SILENT LANGUAGE ON THE NET[1]

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Abstract

The world media coverage on Bali (Indonesia) bombing two months ago, created a global 'mess' to its receivers. So indeed, in this cyberspace world, understanding the cultural context of communication that Edward T. Hall called the silent language seems to still be so important to apply. The difference of each culture therefore should be understood in a virtual way because in cyberspace, the silent language is reflected by the written words on computer screen as the common space for us to interact. The discussion will include the anthropological attitude towards Western and Eastern inclination.

Keywords: cyberspace anthropology, behavior, cultural differences.

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Introduction

> *"There is a great need to revise and broaden our view of the human situation, a need to be both more comprehensive and more realistic, not only about others, but about ourselves as well. It is essential that we learn to read the silent communications as easily as the printed and spoken ones. Only by doing so can we also reach other people, both inside and outside our national boundaries, as we are increasingly required to do." (Edward T. Hall, 1966:6)*

This paper is about the importance of understanding people's culture in order to avoid any communication failure. In this superhighway era, this understanding still needs to be applied to the interaction in cyberspace where computer screens these days can be seen as the only common space of world-wide interaction. This paper begins by presenting personal interaction on experiencing cultural difference that leads to the works of Edward T. Hall on the next part. Then, allowing Hall's theory to the net, the paper continues with a picture of media coverage regarding the actual incident in Bali, Indonesia, and ends by discussion.

The Off-Line Interaction

I once had a Norwegian friend who stayed for 6 months in Jakarta. We spent many times going out together. I usually picked her up in her apartment and drove to the place we were headed.

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After some time, I realized the differences we had in handling our togetherness. And it discomforted me.

At that time, I was invited to my Indonesian friend's Javanese traditional ritual ceremony on 7 (seven) months pregnancy of his wife. As agreed, I picked up my Norwegian friend and drove to my friend's where the ceremony took place. On the way there, my Norwegian friend said that she would buy me lunch after the ceremony finished. Apparently, the host provided it, for all guests. So instead of buying lunch, we ended up having an awesome traditional Javanese meal in my friend's place. On the way back to the apartment, my Norwegian friend kept saying she owed me lunch (or dinner). She brought this up again on the next day when she sent me a thank-you e-mail for a nice Sunday party in my friend's.

As I was bothered by her attitude, I sent message to my other Norwegian friend who was closer to me. He was an anthropologist living in Oslo and did his research in Indonesia. I told him all about what happened and ended my message by asking him whether it was really Norwegian attitude to have a 'balance' between what they took and what they gave away. As I expected, his reply was clear and explainable. He stated that Norwegians were really the men of Marcel Mauss who believed in direct reciprocity. If they did not return it right away, they would feel restless. They were not like Indonesians who were used to give away presents and did not bother about the return.

For me, the explanation above clarified other things regarding the difference we had between my Norwegian lady friend and myself as an Indonesian. This was related to religion. In a further discussion about religion as a belief, my Norwegian friend told me practiced nothing as she never had any evidences on the existence of God.

Relating one thing to the other, I thus understood that being a non-believer, my Norwegian friend observed the relationship occurred among humans was more to its horizontal than its vertical. Her responsibility was only to the other people. It was very different to what I believed. As a Moslem, I understood the vertical path that whatever I did, God would allow me to receive all the 'paybacks' from another person in another time and another way.

With the difference of this cultural background in mind, I then thought about how to make myself free from the 'haunt' of my Norwegian friend but not upsetting her for refusing it. My reply to her that made her cheerful again was, "Postpone the dinner 'til I reach Norway!"

The Work of Edward T. Hall

Edward T. Hall considered this issue of communication many years ago in one of his book The Hidden Dimension (1966). He stated that "communication is the core of culture and indeed of life itself." He noted that "when people communicate, they do much more than just toss the conversational ball back and forth. Each was interpreting the other's spoken words in a context that included both behavior and setting, with a result that positive reinforcement of friendly overtures was often random or even absent."

Furthermore, Hall believed that "as man developed culture he domesticated himself and in the

process created a whole new series of worlds, each different from the other. Each world has its own set of sensory inputs, so that what crowds people of one culture does not necessarily crowd another. [And so] to avoid catastrophe, we must begin seeing man as an interlocutor with his environment [that] leads to an understanding of man's needs and a knowledge of the many sensory worlds of the different groups of people…."

"[There are] subtle interactions [that] make the problems of urban renewal and the integration of minorities into the dominant culture more difficult than is often anticipated. Similarly, … lack of full understanding of the relation of peoples and their biotope is compounding the process of technical development of the so-called underdeveloped nations of the world."

