FACING UP TO THE COMMUNICATION PROBLEM

IN THE REAL WORLD: THE MIDDLE EAST

by Edwin O. Haroldsen*

My colleagues have outlined certain handicaps to communication which theoretically can exist in cross cultural situations -- handicaps such as semantic problems, attitudes and values, and the pressure of social groups.

But since every human contact involves communication, how is one to get started communicating in a foreign country? Let's talk about the Middle East for a few minutes.

1. Semantics

a. Does the Symbol Correspond to the Real Thing?

How do I know that the symbol I use refers to the same thing in the real world as it does to my Turkish associate -- especially when that symbol or word has to be translated into a strange, Mongolian-type language structured very differently than an Indo-European language such as English.

For example, I once was interviewed by a newspaper reporter in Canakkale, Turkey, on the Dardanelles, and referred to as a "tall, blond man." I asked our Iowa State art service to prepare a transparency to depict the Turk's idea of me as a "tall, blond man" in order to illustrate the semantics problem involving the word "tall."

But then another semantics problem emerged. The artist's mental picture of a Turkish journalist turned out to be 40 years out of date. That long ago Mustapha Kemal outlawed the fez, which is a felt cap that looks like a Shriner's hat. These days you don't see any Turks wearing fezzes except in old, old photographs and books.

Idioms of speech present another semantics problem in the Middle East. A given idiom likely will call up in our western mind a different picture than in the middle eastern mind.

For example, Thornburg relates this anecdote. An Arab woman had knitted a sweater for an American girl. Later she asked how the little girl liked the sweater. The mother replied, in the American way, that the girl had been "tickled to death."

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When this was translated, the Arab women lifted their hands in horror. But a missionary wife, laughing herself to tears, put the matter right. What the translator had said was, "the sweater had scratched the girl until she died."  

b. Symbol Not Understood

Again, the thing in the real world about which I wish to talk may be perfectly understood by my Turkish friend, the audience I am addressing, or the readers whom I am seeking to reach. But do they understand the symbol I use to refer to that real thing?

Let me confess that I probably was guilty of using incomprehensible symbols several times in an agricultural book I published in Turkey.

For example, Figure 1 labelled "Be Careful or Die" was published with appropriate Turkish translation as a caution against the misuse of agricultural chemicals. But while Turkish farm people understand poison and death, it is doubtful if they got much meaning out of a winged creature playing a harp, at least not the relatively unsophisticated Turk to whom our book was addressed.

Figure 2, "I Hate Bugs," presents a similar communications problem. University of Wisconsin research has shown that humanization of animals reduces comprehension by farm readers in Brazil and I would assume, now, that this symbol was pretty much a dud in rural Turkey.


3This conclusion is supported not only by the author's personal experience in Turkey but by the views of other observers. See, for example, Daniel Lerner, The Passing of Traditional Society, the Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1958, which notes the lack of empathy among traditional-minded Turkish villagers.

Also, in the same vein, the Turkish village school teacher, Mahmut Makal, in A Village in Anatolia, translated by Sir Wyndham Deedes, Vallentine, Mitchell & Co., Ltd., London, 1954, notes Turkish villagers' lack of contact with the outside world. He comments: "It was as though whole worlds of fairy tales were disclosed to me in the pages of every newspaper, magazine and book; and that terribly narrow world of mine become wider and wider while with the learning of new things my thirst for study increased." (p.100.)

See also, Douglas D. Crary, "The Villager," in Sydney Nettleton Fisher, Social Forces in the Middle East, Cornell University Press, 1955, pp. 55-56, pointing out that visits to the village of persons whose missions are beyond the experience of the peasant are incomprehensible and thus viewed with suspicion, skepticism, and often unbelief.

4Luiz Fonseca and Bryant Kearl, "Comprehension of Pictorial Symbols: An Experiment in Rural Brazil," Bulletin 30, Dept. of Agricultural Journalism, University of Wisconsin, April 1930, p. 17.
Fig. 1 This is English version of illustration in Turkish book stressing caution in the use of chemicals. Indications are that it doesn't mean much to unsophisticated readers.

Fig. 2 This is English version of another illustration used in same book. Research indicates peasants are confused by personifying inanimate things.
2. Attitudes and Values

Can I identify attitudes and values of the Turkish culture that will tend to alter content of messages flowing back and forth between me and the Turks with whom I am trying to communicate?

The following are some examples:

a. Literal Truth

People in the Middle East seem to put a lower value on literal truth than we westerners do.

When I asked what kinds of things a provincial information specialist did at Amaysa, up near the Black Sea, I received a glowing report of news articles written, agricultural films shown, etc. But then when I finally pressed him for some recent examples of his work, I learned that the projector was broken and hadn't been in use for months. I learned that little if anything was actually being done in my field of mass communications. He was telling me what ought to be happening -- but portraying it as though it actually were happening.

