Yamuna Kachru’s contribution to linguacultural studies

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ABSTRACT: This paper summarizes the major theses Professor Yamuna Kachru developed in the field of linguaculture: the relations between language and culture, role of English diversity in enriching speaker's worldview, dependence of language dynamics on the change of the sociocultural context; cultural specifics of text types; the culture's effects on cognition; impact of social conventions and linguistic strategies on intercultural communication, and role of contact literature in enriching English user's background knowledge. All these arguments serve as a solid basis for the world Englishes paradigm closely associated with intercultural communication studies.

One of the qualities of an expert and a professional is to see details and tiny components of the entire whole, as well as connections and links between them, which a layperson is able to see only as an entire picture or part of a mosaic. An expert can see all the parts the mosaic consists of and understand the role of each part in making the whole. Yamunaji was the expert. Her insightful analysis of details that make up languages and cultures provides us with an extensive vista of linguacultures as the entire whole. Her major achievement in the field of linguaculture studies was the idea she cherished in many of her works, namely: how the English language is enriched by the cultural conventions of people from around the world who use it as a second language.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: THEIR INTERRELATIONS

Of all the innumerous definitions of culture, she chose to define the concept as:

shared knowledge, what people (citing Quinn & Holland 1987) ‘must know in order to act as they do, make the things they make, and interpret their experience in the distinctive way they do.’ Behavior in culturally appropriate ways includes verbal interaction in socially defined contexts in a culturally appropriate code or codes. For instance, how various speech acts such as apologizing, complementing, inviting, praying, requesting, and so on, are performed and which code or codes are selected for such speech acts depend on the sociocultural norms of the group participating in interaction. (Kachru 1996c: 127)

As we see, this definition focuses on the behavioral and mental interactions of culture features, the behavioral aspect including speech behavior first and foremost, as language and speech are both mirror and tool of culture. As a mirror of culture, language reflects culture and gives its users a possibility to gain better knowledge of one’s own cultural
heritage and learn other cultures. Thus through English as a medium in intercultural communication speakers come to know Japanese, Chinese, Russian and other exotic cultures with different systems of writing and, therefore, difficult to master. Being a tool of culture, language serves as a factor that has a great impact on the development of a community at large and a behavior of an individual. This is most important for English whose world varieties should be intelligible, comprehensible, and well interpretable (Smith & Rafiqzad 1983; Smith 1992; Nelson 2011) in intercultural communication.

A compelling example of different behaviors, culturally rooted, is provided by Prof. Yamuna Kachru’s analysis of politeness, expressed differently in diverse cultures. She argued that in some cultures it might be absolutely inappropriate to ask a question, ‘Where are you going?’, while in others (e.g., in China) it might be the formulaic greeting. In Inner Circle Englishes, a polite request is usually expressed by an interrogative sentence (could you mail a letter on your way to the store?), while in many Asian Englishes (Russian including) a direct imperative form is considered equally polite, especially if attended by please and/or a term of address (brother, bring me a copy of this book from the library) that serve as a kind of compensatory softening device in English (Kachru & Smith 2008b: 8; 2009: 4).

Professor Yamuna Kachru believed that ‘(t)he relationship between culture and language is not deterministic, but the two are sensitive to each other and evolve together.’ (Kachru & Smith 2008b: xv). Language is a manifestation of culture (Kachru & Nelson 2006f: 283). Developing Halliday’s (1973) functional systemic theory, she argued that language makes it possible to connect the context of culture that defines the potential with the context of situation that determines the actual; thus language is a medium to actualize the potential meaning (Kachru 1997c: 339). Languages change when their sociocultural contexts change (Kachru & Smith 2008b: xiv), and cultural identities of their speakers prove to be enriched through the medium of English that is their additional language, used for intranational purposes, or the language for intercultural communication. No doubt, English spread has influenced world cultures, for ‘those who do use English are the best educated and the most influential members (“the opinion makers”) of their society’ (Kachru & Smith 2008b: 1).

