

## Some Evidence of Cross - Cultural Transfer

### and Some Proposals on Second/Foreign Language Teaching

*Wilaiwan Kanittanan*

*Thammasat University*

As a native speaker of any language, one has both linguistic and communicative competence. That is one has internalized not only the dictionary and grammatical rules but also all that is required in verbal behavior. Not only can one produce all the grammatical sentences but one can participate appropriately and effectively in a verbal communication. One can tell if a sentence is grammatical or if what is being said is a joke, an insult, something polite or something inappropriate and in certain situations one knows what one is expected to say.

In teaching a second or a foreign language, it appears that the emphasis is mainly on the teaching of grammar rules. The communicative aspect to the language has not received much attention in the language teaching circle. If any teaching of the communicative aspect is taught at all, it is done through the teaching of grammatical rules. That is it has always been secondary to the teaching of grammar.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first to present some evidence of cross - cultural transfer, from Thai into English, and second to present some proposals for the second/foreign language teaching.

Examples cited in this paper are collected from Thai students studying at Thammasat University, Thai teachers who have studied in English speaking countries, and English teachers who are native speakers of English.

The following examples will serve to show us that language learners, in some cases, transfer their linguistic behavior from the first language to the second language. We can identify this event as cross - cultural transfer since the linguistic behavior which the learners exhibit does not exist in the second language and it can be traced back to their first language which in this case is the Thai language.

#### Greetings

A Thai student on his way to a bookstore met his English teacher and greeted him.

"Good morning, Mr. Johnson.

Where are you going?"

Mr. Johnson, the teacher, who was expecting the expression, "How are you?", found it awkward to answer his student. It was not the first time that he had been asked this very question and he could not help wondering why the Thai students were interested in where he was going every time he met them.

In fact, the Thai students are not really interested in where their teachers are going and the expression, "Where are you going?" is the Thai way of greeting when people meet on their way. It is equivalent in function to "How are you?" Though the Thai student was speaking English, "Where are you going?", the context which he was referring to was certainly Thai.

#### Addressing people

A young Thai student was spending her Christmas vacation with an American family.

The hostess : Sunee, why don't you just call me Mary.

Mrs. Watson sounds very formal.

Sunee: Yes, thank you Mrs. Watson.

The Thai student could not bring herself to call Mrs. Watson "Mary". This case is so typical of Thai students. They feel very uneasy if they have to call older people by their first name. In order to avoid this uneasy feeling some of them just simply avoid addressing people totally which in some instances causes them to appear impolite. And that is just the opposite of what they want to be. Thai people never address older people by their first name. Normally, kinship terms, such as granny, uncle and sister are used in addressing people. Thus some Thai students try to explain to their English - speaking host families the ways of addressing older people in the Thai society and ask for permission to address their hosts by kinship terms - i.e. auntie or uncle. To my knowledge, most of the Thai students are permitted to go on using "Mr." or "Mrs." and not "uncle" or "auntie".

However, there is an instance when one can address older people by their first name that is when it is preceded by the title "Khun". This title is also used as a polite personal pronoun "You". And it might be

because of this that many Thais think that "You" is equal to "Khun" which is a polite word. This misunderstanding probably leads some Thais to try to get attention from Westerners by saying "Hey, you!" While many westerners say that every time they hear, "Hey, You!" their blood pressure goes up, the Thais think that they are using polite words.

Figurative expressions

- I. A Westerner : Why didn't you tell me that when Mr. Jones was here?  
 A Thai: Oh, I could not do that. I did not want to tear his face in front of other people.
- II. A Thai to an English - speaking person  
 "Hello, my name is Noi. I can't speak English much. I can only speak fish fish snake snake.
- III. A Westerner : Dang didn't pass his road test. He said the car was too old.  
 A Thai : He couldn't dance well and he blamed it on the flute and the drum.

The Thais use figurative expressions quite often in their speech and they tend to think that this type of expression conveys the same meaning in other language as well. The conversations above show that the Thais translate their Thai expressions into English word by word and the translations might not convey any meaning to English - speaking people. "To tear one's face", in I, means to cause someone to lose face or feel embarrassed. "Fish fish snake snake", in the Thai language, means bits and pieces of knowledge. So to know something fish fish snake snake means to know something superficially. When someone says, "I can only speak English fish fish snake snake", he simply means he can speak very little English. In III, the whole sentence means "he did not do well himself and he put the blame on his car". This sentence is translated from the Thai expression "When one cannot dance well, one blames it on the flute and the drum" which in turn means when one cannot do something well, one blames it on other people or things.

