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Using Ubuntu: A New Research Trend for Developing Effective Communication across Cultural Barriers

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Research in language and communication provides great challenges in this culturally intermingled world. Communicating effectively across cultural and geographic boundaries carries inherent and often subtle barriers. Enhancing communication requires an individual or group to understand the basic underlying concepts upon which the language and communication practices depend; these concepts also serve as the basic elements for developing various social structures. Utilizing the complex interconnections between language and communication and these various related sub-fields relies on recognizing the world view concepts that underlie these connections.

This paper explores what knowledge or understanding is required for effective communication across cultural differences. Using a research synthesis, this paper presents one specific world view construct, Ubuntu, which exists across broad societies in Africa, and which undergirds the interconnections that relate language and communication to the social structure in the societies. Analysis of Ubuntu illustrates the significance of cultural world view to the establishment of individual and group identity and to the practice of communicating cultural and natural boundaries.

The results of this research synthesis are summarized in a model which illustrates that the world view of any cultural group reflects the ways in which that group sees themselves as part of the world. Their viewpoints then influence the ways in which they consider it appropriate to behave, to form social structures for establishing relationships with other people, and finally to communicate effectively with others. This model serves as a gateway to understanding other world views and how societies communicate within various sub-fields.

Culture, Identity, Communication, World view, Ubuntu

1. Introduction

Language and communication provide great challenges in a global world. New trends in communicating effectively across cultural and geographic boundaries face inherent and often subtle barriers. Generally, communicators do not even realize that they have missed hidden cues until the occasion and opportunity have passed. Enhancing communication requires an individual or group to understand the underlying concepts upon which the language and communication practices depend; these concepts also serve as the basic elements for

developing social, economic, educational, political, and other related structures. These underlying concepts form our world views. Comprehending the complex interconnections between language and communication and these related sub-fields relies on recognizing the world view concepts that underlie these connections. In this research paper we offer the following research question: **what knowledge or understanding is required for effective communication across cultural differences?** And we use Ubuntu as an example of world view's impact on human communication and structure.

2. Methodology

This research trend relies on a research synthesis utilizing a survey of literature about the influence of Ubuntu on social structure and social behaviors. In order to answer our research question, we reviewed what others have written about Ubuntu in terms of its impact on perceived identity, philosophy, language, organizational communication, education, judicial and political action, interpersonal relations, the media, and the arts. Because all these areas reflect how the individual and the group develop their social structures and interactions, they have served as the means by which many researchers have identified the characteristics of Ubuntu as influencers of human communication among the peoples who self-identify under that specific world view.

Our research synthesis has utilized the work of these researchers to display a new trend in research which incorporates the factors of a world view as it influences the development of individual and group identity and then provides the appropriate patterns for language development and communication. This paper provides an example of a new research trend that offers a model for connecting philosophical world view to communication practices in various social constructs. It offers an understanding for how to communicate effectively with people across cultural differences.

3. Results

This research synthesis provides a clear and cogent pattern for following the world view concepts inherent in any individual or cultural group through various social and structural categorizations and ending in its language and communication patterns. Focusing on identity has led us to propose that there is a common, albeit differing, foundation under all communication behaviors and practices. World view, a core concept of intercultural communication, serves as the foundation of identity and therefore of every area of communication and connects the various venues of communication and language. This study of Ubuntu illustrates that while world views vary according to culture, they provide the perspectives from which cultural individuals and groups understand themselves, the world, and how to communicate to the world. We present a model below that illustrates how the world view of any cultural group reflects the ways in which that group sees the world and themselves as part of the world. The identities that people create guide their behaviors which emanate from their world views. People create identity based on their world view; these identities, in

turn, guide their behaviors. But identities are always in the process of change as humans continually recreate identity across their global experiences.

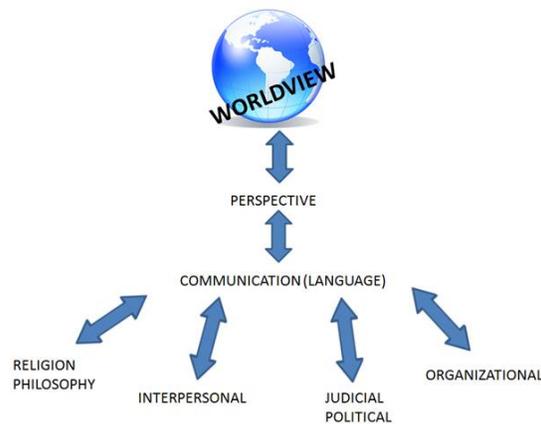


Figure 1. Model of World View Influence on Communication Dimensions

3.1 World View Discussion

Communication in all areas of the discipline has its basis in the cultural factors of a particular world view. Because world view forms the most basic element of human belief systems, an understanding of cultural world view forms an essential element for comprehending and addressing all areas of the human behaviors including their communication.

World view forms an important basis on which humanity attempts to define and to understand the individual and society, to establish identity. Since people have had the capacity to wonder about their similarities and differences, they have tried to isolate conditions and factors which might distinguish basic unifying and divisionary forces among cultural members. For a long time scholars and thinkers have realized that to understand differences among the world's peoples they must delve deeper than merely the level of cultural characteristics and behaviors which reflect rather than formulate individual and group realities. The scholar interested in humanity in general or in people and their various communication behaviors as they represent various cultures must inquire beneath behaviors and attempt to discover how the individual or society looks at life and especially to learn why the view is colored in special way.

Throughout the years, scholars have approached this task from various directions, some seeking to understand the individual as an isolated unit in the world while others search for

meaning among group identities. Philosophers have pursued the strain of human rational processes and offer insights into humanity's method of constructing the universe. Anthropologists also contribute widely to modern understanding of how people think and act and why their behavior fits into certain patterns. Linguists add further explanation for human activities and events as well as do theologians who try to explain the human relationship to the cosmos. Finally, modern investigators have broken the philosophical bounds of investigation by attempting to categorize all these concepts into schemata of world view and then to devise methods for applying knowledge about underlying patterns to specific groups of people and to particular behaviors.

Various elements have formed the inquiry of scholars; some of these include: general patterns to give order to life; harmony with life; human-nature harmony; and cultural influence. Investigators generally agree that culture shapes and defines world view (Prosser, 1978; Jones, 1972; Condon & Yousef, 1975; Marietta, 1980; Dye 1976).

3.2 Identity Discussion

An individual makes choices of language to fit his own and his society's conception of appropriateness and effectiveness. Over the past fifty years Western scholarship has given the study of *identity* a prominent role in the research of multiple disciplines. Sociologists have proposed Identity Theory which focuses on identity formation and maintenance through roles people play in society. Psychologists write about Social Identity Theory and look at social reality through group membership that a person occupies and suggests that social identity depends on categorization of in-group or out-group.

Anthropologists have tended to focus on cultural boundaries, suggesting that cultural differences establish boundaries designed to distinguish members of the culture from outsiders, i.e., claimed cultural space and the collective selfhood. They frequently apply systems theory and social constructionism to define the various constructs of identity that appear across cultural boundaries.

Intercultural communication scholars have focused on identity through work in four general approaches: intergroup, cultural, critical cultural, and postcolonial (Chen, 2012, p. 95). Chen and Collier (2012) conducted research on intercultural identity in which they utilized cultural identity theory (CIT) and suggested that "the enactment and negotiation of social identifications by group members in particular settings along with contextual structures and public discourses produce representations and subjectivities" (2012, p. 45).

3.3 Ubuntu Discussion

Ubuntu is an African ethic that crosses multiple ethnic groups and their languages. Not only is Ubuntu a way of being, deeply embedded in African culture, but it also serves as a deeply

moving African soul force most powerfully demonstrated by personalities like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 1). Essentially, the concept of Ubuntu reflects an African approach and worldview when considering cultural, social, and political aspects of life (Olinger, Britz & Olivier, 2005). This concept carries great weight in attempting to understand the effect of worldviews on cultural communication.

3.3.1 Ubuntu through language

Language serves as a projector of identity and image to others and humans tend to select language that fits the social construction of which they form a part. While our perceptions of reality shape the language we use to describe it, the language we use, in turn, influences the way we perceive reality. Typical Western philosophy relies on Descartes' strong individualism in his dictum, "I think therefore I am" contrasting strongly with the African phrase, "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (a person is a person because of others). This Zulu maxim demonstrates the perception of self within the concept whereby individual members of the society learn to act toward each other with as much concern as they would have for themselves. Mokgoro (1998) explains this maxim stating that the individual's whole existence is relative to that of the group, manifested in an anti-individualistic conduct towards the survival of the group if the individual is to survive. Yum (2007) states that there are similarities between Ubuntu and Confucianism's main principle, *jen*. The two concepts emphasize individuals being embedded within networks of relationships whereby interdependence extols independence. In South Africa and in South Korea, one sees practical examples of how cooperative group activities are encouraged. In South Africa, there exist almost a million *Stokvels* which are joint undertakings or collective enterprises such as savings clubs, burial societies, and other cooperatives. In Korea, there used to be similar cooperatives such as funeral cooperatives but most evolved into revolving savings clubs (*kye*) among friends, which are still very popular and widely utilized.

