Politeness in Cross-cultural Communication

Study of the main principles of politeness and impoliteness in cross-cultural communication enables to avoid misunderstanding and ambiguity thus providing effective communication niveau.

Politeness is generally understood as respect and consideration for other people, ease and gracefulness of manners; desire to please others by anticipating their wants and wishes. In context of cross-cultural communication this meaning tends to fail due to its narrowness and imperfection. So, in the wider, cross-cultural meaning we can perceive politeness as a set of rules, or strategies that are culturally-specific, ritualized in communication that tends to harmonize communication and avoid conflicts.

A good example of communication failure and wrong pattern actualization is given by N.I. Formanovskaya [2005: 337]. She cites a case happened to Prof. V.V. Preobrazhensky who once was in a Chinese bus and translated a polite Russian request “Are you getting off?” into Chinese. The passenger got annoyed and exclaimed “It’s none of your business! It’s up to me whether I go out or not!””. That translation was accepted as an intrusion into the passenger’s privacy and so a conflict probability in that case was high.

There is a point of view that there exist polite and impolite cultures and societies [Tanaka & Kawade 1982], some Russian researchers claim that the Russian culture and language tend to be less polite in comparison with the English language and culture [Muratov 2000]. We support the point of view given in the work [Larina 2003] that suggests that there are no polite/impolite nations and cultures but there are different, culture-specific behavioral norms that are usually based on social and cultural relationships, cultural values and national peculiarities. Politeness is tied up with the most basic principles of socio-cultural organization, and interpersonal relationships within social groups and should be viewed in the context of social distance and Power distance which are considered the main dimensions of cultures [Hofstede 1984, 1991].
Being interculturally polite is a very useful though complicated ability because a person communicates not only ideas, but attitudes as well. Rarely our speech has the form of Meaningful Talk. Such a case can be considered to be an exception rather than a rule. So that it is suggested to single out the so-called Interactional communication which aim is not only to communicate information but to communicate feelings and attitudes as well.

References: