the 'other' and later on the difference between us and them becomes so large that it looks unsurmountable.

Fear of unknown can be mitigated by language and communication but both language and communication are dependent on so many factors that effective communication itself becomes a challenge. One of the most important factor influencing communication is culture. This paper focuses on areas where language can guide us in becoming better communicators. Culture permeates each and everything we may think of, or put

to action. A strong cultural underpinning drives us in our routine and special moments of accomplishments. From how we talk to when we decide to talk, from what we value to what we choose – everything is decided by culture. If the language of the employer hiring an employee or the language of a company selling a product overlooks the cultural bedrock of its target audience, the result can vary from total alienation to total disaster in public relations. Adjustments, re-workings and cultural sensitivity are needed in communication to accommodate neglected and marginalized sections.

The dynamics of international businesses are not just affected by the legal and political framework of the land, they are also affected by unique social, cultural and psychological factors operating within and outside that society. While marketing your product, if words and content are not carefully chosen, then even the best of communication houses and brands can go wrong. The point is further elucidated by two infamous examples of racist ads.

The PSP billboard ad of Sony Corporation America read: "Playstation. Portable. White is Coming". With this tagline was the image of a white woman holding a shorter black woman. The ad was conceived to promote their new all white PSP. Given the racist picture and content of the language the ad was badly received by audience. The use of word 'white' with a dramatic confrontation between a black and a white woman symbolized canonization and idealization of white supremacy and was criticized for its racial overtones. Instead of giving the impression that Sony Corporation was trying to focus on the contrast between their black PSP model and the new ceramic white PSP model, the ad left the audience confused as it seemed to suggest that blacks should know their place since white is coming.

Nivea's Re-Civilize yourself ad of 2011 is another example of how insensitive language and disregard for other people's way of living can land you in trouble and label you and your product as racists. The ad promoting Nivea's line of men's skin care products portrayed a dainty looking and neatly shaven Afro-American man throwing away the head of not so clean shaven Afro-American. This picture was captioned with the punchline - Re-civilize yourself. The words implied that without Nivea and its products Afro-Americans were dirty, uncivilized and unpolished entities. Strong racial overtones of the word 'Re-civilize' seemed to suggest that without Nivea Afro-Americans looked like a replica of a beast and they required re-induction and re-civilization through a range of products offered by Nivea. There was huge uproar against the obvious devaluation of Afro-Americans in this ad. Nivea had to apologize through its Facebook page: "Thank you for caring enough to give us your feedback about the recent 'Re-civilized' Nivea for Men ad. This ad was inappropriate and offensive. It was never our intention to offend anyone, for this we are deeply sorry. This ad will never be used again" (Minato). A handsome amount of money and infinite energy is put in to create the image of a brand and cultural insensitivity can go a long way in sabotaging the image of the brand.

For realization of the dream of one world, we will have to learn to be careful in applying the terminology we use while describing or referring to others. Acquiring language sensitivity is a second step. First is acquisition of cultural sensitivity. Cultural sensitivity is a must have tool if we want to avoid being trapped in a language which may be insensitive, sexist, racist and downright negative. Cultural sensitivity is a difficult thing to master. But it is not impossible to acquire.

Social reality is the sum total of both subjective and objective cultures. 'Objective culture' includes "social, economic, political and linguistic systems" that are studied as part of school and college syllabus (Bennett 3). Bennett points out that objective culture includes study of history, development and various structures of different groups. It can easily be documented to generate data and knowledge about a particular set of people. Subjective culture works at a more covert level. It is hard to pin point but it functions stealthily and informs our everyday thoughts, action and behaviour. "A good working definition of subjective culture is the learned and shared patterns of beliefs, behaviors, and values of groups of interacting people" (Bennett 3). Subjective culture deals with cultural assumptions, values, non-verbal behavior and thinking processes that decide how we perceive and react to reality. For better inter-cultural communication we will have to understand both objective and subjective culture of a group of people.

According to Edward T. Hall, "Simply talking about 'cultural differences' and how we must respect them is a hollow cliché. And in fact, intellectualizing isn't much more helpful either, at least at first" (63). Culture sensitivity cannot be enhanced until we make an attempt to understand, appreciate and respect the difference between two cultures, two classes, two sections, two regions and two people. Inter-cultural communication is dependent on how we approach difference.

