Interpreting across Schema Gaps in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract—**Interpreting is an act of intercultural communication. The interpreter has to interpret across subjects, languages and cultures to make intercultural communication successful. During such a communicative process, there are schematic gaps for the interpreter to overcome, such as language schema gaps, cultural schema gaps and so on. The interpreter has to interpret across schema gaps to help people who speak a different language communicate with each other. In this paper, schema gaps in intercultural communication are analyzed, and strategies are given on how to overcome schema gaps in intercultural communication through interpreting.**

Keywords—interpreting; schema; intercultural communication

I.　INTRODUCTION

The need to communicate is part of man's inherent being. Communication takes place all around us. Mankind has communicated in various ways since the beginning of their existence, by means of drawings, writings, signals, symbols and language. Communication, including writing and talking, as well as nonverbal communication, visual communication, and electronic communication, is a vital part of personal life. Despite its ubiquity in our daily life, there has been no universally accepted definition of communication due to its diversity, as there exist at least 50 modes of interpersonal communication that draw upon dozens of discrete intellectual disciplines and analytic approaches, and may therefore be analyzed in at least 50 different ways. Communication is "a dynamic transactional behavior-affecting process in which people behave intentionally in order to induce or elicit a particular response from another person" [1], "the process of understanding and sharing meaning" [2], or "the process of creating meaning between two or more people" [3].

In the author's viewpoint, communication can be seen in a simple way as information exchange between a message sender and receiver. The process is a two-way interactive one of message encoding on the sender's part and of message decoding on the receiver's part. What are universally involved in this process are schemata, no matter by what channels the communication takes place, be it verbal or non-verbal, oral or visual.

There can be successful communication without words or sounds, as a gesture may convey enough, but without shared schemata, communication would be difficult and even impossible, for shared schemata lay the basis of communication.

For example, when delivering a lecture the speaker may need to use PowerPoint to illustrate. If the lecture happens to be given at night, he may just say "light" for the light to be turned off so that the PowerPoint can be seen better. After he is finished with the PowerPoint, he may just say "light" for the light to be turned on. How can the same word be used to direct two opposite acts? If we look into this question from the schematic perspective, it will not be hard to understand. In the schema of "light", there are two default values: turn the light on and turn the light off. So, with the light on, the utterance "light" will only activate the schema of "turn off the light". And in the schema of "darkness", there is also a default value of "turn on the light to disperse the darkness". With the light off and darkness there, the utterance "light" will only activate the schema of "turn on the light". But all this can only be made possible with shared schemata. From this usually quoted example in pragmatic studies, we have some idea of shared schemata as the basis of communication.

Shared schemata can explain omission by assuming that the "default elements" of the schema activated can be taken as known. Thus it is not that the superfluous information in the second version of our example is not true, but rather that it is assumed—and that the witness can, and should, assume it is assumed. When the sender of a message makes the assumption that an receiver's schemata correspond to a significant degree with his or her own, then it is only necessary to mention specific features which are not contained in it (the time of getting up and the contents of the breakfast, for example); other features (like getting out of bed and getting dressed) will be assumed to be present by default and thus omitted.

II.　SCHEMA-RELATED PROBLEMS IN COMMUNICATION

There are three major schema-related problems in communication, namely, lack of shared schemata, failure to activate schemata, and activation of the wrong schemata.

A.　Lack of Shared Schemata

It takes shared schemata for people to communicate successfully. Sometimes, however, such shared schemata may be lacking, and due to this lack of shared schemata, communication failure and even misunderstanding take place. For example, there is a popular joke on the Internet about the

phenomenon of learning English without paying enough attention to its use of euphemism. A college student who could speak fluent English went with a foreign expert to the Great Wall, serving as his guide and interpreter as well. The expert was much satisfied with the student's service. Suddenly, the expert asked: "May I go somewhere?" The student replied: "Of course, you can go anywhere." The expert, greatly embarrassed, pulled a long face instantly. The student fully caught what the expert said, but misunderstood it. We can say that it was because he had no idea of what "go somewhere" means in euphemism. From the schematic perspective, we can go a little deeper, however; it is because he lacked the shared language schema of "go somewhere" as a euphemism expression for "go to the toilet" that he made such a terrible mistake in communication.

B. Failure to Activate Schemata

One may have the kind of schemata needed to understand what one hears or reads. But due to lack of any clue or stimulus to activate the schemata, comprehension failure or retarded comprehension still arise. It is not rare that communication fails where shared schemata do exist. Shared schemata, if not of easy accessibility due to lack of the stimulus or clue, may not be activated in time to make comprehension possible, especially in oral communication. A person who talks in a vague way is hard to understand and easy to misunderstand, as he offers few or no clues to the schemata hidden in what he says, making it hard for the listener to access the right schemata. A good communicator, if not being vague on purpose, should ensure schema accessibility by using clear, plain language.

