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Building Bridges
of Understanding

INTERCULTURAL GRAMMARS:
A LANGUETICS UP-DATE AND A GEOLINGUISTIC CHALLENGE

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ABSTRACT: Intercultural Grammars presuppose that all people everywhere can synergystically communicate with each other to an acceptable degree and at desirable levels of closure, all things being equal. The essential components of such communication, relational rules from which real patterns of success can be projected, and situational qualifiers which must be given both expressive and perceptive focus -- these together form one of the significant dimensions of the discipline currently denominated LANGUETICS. Simply: What specifically communicates "best"? What is confusing? What is offensive or intolerable? What is so distinct as to be ineffable? What do we now know? What can we learn? What must we attain for world-wide communication and effective interaction?

CULTURE GRAMMARS are composed of written and unwritten "rules" which may be assumed or real. These constitute that which is generic to a given people: Japanese, American, Slavic, and so on. As these are broadly identified, contrasted with other communication systems, and given both rational and replicable points at which communicability, tolerance, offense, confusion, etc., take place, there evolve apparent critical patterning which is essential to the use of "language" -- in all of its forms and functions (the ETICS) useful to successful communication and "closure." Closure in this sense is the satisfactory result of what is intended by the communication or interaction: education, motivation, etc.

LANGUETIC categories interrelatedly demonstrate the CONTENT of real or assumed messages on the basis of CULTURE (unique thought, feeling, and action patterns of a people), CONTEXT (time and place of events, interactions, symbols, etc.) and COMMUNICATION modes and codes (verbal -- such as spoken or written words in well-formed syntactic systems, non-verbal, para-verbal, and para-normal -- such as inspiration, "vibes," and other channels of understanding).

Over 1200 elements have been identified as potentially critical to the acceptability of communication, with developmental rules interweaving culture, content and communication modes and codes in what can be called "INTERCULTURAL GRAMMARS." Over 100 countries/cultures have been sampled to illustrate potential miscommunications. World-wide research and development is essential to adequately portray all essential interrelations. More than 125 disciplines have been found to have bearing on intercultural interactions (such as public relations, deontology, ethics, anthropology, linguistics, journalism, conflict analysis, etc.).

Geolinguist implications come from 300+ political and "people" nations, millions of "kindreds," tongues or languages exceeding 10,000, and "peoples" estimated to range to about 25,000 "affinity groups." An INTERCULTURAL READY REFERENCE has been prepared, citing examples, models, and key statements from experts having world-wide focus on communication.

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Orientation to Intercultural Grammars: People do interact -- usually in patterns or by "formulas." They acceptably and regularly communicate. They learn to use mutually meaningful symbols and signs to transfer their understanding, their feelings, their desires, and their motivations one to another.

Somewhat reliable systems of classification can be understood as they work together: words, gestures, colors, time and place, bodily position and movement. These and many more elements of "language" combine into what we call "culture." Culture characterizes the unique or different ways given peoples think, feel, and act -- and why. Results of culture such as art or activity either converge or diverge in recognizable patterns and environments to help us discern and label the distinctions of a people.

Language in its many forms combines with other signal systems to help people interact and "make sense." For example, WHO speaks can be more telling than WHAT is said -- or not, and what is DONE. And what is done might be more significant that what is verbalized. (Actions can speak more loudly than words.) What is seen often alters what is otherwise perceived. (A picture paints more than a thousand words. Or, "I can't believe my eyes.")

People usually interact in ways that seem universal or all-pervasive to them. Combinations and transformations of thought, feeling, and action (speech, stance, smell, symbols) when used widely and often seem to become "right and proper" or "wrong and inappropriate" for specific groups of people. In combination, these are called "CULTURE GRAMMARS."

A paradox of identification of almost stereotypic patterns which characterize how people act and interact is that the theory of probability can predict with almost uncanny precision the overall result of a large number of individual events (what to say, when to say it, etc.) which are each in and of themselves unpredictable. A large number of uncertainties can somehow produce an almost certainty which we call "language and culture."

Though infinite variations make up a "people," we still can and do categorize them by groups: Trukese, Finnish, Tongan. We feel we can read a sort of "people-map" and readily understand differences which make a difference to our motivations, entertainment, information, etc.