This reminds me of an experience Thornburg had in Arabia. Eager to talk with a well-known dignitary, he made repeated visits to the community -- but the sheik was never home. On one visit, an intimate Arab friend reported that the sheik was not home but that he would be in five days. On the fifth day, Thornburg returned, only to hear from other sources that the sheik had gone to India and would not be back for months. Thornburg was annoyed at being misled -- but the friend explained it this way:

"Yes, I knew that he had gone to India. But I knew how much you wished to see him. And now for five days you have been happy."

b. Repetition to Give Weight to Truth

In the Moslem world they have 99 names for Allah, each expressing a virtuous attribute. Value seems to be imparted by repetition. Thus, the Turks don't simply say "slow" or "fast" but "slow slow" and "fast fast" etc. And even in Africa, the Pygmies of the Congo speak of a person as being "dead" when he is only seriously ill -- and "dead for ever" when he is really dead by our standards.

5Thornburg, op.cit. p. 120.
Knowledge of this value helps one understand the following communications failure. Once in the Arabian peninsula a launch ran dry of fuel, and the boatman was chided for saying he had filled the tank with petrol.

"But Sahib," he replied, "I said it only once." 7

c. Fatalism

Much has been written about the fatalistic philosophy of Moslems. And indeed, ordinary conversation is saturated with phrases such as "Inshallah," meaning, "the Lord willing," and indicating resignation to Allah's will.

Where people are fatalistic in outlook, resigning themselves to fate, it appears probable that they would tend to resist ideas and challenges that would prod them to activity. This is a problem that is easier to note than to meet.

d. Nationalism

Whatever the source, nationalism is an attitude to be reckoned with in communications efforts in Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries. Much, of course, has been written and spoken about monuments built to satisfy the nationalistic pride of poor, backward countries -- uneconomic steel mills and unneeded highway overpasses, for example.

At a minimum, the existence of nationalistic pride in an underdeveloped country would suggest that an outsider working there as an advisor needs to frame his written and oral communications to avoid giving unnecessary offense to such nationalistic pride lest the message be rejected before it is considered on its merits. And he needs to interpret messages received from persons living in such cultures with due appreciation of the distortions and inaccuracies that could creep in as a result of nationalistic pride.

3. Social Pressures

What social pressures are being brought to bear on the Turks with whom I am trying to communicate?

Let's consider, for example, the communications breakdown to which I referred earlier -- the information specialist who said he was showing agricultural films but whose projector had been broken down for many months.

Had I been more sociologically informed when I made that trip, I would perhaps have surmised that the Turkish information specialist was under some social pressure that affected what he was saying.

7Thornburg, op. cit., p. 120.
8Ibid., p. 28.
For example, it is probable that he expected that what he said would be used to evaluate his performance within his own social system -- the provincial agricultural extension office -- that his status position in that system might be adversely affected if his performance were not presented as being near ideal.  

Moreover, he likely perceived me as a member of a higher social system, an official of the foreign aid program working directly with the hierarchy of the Ministry of Agriculture. Thus he could easily assume that the provincial extension office would be presented in a bad light to the officials in Ankara and that his own status would be jeopardized if I were given unpleasant truth -- if I were to learn that the projector was broken, that the office was out of farmer's bulletins, that the short wave radio was out of service, etc.

Another example of social barriers to communications is Thornburg's experience in seeking opinions on the needs of a dozen isolated Anatolian villages in Turkey. He tried first to get an opinion from the rank and file members of the village. But in every case the village leader or head man gave the answer. In the first few villages he urged the interpreter to canvass the group for individual answers, but abandoned this after it became clear that no individual answers would be forthcoming. The interpreter explained that individual inquiries would be fruitless unless a far more intimate relationship were established than would be possible in a single visit. Thus, the social structure of the village was such that only the head man was accorded the authority of giving an opinion to the outside world.  

In this connection Halpern notes that the Middle Eastern bureaucrat is vulnerable in his status and incomplete in his skills. The bureaucracy no longer has a near monopoly on literacy and education and must make its actions acceptable to an ever-growing number of people who resemble bureaucrats in all but their frustrations. See Manfred Halpern, The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa, Princeton University Press, 1963, pp. 345-346.

In a similar vein, Martin comments on the frustration of workers in the agricultural bureaucracy of underdeveloped countries. He observes that they are at the bottom of the totem pole in terms of income and prestige but at the top of the list of those exhorted to do better in pulling off "difficult and miraculous transformations" in their country's economic development. See Lee R. Martin, "Basic Considerations in Transforming Traditional Agriculture," in Economic Development of Agriculture, Iowa State University Press, in press, 1965.
4. Motivation

The question has been posed, "What of human motivation? Can effective communication motivate?"

I would hold that whether a message motivates people to action depends at least in part on whether the message seeks to get them to act in conformity to or in opposition to the attitudes, values, and social norms affecting them. Communications research indicates that the persuasibility of communications also is related to the personality of those receiving the message, some people being by disposition more subject to persuasion than others.\(^\text{11}\)

Closely related to values and attitudes and their affect on communication is the idea of motive for communication. It appears that communications is easier and more productive of action when it seeks to get people to do things they want to do than when it seeks to get them to do things they do not want to do.