**SOCIOLINGUISTIC BASIS FOR WE**

However, Yamunaji’s works remind us that when talking about ethnic cultures, we should always keep in mind that no ethnic culture is a monolithic entity. It is characterized by an internal variation. Each culture (as well as each English variety) represents variations based on factors such as region, ethnicity, age, gender, class, social status, education, and profession’ (Kachru & Smith 2008b: 38). Therefore, specific instances of behavior can be manifested in these subgroups within each variety. This is a sociolinguistic basis of the world Englishes paradigm.

For example, in Russian culture, people of young age normally address each other by their first names. However, it is impolite and, therefore, inappropriate to address a person older or higher in social status by their first name; the patronymic should be used. When using English, will Russian communicators observe this rule? When speaking with Russians (even in English), they most probably will. When attending international conferences, my former students who have become colleagues address me as Zoya Grigoryevna even in the group of conference participants whose cultures require first-name address. However, when speaking about me (or some other colleague older than themselves) in the
third person to somebody else, they usually prefer to mention just the given name or the
given and family names instead of the first name and patronymic. This means that tran-
sscending to a culture where a relationship on a first-name basis is normal, they will adjust
to this cultural norm and switch their speech behavior. This leads us to the conclusion
that Russian English, as it is underpinned by the Russian culture, is based on pragmatic
rules of the first language culture, and a switch can take place in intercultural communi-
cation, in the environment of people from different cultures as a drive to adjust to their
culture.

**DISCOURSE ACROSS CULTURES**

Since discourse is speech plunged into life (Arutyunova 1990: 137), that is, social interac-
tion, or language inacting culture, Yamunaji paid so much attention to studying discourse
across cultures through the medium of world Englishes. For her, studying discourse is
related to two fields: on the one hand, to contrastive rhetoric (Kachru 1995b; 1997c) deal-
ing with different culturally specific types of text, such as scientific exposition, learned
exposition, imaginative narrative, and so forth; on the other hand, to the culture’s effects
on cognition, to the interdependence of language competence and language use and ethnic
styles of socialization (Kachru 1996c: 128).

Based on the research of her native Indian English, she proved that local and regional
English texts conform to the norm of the local/regional writing conventions. For example,
Indian English writing ‘conventions are characterized by a high tolerance of nonlinearity,
digressions, indirect statement of discourse topics, and a sharing responsibility between
writers and readers (or speakers and hearers, in the spoken mode)’ (Kachru 1996c: 129),
‘by a spiral development of topic instead of a linear presentation’ (Kachru & Nelson
2006f: 62). In technical writing, American requirements to sentences differ from European
preferences:

At the sentence level, many American writers are taught that effective writing style involves getting
directly to the specific subject of the sentence, keeping the sentence short and concise. Many Southern
Europeans, on the other hand, prefer longer sentences which include more details in technical writing.
(Kachru & Smith 2009: 4)

Amazing are the examples of the differences in genres stimulated by sociocultural
contexts. Comparison of wedding invitations in the contexts of Inner Circle Englishes and
in the Indian context reveals differences in the genre, reflecting the nativized culture values
of the speech communities, with Indian invitations symbolizing family unions rather than
individual weddings and having sources in oral and literate traditions (Kachru 1997c: 341).
It is the oral tradition of incantation, which is part of the ‘culture of sound’, that makes
Indian style ‘exuberant rhetorical flourish’ (Lannoy 1971: 276).

**COGNITIVE BASIS OF LINGUACULTURE**

The second field – the cognitive basis of shared culture knowledge – leads to the research
of the structure of background knowledge in terms of its conceptual organization, with
the introduction of such terms of cognitive linguistics as dynamic *schemata*, static *frames*
consisting of slots with fillers, many of which are culturally hinted, *scripts, scenarios*, etc. (Kachru & Smith 2008b: 34–37). Yamunaji emphasized that if a text invokes an appropriate scenario for its receiver, it is interpreted successfully (Kachru & Smith 2008b: 36). An example we find in her work is a small dialogue that might take place in the US culture:

Visitor: I was thinking of cashing in some cheques on Thursday.
Host: Thursday is Thanksgiving.

The dialogue is correctly interpreted only in case the communicators are aware of the scenario characteristic of the American culture: on Thanksgiving Day, which is a national holiday, all the banks are closed, so the visitor’s plans have to be revised (Kachru & Smith 2008b: 36).

