

Unit 18

Semantics: What do they really mean?

Cast:

- Teacher Zhang Dong
- Missionary Li Wei
- Students

Scene 18.1. Teacher Zhang Dong in front of class. He has split his class into two groups representing two different areas of (say students from somewhere in Manchuria verses the rest of China). Manchuria verses the rest of China! He then begins to say a long list of typical regional Chinese words pertaining to Manchuria which the rest of the class doesn't understand.

Here, for illustration purposes, are some English example of Canadianisms which Americans are not likely to understand. The translator will have to create a dynamic equivalent between two regions within China!

<i>Rrrrrroll up the rim</i>	<i>Nufie</i>	<i>Dief</i>	<i>Voyageurs</i>
<i>Plains of Abraham</i>	<i>Social Credit</i>	<i>Laura Secord</i>	<i>War of 1812</i>
<i>Golden Horseshoe</i>	<i>Pierre Berton</i>	<i>Terry Fox</i>	<i>Don Cherry</i>
<i>Northern Reflections</i>	<i>The Cremation of Sam M.</i>	<i>toque</i>	<i>Hamilton Bulldogs</i>

Manchuria wins the contest, for the rest of China has no idea what these Chinese words mean!

Fade and Cut

Scene 18.2. Teacher Zhang Dong in front of class

Teacher Zhang Dong: When we find ourselves in a new situation we struggle with a credibility problem. Why should anyone listen to us? We know little of the language, culture, the local situation and the struggles that the local people are going through. The farther the target culture is from our own culture, the greater this problem becomes. We go to them, thinking of ourselves as a messengers, but they see us as outsiders whose message isn't relevant to their situation.

How do you take the Bible, a document written in one cultural-linguistic system and communicate its meaning faithfully and accurately into another cultural-linguistic system without your own cultural and linguistic patterns and values influencing what you say?

You need to recognize that language is a wall that separates people. Culture and history widen that divide. You are outside that wall, and it will take time to get in. That may, in fact, not happen until an invitation or permission has been granted by insiders after you have demonstrated sensitivity, patience, and commitment to their ways.

Translation from one language to another is much more than merely substituting the corresponding words from each language. Language is a cultural and historical Expression. Cultural has to do with meaning, with the “soul”, deep impression and concepts in the total system. Historical has to do with the past, with accumulation, with layers of strata, with the archaic. This is the most difficult issue of all for most language learners: the fact that language is based in the culture and history of the people. Languages have their own patterns which are shaped by culture. The culture shapes the pattern by which one thinks and this is reflected in one’s language.

You may be speaking, but what are you communicating? This is the question that the subject of semantics seeks to address: What creates meaning? Semantics is the area of study which looks at meaning and how it is communicated through language.

Some common language learner statements are: “I understood all the words, but I didn’t get the message” or, “I can tell you what he said but I have no idea what he meant.”

Meaning is not just in the mind; meaning is felt all over. This means you need to learn to identify and feel with you target people. That is different from just knowing and understanding stuff about them! Ask yourself: What culture traits am I manifesting? Am I taking on their mannerisms, facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice? Do I use appropriate interjections to express surprise, emotion, pain? Do I still tend to translate or project meaning from my mother tongue into their words, or am I becoming them? On a deeper level, am I still defending my own culture and socio-political biases?

There are a number of aspects of Semantics that we will need to take a look at. The first is context.

Take a look at the following sentences and tell me what the word “Wungle” means in each case. The word “wungle” is a nonsense word.