Most of the time people seem surprised to find that their figurative

expressions do not convey any meaning when translated into other languages. They simply think that all languages convey meaning in the same manner.

#### Asking questions

In a course of conversation, Thais sometimes talk or ask questions which are considered normal among themselves but which westerners find personal and awkward.

A Westerner : We were in India for six years before we came here.  
 We have not been back to our country for over ten years.  
 A Thai : Yes, you have spent quite a long time in Asia and  
how old are you now?

A Westerner : I went shopping yesterday and I bought this dress as  
 a gift for myself.  
 A Thai : It looks real good on you. How much did you pay for it?  
 A Westerner : I work for an exporting company.  
 A Thai: That sounds interesting. How much do you make?  
 A Westerner : I like Thai food. I often eat it.  
 A Thai: Good for you. You can't gain much weight eating food.  
 It's all spice. How much do you weigh now?

Asking someone's age is not anything personal or impolite among the Thais. Besides, age dominates their speech behavior in many ways. In addressing people, one has to estimate roughly the addressee's age so he can choose to address the person as "Granny" "Auntie" or "Uncle". In some cases, when two people are about the same age and they are not certain who is the older one they will ask each other, or one of them will ask the other their age so they can address each other correctly. Besides, being old is not something negative. Naturally, asking for one's age is not personal. Likewise asking for prices, salary, and weight is also not personal. In fact prices, age and salary are common topics in Thai conversations so naturally they tend to pick these topics when they engage in an English conversation.

#### Formulaic language

Quite contrary to the above, Westerners find that the Thais do not say what is expected of them on several occasions. Or when they say it,

they say something different.

A Westerner : I just won a scholarship.

A Thai: We have to celebrate. You have to give me a treat.

A Westerner: I just got engaged last week.

A Thai : She must be pretty. Who is she?  
What is she like?

---

A Westerner : My father died last month, I had to go back.

A Thai: What did he die of?

---

A Westerner: My brother was in a car accident last week.  
Now he is still in hospital.

A Thai: How is he now?

Instead of saying "Congratulations!", in the first two cases, which is expected of him, the Thai went on to say something else. In the third and the fourth case, the Thai was expected to say, "I am sorry to hear that", but he did not say that. In fact, in the third case the Thai was trying to avoid saying much about the death of his friend's father and in the fourth case he just went right on to ask for the patient's condition without mentioning anything about the accident.

It is not at all surprising that the Thais cited here did not say, "Congratulations" or "I am sorry to hear that", because there are no such formulaic expressions for these occasions. Though now the Thais educated abroad are using some Thai expressions which can be equated to "Congratulations", and "I am sorry to hear that", they are still not common expressions.

#### Polite particles

An English teacher : You need not come up in front of the class  
to tell me that you are late next time,  
you can walk right to your seat.

A Thai student: Yes, sir. Thank you sir.

An English teacher: You should say, "Yes, miss, not yes, sir".

A Thai student: Yes, miss, sir.

"Sir" has been translated in Thai as "khrap" which is a polite particle used by men only. With this translation in mind male students

often use "sir" in their speech to both men and woman and female students hardly use the word.

Though the Thais and Westerners cited in the examples were speaking the same language, English, they did not share the same communicative strategies or verbal routines. The Thais were using the Thai language codes and formulaic expressions in greeting, addressing people, and selecting topics in speaking. They did not share the same speech constraints or expectations. These differences very often cause awkwardness, uneasiness, embarrassment or even communication breakdown. We should regard this deviation from the norm in the target language as an "error". This type of error is comparable to the grammatical one in that with certain "errors", the language learners can still be understood, but with others communication breakdown results.

With "errors" in communicative competence, it can be shown with more certainty that they are the results of the transfer process since this type of error is related to culture and culture is not as universal as language grammar. It can be shown that certain ways of life or customs exist some communities and not others, i.e. it is not a universal custom for people to greet each other by asking where one is going.

