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Linguistic Relativity in Cross-Cultural Communication: A Critical Review of Theoretical and Empirical Insights

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Abstract

As the following paper seeks to give a critical analysis of linguistic relativity, this is a concept that has pivotal importance with regard to intercultural interaction. It discusses the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis according to which language shape the thought of people and consider how the theory can be transformed in modern readings and appraisals. This paper aims at providing a review of various empirical studies that either affirm or reject the concept of relativity of language, with emphasis being placed on how language influences perception, cognition and behavior in line with the cultural requirements. The paper also explores the contribution of cognitive linguistics in analyzing the way language determines the perception of culture, conduct and ethics in language use specifically in the day-to-day interactions. In addition, the study analyzes the consequences of linguistic relativity in relation to language barriers in multicultural global communication processes as well as the ways in which language can hinder or enhance multicultural communication by providing the interlocutors with a different way

of perceiving reality. Finally, the conclusion section of the paper includes the analysis of the necessity of paying attention to the language and cultural differences in order to increase the effectiveness of intercultural communications in the contemporary globalized world.

Keywords: Linguistic relativity, Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, cross-cultural communication, cognitive linguistics, perception, cognition, cultural worldviews, social norms, ethical values, linguistic sensitivity.

I. Introduction

The idea of linguistic relativity, which is best discussed in terms of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, suggests that the ways of speaking in a particular language determine the way its speakers' think about the world. When applied to cross-cultural communication it means that people who use different languages may perceive and interpret their experiences in different ways due to the linguistic categories which are available to them (Whorf, 1956). In the past decades, intense discussions have been held between different theoretical frameworks and in empirical studies of the relationship language might have on the way we think, since not only language content but also its structure has been shown to influence cuing in areas such as color categorization, spatial orientation and time measurement (Boroditsky, 2001; Lucy, 1997). However, the later studies turn to the matter of finding the differences are not so clear as in the first attempts to state that there are two types of connected languages, where one is coherent and the other inconsistent, and there is a many-shades-of-gray approach to the problem stating that linguistic relativity is not simply an either-or condition (Gumperz and Levinson, 1996). This critical review aims at summarizing the main theoretical approaches and empirical evidence related to the effects of linguistic relativity and how it moderates intercultural communication. The review also looks at counter arguments like the possible cognitive universal may restrain the potential of linguistic effect on cognition and, the future of the debates of linguistic relativity in enhancing inter-culture communications in a culturally diverse globalized society (Pinker, 1994). In conclusion, this review give an account of

the studies on the linguistic relativity in an attempt to understand its part in cross- cultural interactions.

Language and thought is the hypothesis in linguistic anthropology that postulates an interdependence between the structure of language and the way a particular language community interprets the world. Sapir first broached the concept, and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf later expanded it during the early part of the twentieth century. Sapir also opined that ‘it is clear that no two speech communities are so alike that they can be taken as giving the same picture of the nature of things. Expanding from this base, Whorf (1956 argued that language grammar structures including tense, aspect as well as modality mold people’s routine ways of thinking. This view contradicted the idea of universal language, which was replaced by the view indicating that different language’s structure different realities. For many decades now, the linguistic relativity hypothesis has been an area of focus where people have adopted either strong versions of the hypothesis, which put it forward as a belief that language defines the way people think or weak versions of relativity, or, where language helps to develop people’s thoughts but does not dictate it (Lucy, 1997). The following historical background allows giving more extensive explanation of the significance of the concept of linguistic relativity in the general context and its application in the various domains including cross-cultural interaction.

This is so because the theory of linguistic relativity has a lot of bearing on intercultural communication since it posits that people in different linguistic communities may have different understandings of reality due to the discrepancies in their usable language. Knowledge of these differences is important while working and communicating in multicultural environment, when failures in mutual understanding can be explained by the differences in communication patterns and the way certain languages are structured in terms of thinking patterns (Boroditsky, 2011). For instance, variations in how languages express the spatial relationships in the form of absolute and relative ways compel unique forms of perceiving and moving about in the external environment (Levinson, 2003). In the same way, the meaning of time in different languages determines speakers’ attitudes

and priorities of events and thus impacts intercultural communication and bargaining (Boroditsky, 2001). Based on the principles of linguistic relativity that has been defined in the scope of globalization when people travel around the world intercultural communication becomes an important aspect and important to be aware of the different languages. Accepting language as the agent of perceived cognitive and behavioral patterns, communicators can design better techniques for dealing with people who have different language and cultural backgrounds.