- I stopped a wungle in the street and asked him the way to the Post Office. (wungle = human being, noun)
- We paid to go into the zoo and see the wungles. (wungle = animal/plant/bird/insect; noun)
- The earth in my garden is so rich that my wungles are growing very nicely (wungle = vegetable/ flower; noun)
- I took the heavy metal wungle out of its box. (wungle = tool; noun)
- She walked into the wungle and up the stairs (wungle = part of building; noun of place)
- It was made of wungle (wungle = material; noun of substance)

- The experience gave me a strong feeling of wungle (wungle = emotion; abstract noun)
- We visited Wungle last year (wungle = place, person; proper noun, noun of place)
- The saw not just one but a whole wungle of them (wungle = group/collection; noun)
- She is a very wungilable lady (wungle = adjective)
- He was unfortunately rather wungled last night (wungle = negative adjective)
- I am please that it was all so wungleful (wungle = adj, positive)
- He was wungily dressed (wungle = adverb, propably negative)
- Congratulations on doing it so wunglefully (wungle = adverb, positive)
- We were disappointed at how wungily they treated us (wungle = adverb, negative)
- People often wungle things they don't like (wungle = verb, transitive)

Here you can see that the meaning of the word “wungle” is determined by its context. Words often have a range of meanings, which you can only discover when you hear them used in different contexts. Context is one very important feature that creates and determines the range of meaning of word, phrase or idiom can have. These leads straight our second point: words have a range of meanings....

Fade and cut

Scene 18.3. Teacher Zhang Dong and Students

Teacher Zhang Dong: What does a word really mean? Word can have a wide range of meanings, and the range of meanings will probably not overlap with those of Chinese. Words can have a central as well as peripheral meanings. The central meaning is the core meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence while the peripheral meanings take a bit of language and apply it to something unrelated. Here are some examples in English (come up with Chinese equivalents):

	<i>Central Meaning</i>	<i>Peripheral Meaning</i>
Dog	animal	non-jew, hot dog
Blue	color	blue-blood, sad, blue collar, blue tooth
Red	color	angry, Communist

It is important to identify which meanings are central, and which are peripheral to get an accurate translation or distortions occur. For instance, if you were to literally translate “hot dog” into German, “heiser hund”, it would mean a dog in heat, not a frankfurter sandwich!

This concept is of true of verbs as well. Take the verb “drop” for instance: (may have to find dynamic equivalent in Chinese)

- “he dropped the vase on the floor”
- “Raindrops spattered on the window”
- “I will drop by and visit with you.”
- “Drop a hint”

Look at this example of the word “mean” (translate the dynamic equivalent into English):

- “He was a mean person”
- “The mean temperature in July was 28 degrees Celsius”
- “I did not mean that he was lazy”
- “That was a mean feat!”

In other words, it is important to recognize that words have ranges of meanings, but that the range of meanings a particular word has will not be the same from one language to the next.

Fade and Cut

Scene 18.4. Teacher Zhang Dong speaking into the camera. Title: The effect of culture on meaning

Teacher Zhang Dong: The third thing we need to consider deeper is the effect that culture has on language. This is shown by the fact that different languages are very rich in the expression of certain concepts, and poor in others. This shows what things are more or less relevant in that particular culture.

One way this is shown is how different languages swear. Some language use sexual language, others compare people to animals, yet others use religious language for swearing and cursing.

Another way this is evident is the importance different languages give to identifying different members of one’s families. Many Asian languages, for instance, have very advanced terminology for identifying different members of one’s family and how they stand in relation to the speaker. Such linguistic classifications reflect cultural issues of prestige and position within the society because, for instance, age reflects superior or inferior position in the family, and that determines how you greet and treat that individual. In other words, language labels each person according to his or her superior or inferior position, something which seems complicated and is culturally unnecessary to most westerners.

Different languages can differentiate between colors very differently. Some languages make very fine distinctions, others lump lots of colors under one label.

Turkish has a huge number of words and idioms pertaining to the “eye”, Irish English has lots of words pertaining to “rain”, Arabic has lots of words derived from the word “camel”, Eskimos have lots of words for different types of snow. English has a habit of differentiating different object made from different metals: lead pipe, copper wire, silverware, gold bracelets and aluminum saucepans. Other languages only have one word for all metal objects. In fact, one of the strengths of English is nouns. It has names

for everything. Arabic on the other hand, has many words that describe relationships and feelings. While English talks about the feeling of depression, Arabic has various words to describe the actual type of depression one is feeling.

Time is also managed differently in different languages and culture. Some divide it into three categories: action that took place in the past, present & future. Some languages, instead of focusing on the time, focus on whether an action is completed or not. Some languages have specific tense forms for general information or for information that comes to the hearer by word of mouth.