Ubuntu addresses the interconnectedness of societies that adhere to its principles as well as peoples' responsibilities to other members of society stemming from their connection. Nussbaum (2003) states that people are distinctive beings, able to recognize and acknowledge each other through mutual encounter and cultural integration. In the Shona culture within Zimbabwe a morning greeting would be:

Mangwanani, marar sei? (Good morning, did you sleep well?)

Ndarara, kana mararawo. (I slept well, if you slept well.)

This greeting applies not only to close family members but also to strangers met on the street and demonstrates how Ubuntu has a direct influence in the use of everyday language (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 4). The daily use of such communal language has the ability to shape how people construct various aspects of their society. The meaning of Ubuntu becomes much clearer when its social value is highlighted. Group solidarity, conformity, compassion, respect, human dignity, humanistic orientation. Practically, Ubuntu serves as the concept of

interrelationship and interconnectedness which embodies human interaction in various contexts.

3.3.2 Ubuntu through linguistic devices

Students of African communication patterns agree that several patterns of communication abound in all areas of the cultural life. These linguistic devices include story-telling, proverbs, myths, and fables. Members of the societies use these techniques in all areas of communication; thus, these patterns of communication carry commonality across the entire cultural community's social behavior.

Many scholars note the prevalent use of proverbs in Ubuntu cultures. Malunga (2009) states that "in indigenous Africa, proverbs are used to unlock immobility, clarify vision and unify different perspectives. Proverbs add humour and defuse tension on otherwise very sensitive issues" (p. ix.). Malunga (2009) identifies proverbs as metaphors which can explain complex issues in simple terminology and construction. Although simple statements, they carry innumerable levels of meaning and interpretation. They show likeness between two very unlike things; they provide vividness and clarification; and they explain deep emotional factors without actually identifying the emotions and opening them to challenge or ridicule. African proverbs are deeply rooted in African culture while providing universal truths than can be interpreted and incorporated by people everywhere and in all times.

Because in the Ubuntu cultures children belong not only to their biological parents, but also live under the authority and control of any adult in the community (Kamwangamalu and Nkonko, 1999), the use of proverbs to instruct, teach, and correct behavior contributes to the social communalism that undergirds life, thus serving an educational function. The common practice of using kinship terms such as grandpa or auntie toward non-kinship members (one's parent's friends, neighbors, etc.), denoting communalism, is just as common in Korea as in South Africa. (Yum, 2007).

Generally, proverbs can apply to various situations. Malunga (2009) offers multiple examples of the ways in which proverbs support the Ubuntu base of organizational behaviors and communication practices. "It is better to be surrounded by people than to be surrounded by things" illustrates the essence of Ubuntu.

Story-telling provides another prominent communication strategy in Africa. In traditional Africa, story-telling took place at the end of the day when people returned from their chores and children awaited this time in the communal system. Typically, grandmothers served as the most important storytellers and often repeated the same stories but with different lessons to be learned by the children and other adults. Story-telling offers many advantages; listeners have the opportunity to let their imagination and minds wander. Instruction in language also fills an important part of story-telling values. The interpersonal communalism of Ubuntu is also

exhibited with the use of story-telling as a device for instructing in good behavior or recognition of poor behavior. The use of a story or fable to correct errant behavior allowed the child to perceive his own action indirectly in terms of the lesson of the story or fable rather than being accused directly, thus allowing face saving and kindness in learning lessons.

Teaching children difficult concepts for socialization can become very difficult because it is not always easy for a child to understand subtle qualities such as listening, patience, and understanding modality of time. The use of stories with animals symbolizing various qualities leaves a more lasting impression for the child than simply providing hard rules to follow.

The use of story-telling in business has become much more prevalent even in non-Ubuntu societies. Research shows that the “best” companies illustrate a clear set of concrete examples, or stories, of past management and organizational behaviors. Stories give living examples of what the organization seeks to be and how employees can contribute to this vision.