All of the examples cited above are good evidence of cross - cultural transfer for the "errors" made can all be traced back to the "Thai way of language". The explanation for the cross - cultural transfer is also parallel to that of the grammatical one. When language learners do not yet have a good competence in the second language but know its vocabulary, the result is usually the second language words arranged in the first language grammar. Likewise, when language learners can speak the second language but lack communicative competence, they will use their first language speech community's linguistic behavior expressed in often correct grammatical rules of the second language.

#### Proposals

If we accept that language is more than just abstract rules and that these rules require an environment or culture to operate in, we must also take into account the teaching of linguistic culture or linguistic behavior when teaching a foreign language. By teaching linguistic culture, it does not simply mean that language learners will be exposed to it through their lessons of grammar. Teaching grammar and teaching linguistic culture must be accomplished separately, each in its own right, so language learners understand clearly what they are learning.

Since it has been established that language learners transfer both their linguistic competence and linguistic culture from their first language to their second language, they should be made aware of the process. They should be conscious of their action in the process. In order to make the best use of the transfer process, the teaching of the following is proposed.

1. The teaching of language - its basic elements.
2. The teaching of the linguistic culture of the target language.

It should be emphasized here that the teaching of the above will not help language learners to speak the target language fluently or enable them to use it competently. To accomplish that, language learners **certainly** need to learn and master the grammatical rules of that particular language. But the teaching of the above will help language learners understand the transfer process which is bound to happen and help them to make the best of it. Consequently, it should help language learners learn the target language better.

#### On Teaching the Nature of Language

Before learning a second language, language learners should be given a proper orientation to what they are going to study if they are old enough to understand. They should know the nature of language and its basic elements. This proposal might be in contradiction with some of the present practice in language teaching. It has been argued that in learning to drive one need not **know** how the engine works and in the same manner in learning to speak a language one need not know what a language is composed of. The **afore** said statement is certainly true but there is a big difference between "just a driver" and "a knowledgeable driver" and likewise between "just a skills learner" and "a competent that equivalent word in the second language is not used figuratively in the same manner. For example, language learner".

Language learners need not know the nature of language as much as a linguist or as much as those who take "Introduction to Linguistics". What language learners really need to know about language before starting their lessons requires a careful analysis which so far we do not have a complete form. It is proposed in this paper that they need to know the basic elements of language - i.e. sounds, word formation, word order, and meaning.

As for sounds, learners need not know what a phoneme is but they should know that a language uses only a limited number of sounds and that some of the sounds which exist in one language might not exist in others and vice versa. Language learners should be aware that they might not be able to hear sounds that do not exist in their first language and that they will tend to substitute such sounds for their own. They should know what stress and tone are and how they function in certain languages. These concepts should help learners understand something about sounds and hence can prepare them to handle sounds in their second language. At least this knowledge should make them aware that not all the sounds used in languages are the same. It is not uncommon for Thai students after many years of studying English to fail to understand why they cannot be understood when they try to speak clearly by enunciating every syllable equally. Many of them even think that native speakers of English are stupid or pretending not to understand.

Again, language learners need not know what a morpheme is, but they should know about both the nature of word formation and different types of word formation in language. They should know that word grammar varies from language to language and that it is related to the grammar of the sentence. They should, again, be aware of the difference between word formations in their first language and in the target language. For example, Thai students should be aware that reduplication which occurs extensively in the Thai language rarely occurs in the English language and that English uses inflections while the Thai language hardly uses any. Lots of grammatical mistakes found among Thai students can be attributed to the unawareness of the difference in word grammar between Thai and English. Thai students tend to use English words without inflections, for example, "The farmer will be go by tomorrow."

On top of the grammatical rules which language learners will have to learn throughout their lessons, they should know about word order in languages. They should be aware that in conveying meaning, different languages use different word orders and they should know about them. For example, the following linear orders in sentences might be introduced to them:

1. verb + object VS. object + verb
2. noun + relative clause VS. relative clause + noun



3. auxiliary verb + main verb VS. main verb + auxiliary verb
4. preposition + object VS. object + postposition
5. noun + genitive VS. genitive + noun
6. comparative + standard VS. standard + comparative
7. modifier + noun VS. noun + modifier

And language learners should be aware of the differences in word order between his first language and the target language, should there be any. Among Thai students, mistakes in word order are very common, this could be the result of, their transferring Thai word order into English, for example, "I met a man very old".

As for meaning, language learners should be aware that though meaning is universal, the use of words is not, and that they cannot always expect equivalent words put in a second language word order to mean the same thing as in their first language. The following might serve to illustrate the two points above.