The common belief is that the end result of globalization will be a smaller and more similar world. With English establishing its numero uno position as the language of global trade, it is natural for us to believe that Western style of business ethics are increasingly becoming the norm in developing and emerging markets. However, with increasing hegemonization of business practices, dissent and unrest is also growing. When people from countries with non-European roots like India, China, Brazil trade with America and Europe, a cultural chasm makes negotiation difficult.

With colonization becoming a distant memory of the past, the concept of swadeshi and indigenous is picking up in the peoples of different countries and communities. If some traditions of yesterday are giving way, there are equal numbers of traditions which are being nurtured and preserved by these people. American invention of drafting the letters with complete Block style has been accepted by most of the companies operating in India. Except letter-head, everything else in the letter is aligned with the left margin now a days. However, what we have not been able to adopt is the American way of addressing people without using 'dear' or 'respected'. So in India in most of the letters 'Dear Sir' is a preferred salutation rather than the use of the word 'Sir' to address people. This doesn't mean that Americans are less courteous. It means that deference is given more importance even in professional settings in countries like India, Japan, and Brazil.

This is just an example of a huge difference between high context cultures and low context cultures aptly summarized by Edward T. Hall. In high context cultures, the instructions cannot be comprehended without sufficient background information. However, in low context cultures, information is clear cut, unambiguous and crisp. In such countries, agreement or disagreement are framed in clear cut language with no scope of ambiguity. However, in countries like India, disagreement can be taken as a personal indictment rather than a professional decision. Hence people have to be careful in giving their opinions, if 'no' is not supported by valid reason. Likewise employees think twice before saying 'No' to their bosses or people occupying a more respectable position than them. So in a discussion an American is more likely to say that he did not understand it as compared to an Indian or a Japanese. In countries with non-European roots sensibilities are people-centric. If a proposition is unacceptable, the response of an Indian or Japanese is more likely to be indirect. 'Yes' is not always used to show agreement. A classic example of this confusion is given by LaRay M. Barna: "When a non-native speaker first hears the English phrase, 'Won't you have some tea?' He or she listens to the literal meaning of the sentence and answers, 'No' meaning that he or she wants some. The U.S. hostess, on the other hand, ignores the double negative because of common usage, and the guest gets no tea" (179-180).

In many cultures, direct and straight forward communication is given preference. However, in others cultures courtesy, politeness and reverence are given more importance. Hence, you will not come across direct, clear cut instructions in these cultures. Most of the instructions are left to implied meaning. It's a basic difference between rule-centric and relation-centric cultures. If this difference is not acknowledged it may create a problem in effective communication. In relation-centric culture, a person may expect some relaxation in the rules and regulations applied to him based on the good performance shown by him. However, in rule-centric cultures, the dos and don'ts are respected for their own objectivity and merit. Communication between two persons hailing from two different contexts is bound to be problematic. If this distinction is not understood, disregard of personal rapport in favor of a rule bound instruction may be treated as arrogance by the person belonging to a relationship-centric culture and bending of rules to favor personal camaraderie may be seen as a sign of weakness and lack of steadfastness on the part of a person belonging to a rule-centric culture.

The differences abound. It will be immature to think that these differences can be erased or two people from different backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities can be made to think and act alike. That is why the concept of a melting pot in America failed. The key to overcome barriers of biases and prejudices in language used for communication lies with the acknowledgement of the fact that this world is a beautiful patchwork quilt. Every patch is unique and we need to stitch together these different patches with a subtle thread of sensitive language to make a beautiful design. While addressing a team of doctors in a medical conclave, if the guest of honor suggests that the doctors should spend more quality time with their wives and children, the chances are that his speech will face the music for ignoring a large section of women doctors who may be struggling equally hard to spend quality time with members of their family. While communicating with others, the individual personality of the receiver should garner maximum attention. A willingness to include and incorporate is the essential ingredient of communication which is needed in the majority of the people who want their communication to be successful. Accepting responsibility for using cultural sensitivity in language is the need of the hour for all of us for a safer and more peaceful world.

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