Thus the main purpose of this review is to highlight the theoretical and empirical evidence on linguistic relativity with an emphasis on intercultural communication. This review is designed to also determine how different languages affect thought patterns and how such patterns affect cross-cultural communication. The data collected to support the hypothesis is based on both the historical studies and current research works, based on linguistic findings across different linguistic and cultural backgrounds for a balanced understanding of the linguistic relativity. Thus, in this cross-disciplinary systematic comparative review, an attempt is made to determine the degree to which language determines and reflects thought and behavior and to what extent this knowledge can facilitate the development of intercultural communication strategies and practices. Also, further discussion will be presented, which concerns the current controversies and concerns regarding the linguistic relativity hypothesis and possible drawbacks to the hypothesis. In this regard, the review shall provide an understanding of the contemporary significance of the linguistic relativity especially given the increase in multicultural interactions in the modern society.

II. Theoretical Foundations

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, or the linguistic determinism, as it is also called, is an hypothesis in that it states that the language one uses in a certain way dictates his ability to think that way. This hypothesis owes its origin strictly to the linguistic concepts that were developed by Edward Sapir in collaboration with Benjamin Lee Whorf in the early part of 20th century. Sapir (1929) formulated the hypothesis that language determines

individuals' perception of the reality stating that an individual blends into the reality as a member of a certain speech community and comprehends reality in terms of linguistic patterns. This idea was elaborated by Whorf in 1956 where he stated that grammatical and lexicon of different languages could require different patterns of behavior among the speakers. In future, the hypothesis was refined and scholars began to differentiate between the 'strong' and the 'weak' LRH. Linguistic relativity, in a stronger version known as linguistic determinism claims that language totally determines the way people think and the weaker/intermediary version supports the argument that language has a strict influence on the way people think (Lucy, 1997). Changing history of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis can be explained by the fact that the further development of the themes presented at the initial stage of research in the field of linguistics and cognitive science and the nature of the link between language and thought continues to be discussed today.

Contemporary versions of linguistic relativity have therefore developed and enriched the initial kinds of analysis contained in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis taking cognizance of recent advancements in cognitive anthropology and psycholinguistics. Modern researchers have analyzed how language implicitly determines developing certain mental abilities, including the ability to estimate colours, navigate through space and time, for example (Boroditsky, 2001, Levinson, 2003). But these studies have also given rise to critique of the hypothesis especially the structural or "strong" version. Such critics that include Pinker (1994) stated that language does not determine thoughts but there are some fixed mental universals that people around the world use in thinking. Furthermore, there is a concern that the theory raises the importance of language at the expense of other cultural and environmental factors that could partly be held responsible for cognitive diversities (Everett, 2013). Such descriptions and critiques revealed much more about linguistic relativity in the sense that it is not the sole determinant of cognitive processes but a powerful element which works hand in hand with other factors.

The studies done under this branch of linguistics have go a long way in establishing the concept of linguistic relativity especially with regard to how cognitive processes are

represented in language. Unlike other linguistic frameworks in which language is said to be isolated and autonomous, in cognitive linguistics language is said to be grounded in cognitive processes and linguistic patterns mirror cognitive schemas (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). This view serves to substantiate the hypothesis of the linguistic relativity at the level of categorization as Kitsik (2007) and other researchers who are in line with the theory as, noted earlier – Evans and Green (2006). Studies conducted in cognitive linguistics for instance, have shown that such figures of speech like metaphor are not mere figures of speech but how people conceptualize and organize their thought system (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This is in line with the hypothesis of linguistic relativity whereby the extent of the presumptions and expectations that are contained in a given language interprets the idiosyncratic metaphors and cognitive models that are found in it. Cognitive linguistics therefore right explains the relation between language and thought in a more complex manner giving evidence for the SR.

III. Empirical Evidence

A number of scholars in the linguistics fraternity have done empirical research that has supported the idea of linguistic relativity that was being forwarded by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis mainly on perception and cognition. Color perception is one of the concepts that indicate how language descriptions of different colors affect an individual's ability to view and sort them. In a classic study Berlin and Kay explained that while basic colors do exist but the way in which color continuum is divided by different languages may differ influencing in this way the perception of color by different language speakers. Similarly, reflecting the influence of language, Boroditsky (2001) has shown that the English and Mandarin speaking population had a different mental picture of time with Mandarin speaking population viewing time vertically while the English speaking thinking of time horizontally. Levinson (2003) also looked at spatial orientation where he posited that people who use absolute directional terms (North, South – absolute as opposed to Left, Right – relative) were more consistent at spatial orientation hence postulating that

language determines navigational related cognitive processes. These studies reveal some hard proof the way an individual manipulates language can affect how he or she views the world.

Nevertheless, even when provided with such solid evidences in favor of linguistic relativity, the hypothesis has never been free of critique, especially by cross-linguistic approaches which seem to undermine its shadier deterministic paradigms. Thus, one of the main criticisms that can be derived from Pinker's (1994) approach is that thought is indeed modular rather than language-based as the former can be observed in infants and animals who do not have full language commission capabilities. In Pinker's view, language does affect thought, however, it is not the sole determinant of thought because there is evidence of different aspects of thought which occur universally across different languages. Also a study carried out by Li and Gleitman (2002), focused on the spatial representation, reveals that people can switch over into another language's frame of reference if directed, and by so doing, affirm proves that language does not limit cognitive capacities but comes equipped with various tools for perceiving space and solving problems. The third major argument against linguistic constructivism originates from the bilingualism studies whereby, the people are able to switch from one language to another without being mentally interrupted, implying that the processes of thinking are not firmly anchored in language. These criticisms point to the fact that there is a connection between language and thought though the process is not void of other general cognitive factors.

Relativity also permeates other spheres of life not only perception and cognition but behavior and decisions as well. Some experiments that have been conducted prove that the language a person uses affect his/her decisions when it comes to money, the perceived risks and self-imposed penalties regarding moral issues. For example, Chen (2013) has reported that the users of languages with less manifest future tense, like, German use their money more sparingly, and pursue healthier practices compared to people who use languages with a more heavily featured future tense, like English. This indicates that there are linguistic structures as pertaining to time which can affect the

behavior of people; they will start preparing for the future. Evidence from Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) shows that even the metaphors used in relation to social issues such as crime, when framed as a ‘beast’ or a ‘virus’ can have an impact on the decisions made by the society. These observations suggest that linguistic relativity has a pragmatic relevance for elucidating how language affects people’s behavior and decision making, thus supporting the notion that through language we are what we speak.

IV. Linguistic Relativity and Cultural Worldviews

Language contributes to the formation of cultural norms and values that govern societies, and an indication of the way the world is by its speakers. This work posits that Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis regarding language as a determinant of perception of reality and concomitant causative of formation of cultural norms and values (Whorf, 1956). For example, the languages that involve special pronouns and verb forms to manifest the collectivist notions act as the media whereby society enforces compliance to order and encourages group cohesiveness as experienced by the speakers of many of East Asian languages (Kashima & Kashima, 1998). On the other hand, languages which promote distinct personal pronouns of the self and the other as in English promotes aspects such as culture of independence and self-reliance (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Moreover, the ideas which are attached to the concrete word also represent certain cultural cognition, for example, the given English word ‘time is money’ which presupposes the culture of efficiency in the USA and other western states (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). These above examples have demonstrated that language is not only a carrier of culture, but it is also the instrument which helps in the construction, reinforcement and regulation of culture and cultural practices.