**GATEWAY TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

*Cultures, contexts, and world Englishes* (2008b), co-authored with Larry Smith, was the culmination of years of research in this field. The major objective of the book was ‘to sensitize users of English to its varieties across cultures, and to emphasize that effective communication among users of different Englishes is possible by cultivating an awareness of the variation in Englishes and their cultural, social, and ideational functions’ (Kachru & Smith 2008b: xiii).

The authors of the book warn us that since ‘different variety users have different cultural concepts, social conventions, and linguistic strategies, verbal interaction between them is not always smooth and successful’ (Kachru & Smith 2008b: 9). This is a straight bridge to the theory and practice of intercultural communication that is intertwined with the world Englishes paradigm in its linguacultural domain. In intercultural communication local Englishes sometimes have to accommodate their habitual patterns to new pragmatic rules of their communicators but still they often retain features imposed by their own cultures. Yamunaji provides us with an example of honorific compensation in a polite discourse – due to the lack of special honorific markers in English, users of other varieties use certain English items, such as *honorable*, or *respected* in the same way as their native language expressions. In India, for example, it is not uncommon for students to address British or American professors as *Respected Sir Professor X*. (Kachru & Smith 2008b: 49). A similar address can be found in Russia: *Esteemed colleagues, Please find enclosed the information about the forthcoming conference on . . .* The necessity to compensate features of the native culture causes structural and pragmatic transference and might be called internal translation (Kabakchi 2000), that is, a complex of language operations a bilingual uses in direct intercultural communication, without a translator’s mediation, to generate an original text.

**CONTACT LITERATURES FOR LINGUACULTURE**

A special talk is required regarding contact literatures, to which a chapter is given in *Cultures, contexts, and world Englishes*. The theme is boundless. I will just point to some important ideas expressed in the book. The fiction yields valuable insights into
the cultural themes many of which can be considered eternal and recur in literatures in English. However, each variety and each culture reveals certain differences in literatures, explains some types of verbal and non-verbal behavior, and illuminates a wealth of cultural traditions. In her earlier book co-authored with Cecil Nelson, *World Englishes in Asian contexts* (2006f: 19), Professor Yamuna Kachru wrote:

> Just as American writers diverged from previous literary styles and genres to express new settings and relationships, Outer Circle authors such as Rao and Achebe exploit linguistic, social and cultural features which allow them to express realities, themes and settings ‘to delineate contexts which generally do not form part of what may be labeled the traditions of English literature.’

Contact literature is a vivid example of culture enrichment, as ‘language and cultural contact have resulted in cross-fertilization and hybrid forms of genres’ (Kachru & Smith 2008b: 172). Examples are Japanese haiku in English, pop-music lyrics (the Hindi-English mix of which is so splendidly analyzed by the scholar in her 2006b article in the *WE* journal), Western-style novels, and others. The ‘nationally identifiable literatures’ ‘are excellent resources for culture learning through literature’ (Kachru & Nelson 2006f: 118). Insightful analyses of this type are made in Yamunaji’s article ‘Speech acts in world Englishes: toward a framework for research’ (1991a) where she brings in catchy examples of leave-taking and addressing by kinship terms in the Indian culture from Indian English authors. The novels analyzed in the article simulate socially realistic conversations, which prove that ‘literary sources can provide valuable data for identifying culture-specific speech act effects such as terms of address for showing deference or solidarity in South Asia’ (Kachru 1991a: 304).

**CONCLUSION**

To sum up, Professor Kachru has left us an invaluable heritage in linguaculture. She is definite that ‘cultural contexts affect language use’ (Kachru & Nelson 2006f: 320). She argues that ‘correlations between cultural features and linguistic expressions lead to variety differentiation, and may cause difficulty in communicating across Englishes’ (Kachru & Nelson 2006f: 320–1). This is a solid ground for both world Englishes paradigm and intercultural communication studies. Any variety of English is distinct, first and foremost, due to its linguacultural basis, so the world Englishes paradigm is rooted in linguacultural studies that have grown from sociolinguistics, ethnography, communication studies and many other adjacent fields. Professor Yamuna Kachru was a scholar who inspired this research and was a founder of the paradigm.

**REFERENCES**

[All references to Yamuna Kachru’s work appear in the bibliography at the end of this special issue.]


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