“The Courtship of Language and Culture”

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1.0 Introduction

I have been teaching Indonesian language to American colleges students for about ten years now. During that time I made a lot of mistakes and experienced many misunderstandings when I tried to get my message across. I couldn’t understand why, because I thought that I was speaking English or Indonesian clearly, but there was often something missing in our communication. From that experience I started to become interested in making a personal observation of students, teachers, relatives and friends who are native speakers of English.

The most difficult thing for me while teaching language to foreigners was learning how I should explain simple topics so that students could get both a real understanding of the meaning and a sense of appropriate usage. For example we often find that beginning students of Indonesian have difficulty learning that silahkan “please” is only used when we are offering something to someone, not when we are making a request. We often seen an Indonesian waiter or waitress look puzzled the first time they hear a student reply Kopi silahkan, “Coffee, please (accept it)” to a question about what drink they want to order. Normally they are too polite to correct the Westerner, and can understand what they mean, so they just get the drink that was ordered. For the students the problem seems to be that English has only one word (“please”) that makes either a request or offer sound more polite. We can see from this that in terms of language learning a student who uses silahkan for both forms of “please” in Indonesia still needs to master the cultural context, not just memorize the words.

2.0 Main points to be covered

I would like to define culture and language first, before I go on to discuss some cross-cultural issues. There seem to be as many definitions of "culture" as there are writers about culture. For this paper I am thinking of culture simply as the habits, customs and ways of behaving that are typical for a particular ethnic or national group. Naturally my observations will be overly general, especially since the “Indonesians” I describe may think of themselves as Javanese, Balinese, Minangkabau first (members of a distinct local culture) and second in terms of the nation, Indonesia.

I will focus now on selected issues that I feel may be relevant to teachers and students of either Indonesian or English. The main goal of the examples I will give is to show how cultural misunderstandings come out in speech and behavior. If we understand the sources of these misunderstandings we can begin to devise ways to teach new learners how to be sensitive to cultural factors and begin incorporating them into their verbal and non-verbal communications.
2.1 Small talk or basa-basi

Basa-basi or "small talk" is light conversation on unimportant or non-serious subjects. In many countries small talk is very important to establish the correct social relationship that must provide the foundation for conducting business. While westerners have their forms of small talk ("it looks like it might rain") the “rules” for small talk vary considerably between Indonesian and western cultures. They are not popular in Muslim culture. But the main cultural difference is that we Indonesians would never imagine starting a conversation with a human being by addressing a dog!

Indonesian small talk often includes questions like “how old are you?” or “are you married?” that are quite normal for Indonesians, but can seem intrusive or impolite to a Westerner.

Example 2: an Indonesian meeting an old friend:
“He, udah lama nggak ketemu, kau gemuk deh sekarang. Pasti hidupmu bahagia dan sukses, ya.

"Hey, I haven't seen you for a long time. My my, how fat you are now. You must really happy and successful now, right?

Most Indonesians don’t think twice about making comments like mine. But not Americans! I once said something like that to a student who had been away for a few weeks. I said she looked really gemuk (“fat”). What I meant was that she looked really healthy and happy. But she didn’t take it that way - she didn't speak to me for the next month, until one day she proudly pointed to herself and said: “look, Ary, I’m back to my normal weight again.”

2.2 Directness and indirectness, “truth” and “untruth”

We all appreciate honesty, but not in the same way or to the same degree. Americans really emphasize honesty, to the point they may say that don’t care whether what they say is painful to another person, so long as it is “the truth”. It seems to me that kindness is more emphasized in Indonesian culture. We don’t want to hurt somebody’s feelings by being “brutally honest”. Unfortunately, some Westerners come to feel that this means that Indonesians are "dishonest". I myself don't think that this is true at all – it just points to another cultural difference.