Language shapes social relations and practices because it serves as a tool through which people understand the social actions and required performance. The language that is used to express relationships can therefore make certain acts seem typical and others as well as unusual and make certain customaries typical in a society. For instance, use of honorifics in languages such as Japanese or Korean is systematic and places and sustains the issue

of authority over age and rank (Ide 1989, 643). Such linguistic practices form part of Group norms that are reproduced in routinized ways in societal practices, shaping social interactions out of the society. Besides, language preserves gendered norms such as in gendered languages with nouns and pronouns where; linguistic division of gender by a language helps in protraction of gendered expectations and performances (Romaine, 1999). The politeness of language, the way requests or commands are made or given also differ from one culture to the other, influencing the sociolultural norms of people's interaction. From these examples we can see how language plays a strong part in supporting the social structures that it offers to the population as norms for cultural proceedings.

Specific empirical account and examples of linguistic relativity across different cultures give real life evidences of how first language influences the second language thinking and / or behavior of culturally different people. There is one that concerns the Hopi language: Whorf (1956) supposed that this language has no grammatical tense indicating the time sequence and therefore Hopi speakers think of time differently than Indo-European language speakers. However, the subsequent research has cast doubt on Whorf's interpretation this case continues to be a perfect example illustrating how linguistic patterns may determine mental processes. Another more specific example is the project with the Kuuk Thaayorre people of Australia whose language has cardinal-direction referring terms instead of near/far terms. Concerning the linguistic feature, research has evidenced that the above language fosters their navigation ability and spatial awareness and therefore, proves the relationship between language and cognition (Levinson 2003). In comparison with other cases from different cultural backgrounds, the above-mentioned examples clearly give evidence of the fact that, the relationship between linguistic relativity and the corresponding aspects of cognition-behavior as well as cultural practice, is not univocal, but rather displays a remarkable variability.

V. Implications for Cross-Cultural Communication

Intercultural conflict is a key element in interaction of peoples as they try to communicate, and language acts as the primary source of misunderstanding. These are due to the differences in either syntactic, semantic or pragmatic aspects of the language leading to different meaning being ascribed to a given message. For example, low context communication culture such as those that are dominant in most Asian countries may be misinterpreted by high context communication culture such as the American or German (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2012). Furthermore culture related language usage which may include the use of titles or even politeness may create misunderstanding or perceived impoliteness especially if they are not acknowledged or returned in equal measure by people from the other culture (Thomas, 1983). Intercultural miscommunications also show that people need to be conscious of cultural differences and language differences when communicating with a global audience because these affect interpersonal and business interactions, trade, and collaborations.

Cultural differences especially when concerning language may cause hurdles to total interaction, co-operations or the success of the international businesses or relations. This has a consequence of impeding sharing of ideas, compromising diplomatic negotiations, and causing problems in international organizations and multinationals (Pasa, 2008). For example, Neeley (2012) notes that in multinational corporate organizations, language barriers result in misunderstandings, low levels of trust and often lead to conflict between the organizational members originating from different linguistic backgrounds. Furthermore, languages can increase tensions in terms of power relationship because dominant language speakers may unintentionally exclude, others, who are less proficient in that particular language which affects decision-making and Company inclusiveness (Piller, 2017). Language barriers do not confine themselves to the realm of practical considerations, extent of communication difficulty; they also engage the realm of acculturation and immigrants and diffusion of scientific knowledge and successful conduct of international humanitarian aid. Overcoming these barriers is however very necessary for enhancing increased proper inter-country relations.

When communicating across cultures, especially when people do not share the same language, there are important techniques that one has to consider. The other is the building of cultural intelligence (CQ) which refers to the cultural acumen of understanding the application of cultural systems in other climes and responding appropriately to this information (Earley & Ang, 2003). Employees with high CQ are better placed to identify cultural differences as far as language is concerned and consequently avoid of misunderstanding. Another strategic guideline is not to use idiomatic expressions and / or cultural references which are not well-understood throughout an organization and particularly within a multilingual context (Seelye, 1996). Such type of listening is also very important as it not only consists of listening to the words uttered but also the cultural meaning and motive behind the words that are said so as to minimize misunderstanding (Gudykunst, 2004). Last but not least, language training and multicultural relations that accept all the languages and accents in an organization's workplace will improve the interpersonal and organizational communication and cooperation between people from different countries (Feely & Harzing, 2003). Since these strategies are aimed at providing people beings with insights on how they can effectively communicate with others across different cultures, these strategies if well worked on would go along way in enhancing successful inter-cultural interactions.