However, what may seem clear and appropriate to one people can be not only confusing but offensive to another. What a person says or does in his or her own society can be intolerable in a new setting. (E.g. the American "O.K." sign is obscene in Brazil. In France it often means "zero, zilch." The INTERCULTURAL READY REFERENCE recently produced at the B.Y.U. Language and Intercultural Research Center cites over 1200 samples of such distinct "messages" in literally hundreds of categories.)

Add together words or terms ("democracy," "leader," "pig," ) and all other potential communication "events" -- such as time, place, circumstance, and language patterns, and you have the currently denominated field of Languetics, or, language in its broadest context. Languetics forms the basis for the study and use of INTERCULTURAL GRAMMARS.
Peoples are recognized and valued by their CULTURE GRAMMARS, in identifiable rules, guidelines, codes, basic principles, and their manifestations. ("Oh, yes, they are Americans. You can tell by how they..."

Though never fully transcribed, there are foundations for etiquette, mores, and laws. Learning such patterns can aid understanding and even communication.

INTERcultural grammars become necessary as people try to understand and communicate with OTHER people. For instance, does an American bow in certain circumstances in Japan, as the Japanese do? With what acceptable verbal expressions or silences? What is not appropriate? When does a hand-shake convey comprehensively the equivalent meaning?

Or, in diplomacy, do we do it THEIR way, or they OURS? To resolve our problems with them, how do we deal with their problems with us? When can we find yet another way which can (by synergy) be more acceptable to both of us -- as in negotiation, decision making, or humor?

INTERCULTURAL GRAMMARS are developed by synergy or common acceptance. (E.g. sign languages used between native tribes, courtesies shown visitors though not normally practiced otherwise, etc.)

There may be few invariable rules or exact formulas for such people-to-people "grammar" systems. There always seem to be more individual exceptions than "musts." However, descriptive generalizations can become valuable "maps" for mutual understanding, responses, and outcomes, more particularly so when they conform to repetitive reality. (Of course, we would first recognize that the map represents only part of a territory; any form of language interrelating with all other forms only provides limited-faceted views of what actually happens.)

Maps of people interactions can be valuable in a similar way to periodic charts of elements (in chemistry). They point out special relationships and values. Generalizations can aid in many situations if not attempted for all. When some structure is required and present, we have what can be called GRAMMAR. Bridges between GRAMMARS are INTERCULTURAL GRAMMARS.

Grammars have recognizable logic to the people who use it -- or "hear" its misuse. (Figures of speech, false logic, humor -- these are types of culture-logic.) Grammars are both a product of and part of the people who devise and use them. Intelligible life processes can represent reality, be real, and be affected by other realities -- such as thought patterns, role relationships, aesthetic choice, etc.

The command "DO IT!" likely represents the authority of someone to motivate. Reactions are culturally determined. (THEY might do it, but should WE? How? Under what conditions? With what expected results?)

Thus, when words and other codes or symbols are "strung together," in any acceptable form and identifiable function, they "make sense." If they confuse or offend unintentionally, then an INTERCULTURAL GRAMMAR system may be required to bring about desired interactions or results.

The model on the next page suggests essential elements for manifesting or modifying what can be understandable in certain CONTENT, CONTEXT, CULTURE, and COMMUNICATION modes and codes. Starting at any point, as fits given examples, one can "map" formulas for successful interactions.
May be used, as a map, beginning at any point, according to need and applications. Other factors may also be devised.
Examples follow of how INTERCULTURAL GRAMMAR codes and rules and the guidelines which govern them for specific situations can be generated. (Principles involved and laws which must be followed can be outlined, as sampled at the base of the prototype chart.)

In the middle of the right column one could find codes for F = Female, yA = Young Adult, Pt = Participant, Gp = Group, Tm = Time, and Plc = Place. A young woman who is participating in a group at a certain time and certain place might [see under CUES] evoke empathy, for instance, in one culture but disrespect in another. That is, she might be in a crowd scene that is "affinity -- alike." Someone with a different value system might think it a mob or "rabble." An INTERCULTURAL GRAMMAR would be used to show the difference and give understanding. In speech, a comparative example might be "Now I understand why she is with them, and likes it." (As a map, the chart allows for myriad uses, dimensions.)