In Bali we have Panca Nreta or "five permissible lies". They include, lying to a child to protect it from danger or from making a “spiritual mistake”. For example we might say: "don't sit on the pillow because it will give you boils." That’s because the head is more sacred than the lower parts of our body, so we don’t want the child to sit on a place reserved for the head.

The relative value of “truth” also comes out Indonesian habits connected with the exchange of food, or promise of an exchange. These habits are an important way of expressing group solidarity, but don’t necessarily mean that there will be any real
exchange of food. This can be very confusing to a new learner of an Indonesian language:

Example 3:

Host: *Mari, silahkan makan dulu, kan sudah siang.*
“Please have a bite to eat, it’s already midday.”

Guest: *Aduh, saya sudah makan tadi, Bu. Silahkan nikmati makannya!*
“Oh dear, I just ate before coming over. Please go ahead and enjoy your meal.”

The guest may be absolutely famished, but will not actually accept a meal until offered several times, with enough coaxing to convince him/her that a meal is in fact being offered. In rural Balinese villages an offer of food is almost as common a greeting as “hello, how are you” in English. So our natural inclination is to say “no” politely. But a western student may have to learn the “rules” here through trial, error and observation.

### 2.3 Different value of time and space

In the West we often hear it said that “time is money”. This is just one of many examples of the great value placed on “saving time” by Westerners. But Indonesians generally take an attitude toward time best summed up in sayings like:

*Biar lambat asal selamat.* “It’s fine to be late, so long as you’re safe.”
*Tak ‘kan lari gunung dikejar.* “A mountain won’t run even when we chase it.”

“Space” is another notion that is completely tied to cultural considerations. In the West people value privacy very highly, and in recent years the idea of respecting someone’s “personal space” has become a common idiom. For Westerners “privacy” is defined in terms of a space where we can do anything we want, without being observed or bothered by other people. But in Bali we think being alone is pathetic, and will always try to keep someone company if they go off alone.

Example 4:

One day my student came to me to ask me about privacy. She said: “How can I find time to be alone while I’m living with my homestay family? Anytime I sit on my verandah reading, one of the family members comes over to join me and chat. S/he just won’t let me alone to do what I want to do.

I told her that in Bali we don’t actually have privacy, that if she wanted to be alone to read she should go into her room and close the door.

”But I don’t want to read in my room,” she replied. “I want to read outside, in the open.”
I said: “I’m sorry, but you just won’t be able to get privacy that way. So long as you are sitting outside, people will feel it’s their duty to keep you company.”

On the other hand, the local Indonesian understanding of “personal space” may strike a Westerner as surprising, especially given that most contemporary Indonesian societies have fairly conservative standards of public behavior:

Example 5:

Student: “After being here for a while I feel like I have to redefine what ‘privacy’ means. At home we feel that we have to be in a space away from other people in order to safeguard our ‘privacy’, especially when we’re doing something like taking a bath. But I notice that my homestay mother and sisters can bathe in the river without feeling at all that anyone passing by is ‘invading their privacy’. I’m not sure how they do it, but Balinese seem to have an invisible wall around them when they bathe in public. Someone may walk by, even a member of the opposite sex, but nobody seems to take notice, or act like anything unusual is happening. I don’t understand how they do it. It’s amazing!”

2.5 Distance of speaking or posture

In Indonesia the distance of speaking depends on gender. People of the same gender can converse with barely any distance between them, but this would not be polite between persons of the opposite gender, even when they are a couple. When two men or two women have a conversation with each other they feel free to touch or hold each other. They may hold hands while conversing, or will walk along arm-in-arm or lie in bed hugging and chatting before falling to sleep. You can imagine what a surprise this may be for western students.

Example 5:

I had an Australian student group who came to Bali to study Balinese art. One of them was studying how to carve leather wayang kulit puppets. Each day he went to the village of Sukawati to study, but one morning he just stayed at the classroom, looking so angry.