VI. Challenges and Controversies

The problem of existence of language universal and/or relativity is one of the most discussed questions in the framework of linguistics theory. In this line of reasoning, it is noted that all world languages possess some identifiable key elements, hence, inherent universals which are beyond the culture-specific variation (Chomsky 1965). This view is closely linked with the views of Noam Chomsky who suggests that language acquisition device is innate to body, all languages have grammatical base. On the other hand, the proponents of the linguistic relativity or the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis believe that linguistic reliability imposes a-positive positive influence on cognition and world view (Whorf 1956). As per this view, it is believed that the variations in language lead to variations in the mental organizations, that is, people speaking different languages may

well consider and bear relationships with the surrounding reality in considerably different manners. This is a fundamental question to our understanding of the human mind and culture as well as has relevance to real life issues such as intercultural communication, translation, and language learning (Evans & Levinson, 2009). On one side of the debate, there are arguments, which state an existence of certain cognitive universals, but in general, linguists do not deny the impact of language on thoughts, implying that such relationship between two may be more complex, thus calling for universality and relativity as two extremes of a single spectrum.

Connecting the concept of linguistic relativity to intercultural communication also brings up several questions of ethical nature mainly in regard to the ways interpreters attempt to implement those theories. Some of the ethical implications thus include possibilities of extending the ideas in linguistic relativity and get to support cultural relativity or prejudice where by differences in language are magnified as a way of trying to mean that the culture of a particular people is inherently different or even more primitive (Hill and Mannheim, 1992). Further, there are issues such as the sanitized languages that are imposed on minorities by those from dominant cultures in an effort to somehow ‘civilize’ the so-called ‘backward’ people, this therefore has negative implications as it threatens the very linguistic and cultural rights of such deprived groups in as much as it denies them their cultural identities (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Another one is the ethical obligation of the communicators not to engage in linguistic imperialism, this is whereby one language is depicted to be superior or more logical than the rest of the languages thus devaluing the rest of the languages (Phillipson, 1992). To overcome these ethical concerns, it is necessary to recognize and appreciate the multiculturalism of the people and uphold the multilingual communication practices that empower all the languages.

Interpreting and translation are two important steps involved in minimizing the extent of the linguistic relativity enabling communication across the language barriers. Translation is the act of turning words from one language into another and at the same time, the understanding of the meaning of such words in other cultures and mentalizing frameworks as postulated by Nida (1964). Translators and interpreters have to go through

certain constraints of linguistic relativity and try to choose or to find a word which has the same meaning, the same connotation and intonation as the term in other language even if direct translation is impossible. This process is especially so when working with concepts that are culture bound or when the two languages, source and target, view the world differently (Venuti, 1995). Furthermore, real-time interpretation involves an additional challenge which is the ability to translate faithfully without distorting the meaning of what is being said in core diplomatic or legal proceedings and at the same time to interpret to ensure that the language used is culturally and linguistically accessible and suitable for the targeted audience. In doing so, translators and interpreters lessen prejudice caused by linguistic relativity and ensure proper communication between parties.