So, language is a mirror of culture. We see the world through our culture, our way of life: the way we act with others around us, the way we organize our lives, the way we speak. And culture is what tells us how to behave, what we should/should not say or do, what we are free to lie about... Different cultures view the world in different ways; so, there are many ways to view the world. To us, our way is the only acceptable way of life. But that is not necessarily true...

In short, we don't just speak a language, we are a living language. Hence, by virtue of who we are as foreigners, we ourselves are often the greatest impediment to our ability to communicate clearly.

Fade and Cut

Scene 18.5. Teacher Zhang Dong speaking into camera: Title: Metaphors

Teacher Zhang Dong: All languages have metaphors, or figures of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to something not literally applicable, as in "food for thought". In every day speech we use lots of metaphors to add color to meaning. Both the speakers and the listener understand what is being said, but a person from another culture speaking another language would not grasp the meaning from a literal translation. Metaphors are often difficult to translate because you cannot usually translate them literally. You have to determine the meaning of the metaphor first and then try to translate that. A literal translation of word forms would give a completely inaccurate translation.

Here are some more common English metaphors:

- "They just won't swallow that idea" > They just won't accept that idea
- "He bit off more than he could chew" > He attempted more than he could achieve
- "Will you stop feeding me that same old line" > Will you stop telling me the same story (giving me the same explanation)
- "He's chewing the fat" > "He's shooting the breeze" > "He's spinning a yarn"
Sorry. He's having a good talk.
- "I thought I could smell a rat" > I was suspicious of something
- "She is nothing but a sticky beak" (Australian idiom!) > "She interferes in other people's private affairs.")

This is an important concept for us when we share the gospel. For instance, when Jesus uses the metaphor, “I am the bread of life” you have to figure out what he means with that. In the Aquacatec language of Mexico, Jesus becomes the tortilla of life. Could he become the “rice cake of life” for cultures where rice is the main staple of life?

Or when the Bible says that God will wash away our sins and make us as white as snow, are we free to say in cultures where there is no snow but where there are coconut trees that God will wash us as white as the inside of a coconut?

Fade and cut

Scene 18.6. Teacher Zhang Dong in front of class.

Title: Becoming Bi-Cultural: Non Verbal Communication

Teacher Zhang Dong: What does the word “Ceasar” mean?

Student #1: A Roman ruler....

Cut

Scene 18.7. Missionary Li Wei outside, calling for his dog:

Missionary Li Wei: Ceasar... Ceasar! (louder) CEASAR! (very loud and fearfilled)
short break... Ceasar (with heart-rending emotion).

Cut

Scene 18.8. Teacher Zhang Dong in front of class

Teacher Zhang Dong: What happened to missionary Li Wei?

Student #1: I think his dog was run over by a car...

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes! How did you know? You didn’t see the dog or the accident or anything. In fact, you had give a very different meaning to the word “Ceasar” before.

Student #1: Well, it was obvious from the way missionary Li Wei shouted and acted what happened.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Exactly. That shows you how intonation and body language effect the meaning of what is spoken. In fact, experts tell us that intonation counts for

34%, gestures for 59%, and the actual words for only 7% of what is communicated in face to face conversation.

Let's take a closer look at the importance of intonation first. Think of how you could say the following in 2 different ways. (Show sentences of white board: NB punctuation has been deliberately left out; come up with Chinese dynamic equivalents)

1. Jim saw it through
2. I couldn't ask Mary who was in the garden
3. Oh hasn't the aspidistra grown
4. This is the right one isn't it
5. You can have whisky or gin
6. When's he coming
7. Great
8. If you think the nurse was rude you should see the doctor
9. I thought he was going to give up

Can you see how you can completely change the meaning of the sentence by altering your voice intonation? Getting incorrect intonation does not only make you sound less authentic, it can lead to very embarrassing situations!