These works of Hall clearly explained the inconvenience face-to-face interaction I had with my Norwegian friend. When she said, "I owe you dinner, Nuri!" she did not just say it. She had a huge cultural context behind it that made me nervous for it was totally different than mine. The knowledge of life that she absorbed every second in the environment which was geographically very far from where I grew up, granted her specific behavior and mind-setting that was uncommon to my crowd of culture. And being minority in Jakarta at that time, her difficulties in blending with the dominant local culture were as many as mine to her minority but troublesome attitude.

The Bali Bombing

Considering how rapidly communication technology is expanding, it is amazing to realize that Hall's argument can still be applied in the cyberspace era of today. Along with the technology that creates a big gap between the developed and developing countries (that Hall called underdeveloped), information runs in a complete chaos around the world. As the same views are expressed and expressed again by diverse parties, matters initially expressed as opinion soon come to take on the characteristics of fact. The original statement is lost in the deluge of comment that follows and it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to establish the veracity of a statement. Interpretation upon interpretation continue to be posted and no body realizes anymore who pulled the trigger first. As Roland Barthes puts it, the text has no beginning and no end when the reader becomes the producer of text as well as its consumer. Today we are living in such an environment, as the description on the consequences of media coverage regarding incident of Bali bombing tells us below.

Reflecting on the consequences of the world media coverage in recent years, I was able to document some news and opinions on the Bali bombing last year. That day, October 12, 2002, the bomb exploded in Denpasar (Bali, Indonesia) and killed about 200 people. The world then was also detonated by terrorism fears. On Monday night, October 13, 2002, CNN International broadcast special report under the title of "Terror in Bali", focusing on the 'white' foreigners either as victims or volunteers. Laurie posted a message to the Internet, wondered why CNN did not mention anything about the Indonesians involved, e.g the injured, dead or missing, nor their volunteer efforts. According to her, the rest of that specific CNN news was a sales pitch to convince the viewing audience that the incident was clearly another Al Qaeda plot, and she suggested people to seek any news source other than CNN, such as Australian-based www.abc.net.au/news which she considered less biased. However, there was Nigel who said that

he was very aware of the negative Australian influence in Bali as he had lived there for a full year. He always boycotted the club that was bombed because of its "no-Indonesian" rule.

Perhaps the political slant of the short paragraph above would be clearer if the items were discussed separately. First, the incident happened in Indonesia. Second, the news was spread by an American broadcaster whose news included a role played by the Arabs. Third, a 'white' lady who lived in the incident area commented and believed that Australia was more dependable than the American broadcaster. Fourth, her comment was opposed by an English person who accused Australia of being 'unfair' to Indonesia.

Coverage of the incident created a global 'mess' to its receivers. The sender—in this case an American broadcast company—dispatched the message about Indonesian to his viewers around the globe, using its own point of view. And apart from breaching the code of ethics of journalism, the coverage itself became a trigger for another explosion: the threat of terrorism.

To conclude the story, there was misleading communication that was caused by a lack of understanding between people. The broadcaster did not understand the variety of 'language' that his viewers used. The 'white' lady did not understand the 'language' of American journalism. The Englishman did not understand the Australian 'language' about Indonesia. The Indonesians did not understand the 'language' of the bomb. In short, again, there was a lack of understanding between people that led to a miscommunication.

Silent Language on the Net

Indeed, for a better human future, we need to comprehend the cultural context of communication that Hall called the silent language or silent communication. This is definitely a difficult task, a never-ending learning of life. This is especially true in today's world where advanced technology provides space for fast and global communication, diminishing the intimate face-to-face interaction that traditionally has carried the silent language. The difference of each culture that Hall described at the previous paragraphs then should be understood also in a virtual way because in the talk of cyberspace, we discuss the computer screen as the only space for us to interact.

As we allow the works of Edward T. Hall to the matters of cyberspace, the language we need to understand becomes more complex. In cyberspace, it is argued, people are accepted on the basis of their words, not their appearance or accent because—as Hakken cited from New Yorker magazine cartoon—"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." And so, "What kind of culture emerges when you remove from human discourse all cultural artifacts except written words? when the visual and aural cues and the context of geographic place are removed?"