Thus in Turkey we found that it was far easier to converse understandably with a merchant about something we were buying from him than with the maid about work she did not want to do. The merchant wanted to sell -- but the maid didn't want to do the irksome task.

5. How to Prepare to Communicate in a Foreign Culture?

General Rasmara, while chief of staff of the Persian military forces, said that if one would govern Persia he must know the tribes.\(^\text{12}\) In terms of our problem, how do we obtain detailed, accurate information on the social structure of a foreign country to which we are sent?

Obviously we can't wait until we know all of the answers before we start communicating -- either in face to face conversation with another person or in saying something to a mass audience by means of radio or newspaper.

Learning the semantic problems, learning the correct symbols for the things in the real world, learning the prevailing attitudes and values of the country, and learning the social pressures and social groups which affect people's behavior -- all of these require that we communicate with people. We can't get it all out of books -- for much of what we need to know probably hasn't even been written.


\(^{12}\text{Thornburg, op. cit., p. 43.}\)
However, I would assume that we would be wise to wait for a while before trying to communicate with the minister of welfare, the head of the university, or some other top official in a foreign culture. Communicating with such a person may be our most important single communications act -- and we may not get a second chance if we fail to get him to understand us on the first attempt.

Perhaps we should prepare for such crucial communications situations by making our mistakes as we practice communicating with lesser individuals. That way we may become aware of the biggest semantics breakdowns that challenge us -- we may become aware of the most important attitudes and values of those we want to influence -- we may become aware of the important social groups and social pressures affecting these people.

My approach, before I tried to communicate anything to officials of the Ministry of Agriculture in Turkey, was to try to learn all I could about what was going on in the country in my area of specialization -- mass communications. I spent about a week "picking the brain" of a Turkish interpreter and in trying to double check what he told me. I was trying to learn how the newspapers and radio stations operated, the literacy problems of the villages etc.

However, I undoubtedly neglected a most important aspect of the communications problem in Turkey. I should have studied those with whom I was working as well as the physical facilities offered by newspapers and radio stations etc. Had I been more aware of the semantic and social barriers to understanding I could have learned more about these things in the course of talking with people to get technical information in my field of interest.

Looking back on my years in Turkey and the mistakes I made, I would make two simple suggestions on how one may improve his communications ability in a cross cultural setting.

1. **Work hard to learn and speak the local language.**

Even if you do not become bi-lingual or proficient enough to carry on technical conversations, the fact you are trying to speak the language will endear you to the people; it will facilitate communication because of their favorable attitude toward you.

I found that Turks were simply delighted when I made a serious effort to speak Turkish. By contrast, one of the American advisors who spent seven years in Turkey was noticeably resented by some Turks because he had learned scarcely a word of the local language.
But of course language facility also is a great asset in learning the local culture and in getting access to people. Because I worked at learning Turkish and spoke it at every opportunity, I think I was able to do some things that I could not have done had I been forced always to work through an interpreter.

One of the problems, of course, is that interpreters often lack knowledge of the technical field of mutual interest to you and your counterpart in the foreign culture. Thus they frequently fail to interpret adequately. Also, of course, an interpreter may take it upon himself to censor the messages flowing between you and those with whom you are trying to communicate.

Once on a field trip in Western Turkey I discovered, despite my very inadequate facility in Turkish, that our U.S. employed interpreter was seriously changing the questions I was putting to a man from whom I was seeking information. Later challenged on this point, the interpreter offered the excuse that the information I sought might have worried the man. However, after we talked over my need to know the facts of the situation in order to aid the ministry in its program, the interpreter agreed that henceforth he would interpret my questions more literally.

2. **Emerse yourself in the culture in which you are working.**

Do this by associating socially as well as professionally with the people of the country to which you are assigned, by involving yourself in their institutions and activities, by "getting close" to them, etc. This is perhaps easier said than done -- and presents some problems. For example, in countries where the U.S. Government maintains military facilities, there is the problem of turning down requests by nationals to make illegal purchases of PX items for them.

However, despite the problems involved, I cannot see how one can communicate in a foreign culture without becoming emersed in that culture. Unfortunately some Americans live by themselves and never really begin to understand the local culture. In Turkey there were some who preferred their own self-sufficient world of the American PX, the American officers' club, and the American cocktail circuit. If they did associate with Turks, it was only with those in high places, not with villagers and others not so privileged.

In summary, I would suggest that to communicate in a foreign culture you have to start talking and interacting with people of that culture. It's somewhat like swimming. You have to get in the water and paddle to learn to swim. However, you don't need to get out in the deep water, over you head, until you've learned to splash around in the shallow end -- and learned what it's like to have water in your nose and eyes.

Similarly, you need to develop some facility in communicating in the foreign culture before you tackle your biggest and toughest communications tasks.