Me: “Don’t you have a lesson today?”
He: “No, I’m so cross at that guy at my teacher’s house.”
Me: “Why?”
He: “When he was talking to me he touched me all over!”
Me: “What part of your body?”
He: “My shoulders, my thighs, my arms.”
Me: “But that’s perfectly normal for a Balinese. It’s okay to touch your friend while talking, just as long as it’s not someone of the opposite sex.”
He: “Oh my gosh! I thought he wanted to make out! I guess I’d better go to my lesson now.”
Some western students may be used to a more “touchy feely” kind of friendship with friends or family, but others may feel like they’re getting an electric shock if touched by a member of the same gender. On the other hand they may not be at all surprised at seeing a couple “necking” in public, something that would be sure to bring stares from an Indonesian crowd.

3.0 Non-verbal communication

Many people believe that the language of gestures and emotions is universal; they believe that communication means speaking, and that misunderstandings only arise with speaking (paraphrase of Condon and Yousef, 1985:123).

There are some aspects of non-verbal behavior that seem to be universal, like crying, laughing and smiling. But in my experience there are cultural factors at work in how we interpret these “involuntary” gestures. I will try to illustrate some of those differences here.

3.1 Eye Contact

In America if we talk to people we should look at the person’s eyes to show them that we are paying attention to them. But in Indonesia we are taught not to gaze at somebody’s eyes. People think that we have no respect to them if we stare at them while speaking, especially if a younger person speaks to someone who is significantly older than they are.

I can still remember my mother exploding angrily if I looked too hard at her when speaking. Unfortunately this form of Indonesian politeness is the source of a common stereotype about Asians. I really feel hurt when someone says that Asians are “shifty-eyed”, meaning dishonest, when we are only showing our most polite side when we don’t stare at people who are talking to us. The other side of the picture is so opposite. In Balinese and Javanese shadow plays, the biggest demons always stare wide-eyed at people, showing that they have no inner sense of politeness or refinement!

3.2 Movements of the hands

Nodding and shaking the head almost universally means “yes” or “no”, but there are some cultural variations, such as the Greek emphatic nod, which is a “no” of annoyance and the Indian wag of the head from side to side, which means “yes” (paraphrase of Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1979).

Gestures are a language of their own, as we know from watching good pantomime performances. Here too we can observe cultural differences. In the west people can point at someone with their index finger then wave the finger toward their body several times to mean, “hey you, come over here”. For Indonesians pointing the finger is a gesture reserved for representations of violent behavior in the theater. To call someone over, we extend our right hand, palm downward, then wave all our fingers toward our body several times, to give the idea “please, come over here.”
4.0 Conclusion

Based on the above example I can conclude that language can either separate people or be a bridge that connects them. Therefore part of the language learning process should involve immersing ourselves in the culture we are studying, at least for long enough to begin to understand how culture affects the way we communicate, whether in words or gestures. We should keep in mind that no matter how much we learn about cross-cultural communication we surely will still experience some misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and miscommunications. Making mistakes is perfectly normal, but making the same mistakes repeatedly can be very discouraging. Here are a few tips I have for people studying a new language:

- Try to use your language skill as much as possible with the local people, because you will be able to master the language quickly only by speaking it frequently.
- Don’t worry if you make mistakes; you can learn from your mistakes. Try to understand both grammatical and cultural aspects of your mistakes.
- Observe people’s behavior around you and try to be selective in who you take as a model of good language use.
- Don’t judge people from your first impressions. Understanding people who speak a different language and live in a different culture is a real challenge. It pays not to make judgments in a situation where we may easily change our mind about someone when we understand the social and cultural contexts of what they are saying.
- Success in creating good personal relationships with local people depends a great deal on your sensitivity and respect for other people. For a culture like Indonesia, it also depends very much on your willingness to learn the local rules of etiquette. These are an important part of the total picture of “language and culture” that must be mastered together in order to survive and prosper in unfamiliar “cultural territory”.
Works Cited