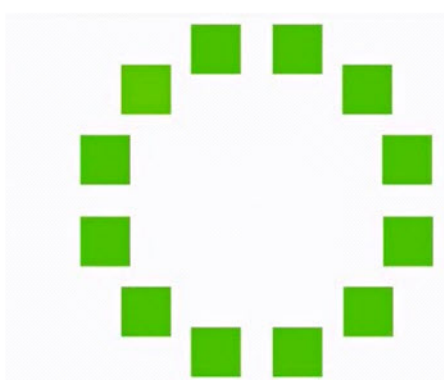


More than words can say

Many people around the world consider English as the international language of business. But how valid is that belief? Can the entire human experience be encapsulated in just one language?



Take a look at the image on the left. How many different shades of green can you see in this collection? Are there any differences at all, or are they all identical?

So how many did you spot? If you thought they are all the same, you wouldn't be alone.

In fact, most of the Western world would agree that all these greens are identical. But in fact, they are not. Here's the same set of squares with their respective RGB values.



As you can see, they are all identical apart from one. So why is this significant? The reason this is interesting is that if you had been a member of the Himba people from northern Namibia, you would have had absolutely no problem spotting the odd one out. In fact it would have stood out like a sore thumb. The Himba people are unique in their ability to discriminate shades of green that outsiders find impossible to tell apart, and this unique ability has been the subject of intense scientific scrutiny for over 50 years. How can it be that one group of people, equipped with exactly the same biological equipment as the rest of us, can see something so clearly that we can't?

There have been numerous theories proposed, but all of them use as a starting point, ideas on how concepts are framed in different cultures and different languages first postulated in the 1930s by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf – now commonly referred to as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis of linguistic relativity.

Language is linked to world view

In a nutshell, the basic idea was that if there isn't a name for it, it doesn't exist. More controversially, Sapir and Whorf argued that things come into existence once we name them. In the case of the Himba people, they can see specific shades of green *because* they have names for them. While some of Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis has since been disproved, recent research has shown that there is a tantalising link between language and colour perception. Interestingly, the Himba don't have names for many of the colours that we westerners are familiar with, and they have great difficulty distinguishing them apart even though to us, the difference is blindingly obvious.

Another well known example is the variety of words Eskimos have for the various forms of snow. A key idea in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is that language reflects the ways that speakers conceptualise the world and their cognitive processes. One idea is that language, and the cognitive processes that underpin it, evolved as tools to better equip the speakers to thrive in the specific environments in which they lived. The Himba needed to be able to distinguish subtly different shades of green to guide their herds to the best pastures; the Eskimo needed to be able to distinguish between hard frozen snow, slushy snow, drifting snow, and so on.

What lies beneath

Language, then, derives from the deep-seated experiences of the culture from which it evolved. While its words may be relatively easy to understand, for outsiders the concepts that underpin them often are not. Language is merely the tip of a very large cultural iceberg – the vast majority of whose bulk lies hidden beneath the surface. The older the culture, the more homogenous it

is in terms of its origins and contact with the outside world, the bigger the iceberg. And the thing with icebergs is that while they may look trivial on the surface, they present a grave danger to those who do not pay sufficient heed to what lies beneath!



Old roots go the deepest

Japan is a very old culture, and it's a culture built on very different ideas to Western cultures. It's a classic example of what social scientists refer to as a "High Context" culture. High Context cultures are common in Asia, and are often based on Confucian principles of collectivism as

opposed to Western ideas of individual endeavour. The strong sense of social order that pervades Confucian societies tends to encourage shared experience; and when we all share the same

experience it soon becomes unnecessary to state the obvious: All Himba, for example, can see that this patch of grass is a different colour to that patch, and it's obvious to Eskimos that this snow is different from that snow. Hence the *context tends to* have a significant bearing on what is being communicated, even though it is unspoken: Low Context cultures, like the US and Europe, tend to be much less homogenous, more oriented around individual experience and therefore not as able to rely on this unspoken "contextual" communication because there is no common experience on which to base it on, so we tend to articulate relevant facts for clarity.

Many of the ideas and concepts which are important in a Japanese context are largely invisible to Westerners because they are so rarely elaborated upon

The concept of deference to social "superiors" is difficult for an modern Europeans, Americans or Australians to truly understand because it's a social construct that has little relevance

In other words, many of the ideas and concepts which are important in a Japanese context are largely invisible to Westerners because they are so rarely elaborated upon – there is no need for the Japanese to do so in normal circumstances. If we don't appreciate that other people's world view may differ significantly from our own, we are heading into dangerous waters.

Of cats and kings

In 1904, Souseki Natsume wrote his famous book "I Am a Cat" in which the main character is a no-good stray cat who ekes-out a precarious existence in the household of a rather arrogant, low-grade teacher with pretensions of academic greatness. From his lowly position, our hero observes and pours scorn on the antics of the various members of the household and the stream of comic characters that pass through its door. Large numbers of English-speaking readers have enjoyed the translated book over the years, without realising that one of the main comedic devices of the original is its title. Japanese doesn't have just one word for "I"; it has lots – at least twenty, in fact. Many of these words are rooted in ideas of social hierarchy. The big joke for Japanese readers is in the choice of word our hero uses to describe himself. In the title, he refers to himself not as "watashi" but as "wagahai" – a term more appropriate for a great lord, rather than a lowly stray cat. His choice of word reveals his mind clearly, and once you understand this, the story that follows becomes far more entertaining: He is the lord of all he surveys; looking down on with utter disdain on his pathetic subjects!

within their contemporary cultures. While the same is true of modern Japan, it should be remembered that feudalism only truly ended in 1945 and the echo of that social hierarchy is still very much alive in the language people use when addressing each other and the customs of everyday business. The feeling a Japanese speaker gets when reading the phrase "Wagahai wa neko dearu" is very different to that of a Westerner reading "I am a cat".