From the PROTOTYPE CHART can be generated almost any kind of interactive relationship. Though it is the initial chart comprehending INTERCULTURAL relationships, rules, codes, etc., it is obviously in need of expansion and comprehensive examples. Only completed in the past several weeks, it is already being used in a variety of ways to demonstrate factors and interrelationships of message transfer across cultural and other boundaries. It is a generative "map" and has as many possible uses are there are intercultural situations to work through. It is NOT final but only operationally suggestive of what can be done to create scenarios, examples, rules, guidelines, and indicate what "can be."

In our times, patterns by which people can or cannot be understood and accepted become quite critical. Prototype ready references recently completed at BYU's Language and Intercultural Research Center cite from the literature and intensive interviews such critical patterns. Such examples obviously have to be tested and retested by personal experience and broad applications.

Forms and functions of INTERCULTURAL GRAMMAR rules, guidelines, codes, and principles are only now beginning to be applied (other than intuitively) to critical interactions between the distinct peoples of our world. Reasons for this delayed but urgent task are indicated in questions and quotes appearing with the INTERCULTURAL READY REFERENCE. For reader's interest, some of them appear on the next page. Specific quotations in context are available from BYU/LIRC.

Much is yet to be done. While this is but a beginning, is IS a beginning. As Edward T. Hall (Beyond Culture, Anchor Books, 1977.) indicated,

An almost overwhelming task lies ahead of us to classify situation- al frames and the way in which they build up into larger wholes. Man has had very little experience with this sort of analysis, and I for one have no notion where it will lead us. Research...smooths out contradiction, and makes things simple, logical, and coherent.

To perform that task is a challenge open to you and many of us willing to pay the price of world-wide, people-to-people, urgent and meaningful understanding. A base is being built, through LINGUISTICS and many other scientific studies. Accomplishment requires us all working as one.
Questions and Quotes

WHY IS AN INTERCULTURAL READY-REFERENCE NEEDED?

...The principal function of the International Communication Agency should be to reduce the degree to which misunderstandings and barriers to communication appear.

...Only recently, man did not need (as much) to be aware of the structure of his own behavioral systems (or others') because, living at home, in the behavior of most people was highly predictable. Today, however, man is constantly interacting with strangers, especially to carry on his professional or social duties. His environment, therefore his responses, have undergone changes in his past and these have led to a world of work.

...It is therefore necessary for man to transcend his own culture and the rules can be done only by making the rules by which it operates.

...It can be by definition of variance with existing knowledge; what research does is to smooth out contradiction, makes things simple, logical, and coherent.

...The communicator cannot also be knowing that the people he is working with have different customs, goals, and thought patterns from his own. He must be able to feel his way into people contact with those do not know culture and attitudes. He must be able to work with them and within them, rather than seeing his own values in the confrontation nor protecting themself behind a wall of intellectual detachment.

...There are different perspectives from which to view things, and something can look radically different to persons who view it from different perspectives.

...If we would communicate across cultural barriers, we must learn what to say and how to say it, in terms of the expectations and predispositions of those we want to listen.

...What is the challenge for devising an intercultural ready-reference?

...To abstract such a system from the living idea where none existed before is a formidable task, an intellectual achievement, that can equal the great accomplishments in chemistry, physics, and astronomy.

...The dividing line between language and nonlinguistic knowledge is not as a clear one...there are many other difficulties in deciphering the elements of a culture grammar and grammar, and structure of grammar in our mind.

...Man does not possess and cannot ever have, perfect knowledge and will never predict with any degree of accuracy the outcome of any action made. The objective intelligence is to reduce the uncertainty and to determine the level of risk that is acceptable in terms of the expected benefits from the proposed action.

...What is the urgency? Hasn't this all been done before?

...The speed and acceleration of events is such as to make obsolete and irrelevant almost anything that has been published.

...What is increasingly becoming required is an interdisciplinary research and intercultural management. The data, from this, the problem squarely, are too great to take.

...Our linguistic and cultural myopia is to ignore our business, social, and real world.

...Our great need, desire, and obsession is to bring to this world the candle of understanding.

...What is an intercultural grammar, and why is it needed?

...An intercultural grammar would consist of rules for the arrangement of (cultural) elements that should account for all communications, given by way of the expression of culture.

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LANGUETICS: An Up-Date. INTERCULTURAL GRAMMARS (using elements which number over 1200 essential to specific uses) spring from the study and use of "appropriate language" in any and all of its critical and essential forms and functions.