3.3.3 Arts and media

Impey and Nussbaum (1996) report that the arts and media also strongly reflect the culture of Ubuntu. “I feel the other, I dance the other, therefore I exist” (Senghor, 1996, as cited in Impey and Nussbaum, 1996) provides the clarity helpful to westerners in connecting Ubuntu with these aspects of African life. Impey and Nussbaum (1996) suggest that music and dance apply as educational resources, morale agents, enhancers of social cohesion, vehicles for team building, strategies for stress management, tools for reconciliation, forms of marketing, and resources to improve productivity (p. 2). If the arts serve as tools for such extensive social productive and restructuring purposes, they must communicate the underlying belief and value systems that the people follow. Thus, they also reflect world view and the ways in which it influences all the communication patterns that a cultural group finds acceptable and admirable.

Blankenberg (1999) carries the theme of Ubuntu in the arts into the role of the media in African societies. He states that after the radical transition in South Africa with decolonization, great soul-searching and fundamental questions attacked conceptions about the role of the media as related to the identity of the people and of the nation.

3.3.4 Legal system

African culture with Ubuntu at its core has an infinite capacity for the pursuit of consensus and reconciliation. Adherents to this world view perspective, therefore, regard conflict as a failure to uphold this ethos, and so deem it unconstructive. Ubuntu has been used to great effect with great success in the past to shape legal institutions when dealing with conflict situations. Mokgoro (1998) provides examples which include:

- the original conception of law perceived not as a tool for personal defense, but as an opportunity given to all to survive under the protection of the order of the communal entity;
 - the conciliatory character of the adjudication process which aims to restore peace and harmony between members rather than the adversarial approach which emphasizes retribution and seems repressive. The lawsuit is viewed as a quarrel between community members and not as a conflict. The importance of group solidarity requires restoration of peace between them.
 - the importance of public ritual and ceremony in the communication of information within the group;
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In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) provides the most practical example of how worldviews determine human interaction in social contexts. South Africa's post-apartheid conflict resolution focused on healing measures (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2006). In a tense political and social environment, finding common ground between all South Africans presented two particular options; the first attempted to achieve reconciliation through the punishment of wrongdoing; the second and more favored position, sought to find ways to forgive the past actions of perpetrators across the political spectrum (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2006). The TRC thus became an indicator of a new, reconciliatory national ethos, recalling on aspects of Ubuntu as it called for compromise and collaboration by all citizens in a "fledgling democracy" (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2006, p. 566).

With storytelling central to African culture and Ubuntu, the TRC sought to communicate its findings with all the people so these findings would resonate with the population and healing would begin on a national scale,. The TRC achieved this by broadcasting highly personalized accounts containing excruciating detail of the suffering of thousands of individual South Africans (Gibson, 2006)

3.3.5 Politics.

Colonialism saw the erosion of traditional tenets upheld by indigenous people, replaced by ideas and ideals of being, purported by colonialists. So great was this erosion that at the height of the apartheid struggle certain political parties used these tenets as a claim to legitimacy of power in the eyes of the masses. In an attempt to lead the country in a post-apartheid South Africa, the Inkatha Freedom party initiated an educational intervention in some parts of the country in order to win the minds of the people. Ubuntu, a world view perspective often taught at home, was officially introduced into schools as a specific syllabus which communicated this perspective although students were not examined on the subject. According to Mdluli (1987), the aim of the political party's initiative was to teach pupils good citizenship.

4. Conclusions

World view forms the basis of all types of human communication. Because the Ubuntu world view seems so foreign to most westerners, we use it in this paper as a model that is clearly different and stands out as the connection between various areas of the communication discipline as well as among the actual communication customs of different peoples of the world. To study communication in the various contexts that the discipline identifies (interpersonal, intercultural, organizational, etc.) we must recognize the foundation of world view and the ways in which it intertwines and interfaces communication in its various contexts. An understanding of the world view that forms the base for interpersonal interaction including communication allows an individual to comprehend the communication patterns, to visualize the ways in which the communicators see themselves in the world, and to realize how they think it appropriate for them to communicate. Because an understanding and recognition of the importance of world view serves such a basic function in cultural communication, individuals who want to communicate with members of other cultural groups can best prepare themselves by gaining and understanding perspectives of life and the ways in which they influence and control communication in the various cultures. Recognizing that communication relies on different perspectives allows communicators to connect more easily across cultural factors and across sub-categories of the communication discipline.

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