C. Activation of the Wrong Schemata

Sometimes, unlike activation failure of schemata mentioned above, there are schemata activated indeed, yet unfortunately wrong schemata rather than the right ones. A lot of examples can be found in cross-cultural communication here. For example, Chinese like to pat a kid's head to show intimacy. A Chinese woman will be much pleased if one pats her kid's head and says "how cute your kid is". Such an act conjures up her schemata of "praise" and "appreciation". To her it is a kind of praise and appreciation. If one does the same in Thailand, however, one will only provoke hard feelings. For in Thailand, the head is seen as a sacred part of the body and can't be touched at all. Instead of evoking the schemata of "praise" and "appreciation", one activates schemata such as "insult" and "disrespect". Unlike the failure of understanding due to lack of shared schemata, the activation of the wrong schemata is more dangerous and harmful in communication and must be guarded against. This is caused by cultural schema conflict in which the same act stimulates different feelings and attitudes as sometimes schemata may seem the same but actually completely different and even conflicting. For example, if a Chinese says he wants his son to be a dragon which means "somebody" in Chinese, an Englishman, due to the fact that a dragon means someone fierce and evil in his culture, will be puzzled: why would he want his son to be a fierce evil man? Here the schema of dragon in Chinese culture is completely different from and conflicting with that in British culture.

III. SCHEMATA IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH INTERPRETING

Interpreting is a service provided to facilitate communication between people who share no or few language schemata. It is essentially "a service activity with a communicative function" [4].

As the speaker and the listener are from two different cultures [5], such a service is in fact an act of intercultural communication. The ultimate aim of interpreting is to help achieve successful communication ideally the same as that between people who share the same language and culture, although it is in fact like mission impossible in real-life situations. The explanation lies in the fact that there are too many barriers to overcome to convey a message from its source to the destination through interpreting without something lost or distorted. From the schematic perspective, intercultural communication through interpreting is a complicated process in which three-party interaction of schemata takes place. An examination into such a process helps identify the barriers, account for them and offer food for thought as to how to overcome these barriers.

A. Shared Schemata as the Basis of Intercultural Communication

Shared schemata lay the basis of communication with shared language schemata at the core. In intercultural communication through interpreting, there are generally no or few shared language schemata between the speaker and the listener. That explains the reasonable existence of the interpreter, because he or she has shared language schemata with both the speaker and the listener and therefore can serve as a schema mediator.

Language alone can't do all the communication. It also takes topic schemata to communicate well. Unlike language schemata, there are usually sufficient shared topic schemata in different languages between the speaker and the listener in intercultural communication through interpreting.

Text schemata play a very important role in communication, in that they offer clues to the ordering of information in a speech of a certain text type, and such clues are very helpful to information retrieval and anticipation. So in intercultural communication, shared text schemata are also very important.

The sharing of cultural schemata is a much more complicated issue. In fact, despite the variety of cultures and their great differences, cultures have a lot in common. For example, "rose" represents love in many cultures, including Chinese culture and American culture, which shows that shared cultural schemata exist in different cultures. And there are feelings like love, hate, and compassion in all cultures. The problem is that such feelings may be triggered by different schemata. For example, the utterance "dog" conjures up feelings like "being insulted" to Chinese as it is often seen as a humiliating word, while to American people, the word "dog" evokes no hard feelings at all. This is a case of cultural schema conflict. And there are cultural schemata totally specific to a culture or some cultures and there are no equivalent schemata in another culture or other cultures. Such a lack of shared

cultural schemata may pose a serious barrier to intercultural communication.

Shared schemata between the speaker and the audience lay the foundation for successful communication. The interpreter's job is to activate the shared schemata so that new messages can be absorbed on the basis of these schemata and hence successful communication becomes possible.

B. Schema Gaps in Intercultural Communication through Interpreting

By schema gaps, the author means schematic difficulties that result from lack of shared schemata, schema difference and so on. Due to difference in educational, cultural and professional background and so on, there exist schema gaps in intercultural communication. The first kind that comes to our mind may be the language schema gap which justifies the existence of the interpreter. In addition to the language schema gap, other schema gaps such as topic schema gaps, text schema gaps and especially cultural schema gaps are also encountered in intercultural communication. It is the interpreter's job to overcome such gaps to make intercultural communication successful.

In intercultural communication through interpretation, three-way schema gaps exist between the speaker and the listener, between the interpreter and the listener, and between the speaker and the interpreter as well.

Firstly, schema gaps between the speaker and the listener. In this regard, mainly cultural schema gaps and topic schema gaps call for the interpreter's attention. The speaker and the listener are supposed to have great cultural schema gaps as they speak different languages with different cultures behind them. Such cultural schema gaps, if not overcome by the interpreter, become communication barriers and even give rise to misunderstanding. Take topic schema gaps as an example, two situations may exist. The first is that the speaker and the listener have a large sharing of topic schemata encoded in different languages, for example, in business negotiations, dialogues between state leaders of different countries, forums attended by specialists and so on. On such occasions, the speaker and the listener have few topic schema gaps. The interpreter's role is to activate the listener's topic schemata by interpreting SL into TL, while the interpreter's own topic schemata may be smaller than those of the speaker and the listener as well. The second is that the speaker and the listener have a much smaller sharing of topic schemata. The interpreter's role is to help the listener absorb new information on the basis of their topic knowledge which may be very insufficient, as in the case of interpreting a professional speech delivered to lay people. Sometimes he or she has to give explanations on the new information for the listener to understand.