Languetics, as an intercultural bridge, involves the study and use of practical and real interrelationships of the:

VERBAL (i.e. print, spoken, other symbolic codes); PARA-VERBAL (rate, pitch, lay-out, et al.); NON-VERBAL (anything which is used to, or by which itself does, communicate: events [such as elections being a "voice of the people"], gestures --or their unexpected absence, colors, touch, media ["the medium IS the message"], etc. The current BYU/LIRC TAXONOMY OF ELEMENTS consists of over 1200 separate potentially essential factors, categorized under CONTENT, CONTEXT, CULTURE, and COMMUNICATION modes and codes. Not to be left out is the PARA-NORMAL (ESP, intuition, inspiration, the "vibes," psycho-kinesis, and other PSI-types of "fourth and fifth dimension communication").

As a scientific discipline, LANGUETICS draws upon and correlates principles and practices from over 130 related disciplines, such as semiotics, cybernetics, linguistics, content analysis, stylistics, translation, etc. (A complete list is available from BYU/LIRC. Models for interrelated research are illustrated in the new INTERCULTURAL READY REFERENCE.)

One of the major principles involved in Languetics is that of IMBRICATION. This term deals literally with what is "missing." For example, a tile broken on a roof may allow rain to come in. Closing up the hole is IMBRICATION. So, in intercultural interactions, finding the "holes" and closing them -- to prevent confusion or offense -- is a Languetics principle called IMBRICATION. The positive application of the principle is to determine where critical points of successful communication can be dealt with consistently, to "build bridges of understanding." (E.g. to know when to wink, with whom, together with what verbal expressions, can be important to youth relationships. What clothing to wear, and colors to use, can also be vitally important to total message acceptance in some situations. What gestures to avoid or use can be good to know -- particularly when these can enhance a message transfer.)

The main point of Languetics is to investigate what "works best" in predictable intercultural situations, or to detect what offends or confuses or otherwise inhibits the desirable results expected in human interactions. As "bridges" are built and appropriately crossed, there can be continually improving understanding, friendship, motivation and all else which the use of LANGUAGE AS COMMUNICATION implies.

A few brief analogies may help readers to understand the purposes, uses, and challenges of Languetics.

Medical I: A doctor can indicate on a graph an area of concern regarding a patient's health. Some sections on the chart demonstrate a quite satisfactory range or tolerance, or "health." Another may indicate where special treatment may be required. The doctor uses the chart in a diagnosis of what might need to be done to assure improved or continuing good health. (An oculist uses a similar chart to prescribe lens preparation so that eyesight can be improved.) [Sample chart: next page.]
DIAGNOSTIC MODEL--LANGUETICS

LANGUETICS MODEL for CRITICAL CONVERSATION: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION LEASURES

[Key: A-D: range of acceptable or tolerable communications; H: high; T: transitional; U: confusing, unclear; O: offensive]

A CONTENT (real or assumed) INHIBITORS
B CONTENT (real or assumed) ENHANCERS
C CULTURE (physical, intellectual, social, emotional, aesthetic, ethical)
D PERSONALITY (physical, cognitive, creative, motivational, emotive, moral)
E CONTEXT — TIME and SEQUENCE
F CONTEXT — PLACE and SPACE
G CONTEXT — PARANORMAL
H COMMUNICATION MODE — PERSONAL (& Group)
I COMMUNICATION MODE — MASS (Organizational)
J COMMUNICATION MODE — DELIVERY (Systemic)
K COMMUNICATION MODE — VERBAL (Composited)
L COMMUNICATION MODE — NONVERBAL (Composited)
M SENDER FACTORS (Feedback Composited)
N RECEIVER FACTORS (Feedback Composited)
O UNKNOWN FACTORS (within or beyond range of acceptability or perception)

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The preceding chart could help in analyzing and diagnosing and prescribing for people seeking improved understanding with other people across international or intercultural barriers. Such a chart can also graph what is "healthy" or "successful" in people-with-people interactions. (For those having interest in the use of such models, the BYU/LIRC INTERCULTURAL READY REFERENCE, in the appendix, provides an introduction to the creation and adequate use of such research and training devices.)

Critical concerns can be graphed, prescribing necessary "treatment," such as apology, restatement, etc. The chart may also indicate a given range of meanings which can be appropriately expressed in certain cultural environments, or others which may cause offense or confusion. (E.g. "Yes, I know what you SAID... but what did you mean? I saw your look and realize you are not being honest.")