Different languages have different intonation and stress patterns for different kinds of sentences. It is very difficult to make hard and fast rules about these matters. Look at the following example from English, for example:

- The cat is interested in protecting her kittens (2 stress points)
- Large cars waste gas (every word stressed)

Although it is difficult to make hard and fast rules, here are some guidelines for English:

1. Wh__ questions are generally accompanied by a falling tone.
2. Yes/No questions are often accompanied by a rising tone.
3. List intonation is "rise, rise, rise fall." (I saw a cat, a dog, a bird and a fish.)
4. Intonation (and stress) are extremely important if the question tags are to convey the appropriate meaning: try rising and falling the following sentence and compare: "You're from Germany, aren't you?"
5. Rising intonation normally indicates that more is expected to follow...

Try the following to help you learn intonation:

- conducting/beating/tapping
- humming/pom-pom-ing
- notation (markings to indicate rise and fall)
- slowing down, elongating to clarify (like reading to children)
- say it like you mean it!
- Hear it in your head, then say it.

- Sound angry/glad/worried

Scene 18.9. Missionary Li Wei walking through an obviously Muslim district

- Missionary Li Wei walking through a Muslim district in typical Chinese fashion (i.e., fast) with people looking at him.
- Missionary Li Wei walking through a Muslim district wearing sunglasses and a Muslim dress and walking fast: people still look at him.
- Missionary Li Wei sauntering at the speed of locals, looking at the things on display that they are looking at... someone stops him and asks for directions as though he were a local!

Fade and cut

Scene 18.10. Teacher Zhang Dong in front of class

Teacher Zhang Dong: What is missionary Li Wei up to?

Student #2 (hesitatingly): He is walking.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes. Where is he walking and how?

Student #2: He is walking in a Muslim area in different ways.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes. And what is the result?

Student #3: When he walks like everyone else people don't stare at him like he was a stranger. Someone even asked him for directions.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Exactly. Once he slowed down and tried to fit in he didn't stand out of the crowd any more.

Fade and cut

Scene 18.11. Missionary Li Wei outside, striking different poses

Jordan: no money pose; Turkey: ward off the evil eye (by pulling ear), point feet at someone, cross legs, come, go, what's happening, slow down,

Cut

Scene 18.12. Teacher Zhang Dong in front of class

Teacher Zhang Dong: Now what is missionary Li Wei doing?

Student #3: He is striking different poses.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes. Do those poses communicate anything?

Student #2: Well, yes they do.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, they do indeed. Much significant communication is altogether non-verbal. We size each other up by interpreting our observations of people's body language within a cultural context. We can say what we want, but if our body language communicates something different, we haven't communicated what we wanted. Body language may be interpreted totally differently from what you intend to communicate.

What does crossing your legs mean in certain cultures? Can you smile and talk—that is very important in certain cultures! Different cultures walk at different speeds. In some cultures a man's wife walks behind her husband. How do you sit in a chair? Do you flop all over it? Can you cross your legs? If so, with who? Different cultures have different senses of personal space. It feels awkward when you have to adjust to another culture's personal space! Who can you look in the eyes when you speak to them and who can you not look into the eyes when you speak to them? What does the way you dress say about you? Are you communicating godliness through these things?

These are things you cannot learn from a book. Observe other people's body language in reaction to what you say and pay attention to your own body language. This includes gestures, tone of voice, pace of speaking, facial expression, posturing, and so on.

You know, it is impossible for human beings NOT to communicate. The question is: are we communicating that which we want to get across, or something else?

Scene 18.13. Things learned in this lesson

- Language is a cultural and historical expression.
- Different cultures view the world differently. Language is a mirror of culture. We don't just speak a language, we are a living language. Thus, by virtue of who we are we are often the greatest impediments in cross-cultural communication.
- You need to learn to identify and feel with your target people
- Words often have a range of meanings which you can only discover when you hear them used in different contexts. The range of meaning of particular words does not necessarily carry over from one language to the next.
- Metaphors cannot usually be translated directly.
- Different languages have different stress patterns.

- Voice intonation and body language can completely change the meaning of a sentence.
- Much significant communication is non-verbal. We can say what we want, but if our body language communicates something different, we haven't communicated.