Secondly, schema gaps between the interpreter and the listener, such as language schema gaps. In English-Chinese interpretation, the listener may not understand expressions the interpreter uses due to language schema gaps. In Chinese-English interpretation, an English-speaking listener may find the interpreter hard to understand if the interpreter happens to speak with a strong Chinese accent. There are also topic

schema gaps to be considered, as the interpreter usually has fewer topic schemata than the listener if the listener doesn't happen to be a layman whose topic schemata are usually fewer than those of the interpreter, for the interpreter can build up some topic schemata through assignment-oriented preparation.

Thirdly, schema gaps between the speaker and the interpreter. In Chinese-English interpretation, language schema gaps are usually not so serious unless the speaker has a strong accent and uses slang expressions which sound Greek to the interpreter. While in English-Chinese interpretation, language schema gaps cause more difficulty and problems for the interpreter, as English is not his mother tongue. As for topic schema gaps, the interpreter usually has fewer topic schemata than the speaker. Such topic schemata gaps lead to problems like odd interpretation of terms, which is said to be most annoying to the listener.

IV. OVERCOMING SCHEMA GAPS TO FACILITATE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH INTERPRETING

A. Be Aware of Schema Gaps

To overcome schema gaps to facilitate communication, the interpreter should first of all be keenly aware of the schema gaps discussed above. With view to schema gaps between the speaker and the listener, the interpreter's task is to facilitate communication by overcoming schema gaps. In this case, he or she should keep the cooperative principle in mind. That is to say, he or she should make sure the listener understands what is interpreted. If there are troubling schema gaps that will result in confusion or misunderstanding on the listener's part, the interpreter should make efforts to explain rather than resort to word-for-word interpretation. To do so, he or she should always try to enlarge his or her network of schemata, which will ensure accurate interpreting or explanation of schemata and thus enforcing his confidence and achieve better performance.

B. Coping Strategies to Overcome Schema Gaps

To overcome schema gaps, the interpreter has some coping strategies to resort to.

Firstly, try to bring into full play the complementary function of his or her schemata. For example, an interpreter may be strong at language schemata but comparatively weak at topic schemata. He or she may not be able to interpret certain technical terms accurately, but he or she can rely more on the language schemata to convey the main ideas in a coherent and fluent way rather than stumble over such terms by trying to figure out an accurate translation. His or her interpretation of such terms may sound odd to professional ears but can still activate the right schema in the listener's mind, for the listener can alleviate more efforts to figure out what the inaccurate terms interpreted mean, as the coherence and fluency of the interpretation on the whole will ease his efforts to understand the rest of the messages. If an interpreter has strong text schemata, he or she can better generalize what the speaker says by grasping the speaker's train of thoughts and anticipate what is to come next.

Secondly, try to make modification of what has not been satisfactorily interpreted. Schemata can be modified by fitting new information to it during the process of information exchange. Thus what's been interpreted unsatisfactorily can be remedied when it is repeated. An interpreter should make good use of schema modification to strive for better performance during the whole interpreting process.

Thirdly, try to get help. Most of the time the interpreter works alone with only himself or herself to rely on. But on some occasions there may be colleagues to turn to. The interpreter can ask for their help. If possible, he or she can also ask the speaker to rephrase himself. On some informal occasions, he or she can even consult a dictionary, paper or electronic.

Fourthly, try to make a good pre-interpreting preparation. Try to get the speech draft in advance, if any; find out as much as possible about what the speech is about if no draft is available. Search for topic-related information from sources available, such as the Internet, libraries, professionals, and so on. If possible, talk to the speaker in advance to get familiar with his or her accent so that the phonological schema can be adjusted for faster activation. Such a face-to-face communication may also give the interpreter a chance to ask the speaker to be considerate while delivering the speech, such as not speaking too fast.

Last but not least, on occasions where the speaker and listeners share almost the same topic schemata, the interpreter is advised to pay more attention to fluency and coherence while interpreting, instead of spending too much effort on single troubling terms at the cost of fluency and coherence and even the messages that come next, for despite the inaccuracy of terms interpreted, the speaker and listeners share topic schemata enough to understand what such inaccurate terms really refer to. For example if the interpreter puts "memory" into "jiyiwu" in an IT forum, it is ok, for everyone knows what it refers to in the context.

V. CONCLUSION

Interpretation is an act of intercultural communication. Shared schemata lay the basis of communication. In intercultural communication through interpretation schema gaps have to be overcome to achieve communicative purposes. An interpreter needs to enhance his or her schema competence to better fulfill the task of bringing about successful intercultural communication through interpreting. The interpreter should be well aware of the cultural schema gaps in intercultural communication. And he or she should be culturally minded in any time and any place. What's more, he or she should strive to be bicultural, as in Grosjean's words, "many people are bilingual without being bicultural"[6].

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