The analysis and diagnosis of "best" communication, or of MIS-communication -- between peoples who are socially or linguistically or otherwise "different" -- could make possible the building of bridges of understanding not now available except for intuition or chance.

Medical II: Vaccinations are often successful in helping a body to become immune to certain diseases. (E.g. Salk over polio; innoculations vs. killer pneumonia; exercise for healthy heart; etc.) In the medical chart there is the possibility of preservation or cure. With innoculations we speak of prevention.

To make available certain vital information which can aid people seeking to avoid confusion or offense (or, to positively find a "best way") can be a helpful "vaccination" -- given the need and accuracy of data.

Obviously, there is the determination of risk and effectiveness to be carefully considered. Options must be taken into account. Vaccinations are only about 85% effective in some cases. Risks are possibly greatest when true causes of illness are not known for sure. Yet, real lives and feelings, and understanding -- in many cases, can be helped by injecting minuscule doses of "avoid this" or "use that," or "we can know...."

Recipes: There are basic foods containing needed protein, carbohydrates, fats, etc., which are used in family and institutional menus to "balance" diets. Food served to people who are different may not be attractive. (Do you enjoy fried baby bumble bees? Does milk-drinking come across to you as equivalent to drinking blood? What is "sweet"? What is a "lie"?)

Recipes can be useful provided ingredients are accurately measured and required preparations are made. What else is necessary? The awareness of what is palatable to those who may be given the food to eat!

So with intercultural interactions. Preparations and recipes may be useful IF and WHEN they match "appetites" or predilections and predispositions. Otherwise there may be unexpected or undesirable results.

Homilies, Literary Notes, etc.: Consider the intercultural implications of "A Soft Answer Turneth Away Wrath." (To fighting tribes?) "School thy feelings, oh, my brother." (To an employer?) "A stitch in time saves nine." (What if not available, or is weak?) "Actions speak louder than words." These and other models give a focus for Languetics research/use.
Geolinguistic implications: When we begin to see the interrelations of the many forms of language, we recognize that there is much yet to study, learn, and become acquainted with from "all good books, and languages, tongues, and peoples." (D & C 90:15.)

Verbal languages in our world today number well over 5,000, where one person cannot understand his or her neighbor. Non-spoken languages: of the deaf, of drums, flowers, colors, etc., extend this number tremendously. When we learn all necessary interrelationships of all of the world's "languages," we will begin to have the complete model of Languetics. Until then, we are only guessing and bluffing our way along the paths of desired understanding, albeit somewhat acceptably.

In diplomacy, we currently have about 152 nations in the United Nations trying to speak together. Another 150 "people" or "political" but not territorial states, necessarily, are awaiting improved communication. (E.g. the Kurds of the Mid-East, the Apache of Arizona, the Karens of Burma, the Teso of Uganda, the Koreans of China, et al.)

Some interaction is directly people-oriented. (E.g. truck-drivers have their own lingo but also their unique behavior patterns -- which also "say" a great deal.) People -- or "cultures" number well over 25,000 today. Each is unique; each with a pattern of patterns of acceptable interaction and understanding.

Still there are people who will be known only by their "families" or "kindreds" or "tribes." We know little about communication patterns in such instances, as oriented as we are to families being the most basic and likely the most lasting of relationships.

The challenge of geolinguistics (that is, where what people use what languages) is to determine what is significant, what is offensive, what is confusing, etc. Then, as intercultural interactions take place on the basis of realistic INTERCULTURAL GRAMMARS, new dimensions of human understanding and interrelationships will develop.

This may seem too broad, too complex, too altruistic. What are the options for our times? You may have noticed the quote from Dr. Wilbur T. Blume (retiring program officer with International Communication Agency of the U.S. government):

The speed and acceleration of events is such as to make obsolete and irrelevant almost anything that has been published.

What is increasingly becoming required is anticipatory research and anticipatory management.

The risks from not facing the problems squarely are too great to take.

Or as President Spencer W. Kimball has said, "Our great need, desire, and obsession is to bring to this world the candle of understanding."

These we see as some of the challenges, uses, and opportunities of INTERCULTURAL GRAMMARS which build bridges of understanding in the world.