#### Different uses of words.

The word "uncle" in English is equivalent to the word (lung) in Thai but the use of these two words is not the same. Thai people can go around addressing people as (lung) but native speakers of English do not address strangers as "uncle". So language learners should be aware of this difference.

Besides the literal meaning, language learners should be aware that "to eat" is equal to 'kin' in Thai, but the Thai word 'kin' has so many figurative meanings, i.e. "to corrupt". Besides this word is also used in many other figurative expressions, i.e. khon kin phua, literally "person eat husband", meaning a woman whose husband dies not long after their marriage. The opposite expression 'kin mia', to eat wife, also exists. Language learners should be told that they will not be understood properly if they say, "Mrs. Jones eats her husbands.

#### Equivalent words in the second language word order

There are lots of instances when equivalent words put in the second language word order mean the same thing as in the first language, i.e. "fried egg", "hot water" "friend's aunt" and "red colour". But there are also lots of instances when equivalent words put in the second language word order do not mean the same as in the first language. Very often they do not convey any meaning, for example, "boiled rice" does not mean

"rice soup" in English and likewise "sugar colour" does not mean "brown", "sand sea" does not mean "desert" and "black tiger" does not mean "panther". The direct translation above is very common among Thai students and it is very difficult for English speaking teachers to understand them when reading their essays.

Aside from the meaning and the use of words, language learners should also be aware that proverbs and metaphors work differently in different languages and that they should not translate one into another language for they will not convey the same meaning or any meaning in the second language.

#### On Teaching the Culture of the Target Language

When starting to learn a second or a foreign language, learners should learn about its linguistic culture. By linguistic culture is meant "the way of talking of a speech community". It includes all the formulaic speech in greeting, leaving, thanking, visiting, blessing, cursing, etc. Language learners should know that formulaic language differs from language to language. What is a formulaic expression in one language might not at all be formulaic in another language. Learners should also know if age, social class, status, sex and relationship between speaker and listener govern speech behavior. If they do, they should know how these factors operate.

Language learners should be taught in particular what is considered polite or impolite or inappropriate in speaking so they can avoid being impolite or using inappropriate language. This includes the knowledge of selections of proper topics for conversation and of avoiding what is considered "tabu".

Language learners should be aware of the differences between the two linguistic cultures. They should know that what is considered an appropriate or polite speech in one culture might not be true in another culture. To ask where one is going is something normal and appropriate in the Thai culture but it is not so in an English-speaking one. A factor which is vital or very important in one linguistic culture might not have a place in another culture; for example "age" is a very important factor in the Thai language but it is not significant in English.

Language learners should be made aware of their tendency to transfer the linguistic culture of their first language into a second language. Especially, they should be aware that they tend to translate formulaic

expressions into the second language. The result usually is that their translated formulaic speech is not understood or it is taken literally and conveys a different meaning, i.e. "Where are you going?" is not understood as a gesture of greeting by a native speaker of English. Besides, language learners should know in advance that they can expect some uneasy or difficult feeling when they find that what is inappropriate in their culture turns out to be something appropriate in the second language culture. We have seen from an earlier example that Thai students find it very difficult to address older people by their first name because it is against their culture to do so. Also, they will be able to accept English usage which appears contrary to Thai culture when such points are understood. For example, a Thai can accept without any hard feeling a younger person addressing him by his first name but he will find it very difficult to address an older person by the first name. Or native speakers of English find that it no longer bothers them when asked how much they have paid for something after they have spent some time in Thailand. However, they still find it awkward to ask the question, "How much did you pay for it?"

It must be suggested here once again that the teaching of the linguistic culture of the target language should be done at the beginning of the study and it need not be taught together with the grammar of the language. It can be taught separately as a topic of teaching in its own right.

Conclusion It has been proposed in this paper that language needs to be taught as a totality which comprises grammatical rules and linguistic culture. And to make use of the transfer process, it is proposed that language learners be made aware of their tendency to transfer the linguistic behavior of their first language into the second language. In order for them to be well aware of the nature of this transfer, it is proposed that they study the nature or the basic elements of language and the linguistic culture of the target language. The teaching of the aforesaid should be accomplished separately from the teaching of grammar and should be taught when the study of the language begins.

If this is done it is expected that language learners will become competent learners and not mere language skill learners.