Foreign business people in Japan need to be aware of the fact that these Japanese concepts, and the customs that surround them, are not merely anachronisms that can be

brushed aside for the sake of commercial advantage; they still matter. Here is an example:

When Australian serviced office company Servcorp entered the Japanese market, the firm believed that its unique take on the famous informality of Australian culture was an important part of its brand. Establishing its first branches in Tokyo, the firm issued instructions that its managers were not to bow to customers as this was perceived to be “un-Australian” and counter to its corporate culture. Not surprisingly, this didn’t go down very well. In fact, it was a disaster: By its own admission, Servcorp didn’t land one single contract with a Japanese firm during the time this policy was in force. Eventually realising its mistake, it reversed the decision and found success. It is now the largest Australian-owned company in Japan.

Deference to the hierarchy of society

The concept of respect for the *system of social hierarchy* as well as for individual customers was something the Australian management just didn’t see clearly enough; consequently they rammed their bows, full steam ahead, into the iceberg of Japanese culture and were lucky not to have sunk without trace. Others haven’t been so fortunate.

The business world is littered with the wrecks of foreign businesses (and business people) who have discovered the

hard way that the only way to do business in Japan is the Japanese way. And that means, more than anything, being aware that some of the most important things you need to make allowances for may not be immediately obvious to you. Conventions that arise from Confucian ideas of age-based superiority, from collective decision making, from the importance of precedent may seem irrelevant to you, but that’s only because those concepts exist in your mind only as broad strokes – just like the words “green” and “snow” would in no way convey the precise clarity with which the Himba or Eskimo understand those ideas. To Japanese business people, the meanings of status, obligation, harmony and group loyalty are crystal clear, living concepts. To succeed, you must learn to work within, and in harmony with this framework - even if you don’t fully understand it.

Pushing against the mountain

A recent article by Dr. Bob Tobin, former professor at Keio University, really sums up the futility of trying to fight



Even though we're speaking the same language, are we really understanding each other?

against a system that is immovably entrenched in thousands of years of history.

“When I first started at Keio University more than 20 years ago, I really was in culture shock. I didn't understand the culture of a Japanese university, I could not deal with the piles of paperwork, I couldn't understand why there were so many meetings that lasted so long, etc. I had taught at Boston University and Pepperdine University in America, but Keio was very different. So I complained. And

complained. And I tried to change a lot of things. And I didn't change any thing. A lot of people got upset with me. My partner Hitoshi told me I should just follow along

and do what everyone else was doing--just follow the pack. But that didn't seem to fit my personality nor was it what I wanted to do. I wanted to make a difference, not just do my job.”

“Instead, I changed the way I looked at the whole situation. I took on my other role--the role of a consultant instead of a professor and decided to "study" the situation. I researched how things got done, who had power, which rules were important, what meetings didn't matter, who had influence, and perhaps most importantly I stopped complaining.”

It was only after Bob learned to work in harmony with the Japanese way of doing things, that progress was made. It should be noted that this is not a question of language difficulties. In fact, the problems can become even more acute when everyone is literally speaking the same language.

More than words can say

Rakuten's Hiroshi Mikitani took the bold decision within his organisation that, in order to further its global ambitions, all company business was hitherto to be conducted in English. He termed this process the "Englishnization" of Rakuten. On paper, this seemed like a smart move: Internal processes would be more efficient, it would be easier for Rakuten to communicate with its overseas subsidiaries and such a dramatic move would clearly signal its intentions to move to the global arena. Naturally, getting the entire workforce to switch to a completely different language was not without its problems. But the biggest problems came from rather an unexpected source. It was not the rank and file employees that struggled, it was the managers. And it was not difficulties in mastering the language that caused the problem.



As noted earlier, English – particularly American English, is the product of a comparatively egalitarian culture. English per se does not have status language built into it in the way that Japanese does. So by moving to English, the Japanese workforce had lost an important aspect of its communication ability – the ability to recognise and acknowledge authority in the working environment via "status language". The result was that employees felt disoriented and managers reported a vague sense of loss of status within the organisation, both of which proved distracting and counterproductive to the original aims of the programme.

The very clear conclusion to be drawn from this experience is that language is an expression of the culture that originated it. It embodies more than just the common concepts that we all share. As we saw at the start of this essay, language is actually closely linked to the development of cognitive processes, and that those processes may be unique to one particular culture. Merely swapping one language for another may give the semblance of effective communication, but it will not necessarily lead to an understanding of another's thought processes and world view.

Some of the biggest communication problems are encountered when both sides assume they are fully understanding the other. In management, it is even more important to thoroughly immerse yourself in the culture so that you can come to understand, not just the words, but the processes that drive decisions and that create barriers to progress.

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