In her work, Reid explores how IRC participants use the power of written language a human creativity to construct a form of community. Two of the key elements she identifies are the creative extension of language to encode expressiveness usually conveyed by other channels in face-to-face conversation, and the development of communal sanctions to punish those who flout the common laws (known as 'netiquette'). The language of IRC is a strange, highly informal speech, but with defined styles and conventions. Conversing using short-typed messages is necessarily direct and 'chatty' in nature. This has given rise to new conventions of language

unique to real-time text-chat, with a prevalence of abbreviations and acronyms (like 'LOL' for 'laugh out loud' or 'BRB' for 'be right back') to represent frequently used phrases, minimising the amount of repetitive typing and helping to maintain the speed of conversation. In addition, these abbreviations act as a shared dialect which helps to define the particular character and distinctiveness of the virtual community. Other distinctive features of this mode of communication include the use of emoticons (e.g., J), action phrases (*Martin smiles*), heavy punctuation ('…????'), capitalisation ('SCREAM!'), and onomatopoeia ('hehehe'), to express feelings and emotions that are normally conveyed by body language and tone of voice in spoken conversation. Those who are the most creative wordsmiths at using this language hold center stage. As Reid notes, 'speed of response and wit are the stuff of popularity and community in IRC'.

Along with the works of Reid in cyberspace, we have Gumperz & Hymes in the offline world. They suggest a speech community where we have a community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety. Saville-Troike (1989:154-5) adds that within every communication, there are rules of interaction that includes an explanation of the rules for the use of speech which are applicable to the communicative event. This 'rules' refers to prescriptive statements of behavior, of how people 'should' act, which are tied to the shared values of the speech community. This includes positive and negative sanctions which are applied to their observance or violation. There are also norms of interpretation that constitute a standard shared by members of the speech community, and also be related to rules of use in the prescriptive sense. The positive and negative valuation and sanctions on use which characterize rules are not a necessary condition for inclusion in this component.

We thus have a similar rule of 'living' in a community, both in cyberspace and in the offline world. However, assuming the netiquette of IRC can be generated to the whole interaction in cyberspace, we still miss the huge cultural context behind the body language and tone of voice that was expressed by emoticons and else. We can not separate the virtual interaction from the offline world. It is true that, as Dodge & Kitchin finds out, cyberspace allows people to construct their self-presentation and to play with their online identity. However, going online does not mean we lose the identity constructed in geographic space. We are aware of our lives on and off screen. Our actions are mediated with reference to both: spaces might be distinct and identity might be fluid and fragmented, but they are also situated—our lives in one space are contextualised in relation to life in others. Conversely, our lives offline become embodied through our memories and experiences online, so that a recursive process exists as the virtual is realized and the real virtualised. Stone stated that it is important to remember that virtual community originates in, and must return to, the physical. Even in the age of the technosocial subject, life is lived through bodies.

Thus in the case of Bali bombing, how could we understand why Laurie saw CNN in its negative side? Is CNN really that evil? If it is, why? Wasn't it just Laurie who probably experienced wicked relations with CNN and spread it widely because she got traumatic of it? How could we tell that Nigel was more 'human' than Laurie? Didn't we have different standard of what we called 'humanity'?

Answers for all the questions above occur in the offline world where face-to-face interaction exists. And to communicate the explanations worldwide, people uses cyberspace which Paul

Virilio called speed-space as the speed (-of light) now becomes a milieu of interaction rather than just a means of communication. In this speed-space, information is processed by the speed of light in a virtual storage which has tremendous space. And thus as receivers, we need to comprehend the cultural context of communication or the silent language which is reflected by the written words splashed in velocity on the electromagnetic vibes.

Back to the Basic 101

Escobar posit that technology is a social construct and technology and society cannot be separated because they are intimately entwined with each other and with nature. Technology therefore is mediated by culture, and culture by technology. It seems logical that an examination of how we comprehend offline culture might reveal insight and lines of enquiry into how we comprehend communicating in cyberspace. As such, we cannot divide the offline and online world as one is simply an extension of the other.

We can say therefore that it is the relationship between people that is important, not the medium of communication. Understanding that people are different and respecting it, would be the utmost helpful way to avoid communication failure. Nini Bloch believes that we can not escape cultural diversity. Laumbach also points out, "World citizenship is a great idea, but we all also need something that's a bit closer to home" because culture is ultimately rooted in the land, and ecosystems will remain different, we always will need something a bit closer to home. That's writ in our DNA. So although we seem to be heading for a rootless and homogenized society, human nature has shown us so far that culture comes from home, the offline home.

And as probably foreseen by Hall in 1966, he would love us to revise and broaden our view of the human situation, to comprehend and be real about others and ourselves, to learn to read the silent communication, so that we can reach other people beyond boundaries, as we are increasingly required to do. Or in his own words, again:

"There is a great need to revise and broaden our view of the human situation, a need to be both more comprehensive and more realistic, not only about others, but about ourselves as well. It is essential that we learn to read the silent communications as easily as the printed and spoken ones. Only by doing so can we also reach other people, both inside and outside our national boundaries, as we are increasingly required to do." (Edward T. Hall, 1966:6)

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