VII. Future Research Directions

The availability of new empirical material in different linguistic settings is enormous, which gives a perspective for extending the tentative comparisons and developing more nuanced theoretical ideas of linguistic relativity. However, there is a lack of a practical library for NLP and there is a lot of work done in this area where the work is limited to a small set of languages and mostly these languages are from the Indo-European group. Future research can extend this line of work to other, even less explored languages mainly from non-Western and indigenous cultures to compare how otherwise similar populations code the world and think in different ways due to the specifics of the linguistic environment (Evans & Levinson, 2009). For example, analyzing languages that have special grammar peculiarities, for example, polysynthetic languages or languages with a extremely developed system of noun classes can contribute to the emergence of new cognition that language affects thought. Also there can be more longitudinal studies concerning development of generic cognitive in interaction with bilingualism and language shift and thus enriching the dynamic perspective of linguistic relativity (Kroll & Bialystok, 2013). These studies could also include renovation of paradigm by examining linguistic analysis in combination with cognitive neurol science, anthropology and

psychology for better understanding of interaction between language, thought and culture.

Globalization has strong implication on the issue of linguistic relativity because with growing interaction across global cultures and growing dominance of world languages including English, may have an impact the way that linguistic diversity impacts the way individuals think. In one hand, there is the potentiality of the so called linguistic relativity declining as globalization might cause different people who speak different languages to pick similar mental frameworks given the dominance of a global linguistic medium, which is a view espoused by Pennycook (2017)., at the same time, the preservation and revival of minoritized languages for countering the effects of globalization could continue to bring up and even deepen, the cognitive and perceptual distinctions resulting from language as highlighted by Fishman (2001). Further studies should address how new patterns of CAN, multilingualism and language contacts impact on the linguistic relativity across different cultures. Also, studies could be done to compare and compare how effects of digital communication that necessitate use of common language form part of the cognitive processes of individuals that interact in different contexts and across different linguistic domains as part of the impact of globalization on linguistic relativity.

The impact of the linguistic relativity for the international relationships and cooperation is evident as the language is vital for diplomatic interaction, intercultural bargaining, and making of global policies. This is because the process of how language affects cognition can improve the international relations and avoid misinterpretations in political situations (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). For instance, admission of the fact that various linguistic paradigms may result in dissimilar notion of important terms may assist the negotiators to prevent disputes which stem from misunderstanding. Also, increased use of diverse languages and emphasis on the multilingualism in the international organization s can lead to more democratic decision-making since it implies different cognition style's consideration. Further research may look at the ways LC might determine international policies by examining how the different languages would possibly frame kinetic issues that require systematic solution such as climate change, human right issues or else,

economic development. Such observations might be useful for devising measures that could enhance cooperation between states across the world and the acquirement of fair relations between them.

VIII. Conclusion

This chapter has examined the theory of linguistic relativity in detail in an attempt to clearly and comprehensively define what this concept actually entails. According to the findings, it has been established that there is a strong correlation that exists between language and thought and perception; however, this correlation differs between various areas of cognition, for instance color perception, spatial orientation, and time orientation (Boroditsky, 2001; Levinson, 2003). In addition, to this there is still the unresolved argument as to whether language is universal or relative, but research in the present day highlights a much more complex relationship between the hard-wired structures of language and human cognition (Evans & Levinson 2009). The chapter also pointed out language and its use in influencing culture, especially social etiquette and manners, as well as its responsibilities for creating cross-cultural clashes in international operations (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2012). In conclusion, the study emphasises the relevance of LOI concept in the context of globalization and its impact on culture and relationships for interactions in the context of today's international cooperation.

The fact that there is the concept of linguistic relativity is important especially now that our world is a global village. Which is why it is imperative to understand how language is involved in the structuring of thought and behavior all the more with the increasing interaction between different cultures in today's globalized world. Linguistic relativity as an interdisciplinary concept gives a wide perspective on how language is intertwined with both the individual's mind and societal tendencies influencing culture and cognition by affecting and shaping any global processes including diplomacy and global business (Pennycook, 2017). Furthermore, as more and more people communicate with others from a different language through digital media, one has been able to be reminded by the principles of linguistic relativity in that there can be challenges as well as benefits that

come with cross-linguistic interactions (Crystal, 2003). Thus, the theory continues to be an important paradigm for understanding and solving the challenges involved with intercultural communication in the contemporary global environment. That means it helps us to think about how language influences our ways of seeing the world and whether it is possible to change people's perception of language for the better and focus on the cultural differences rather than on the similarities.

Future research on linguistic relativity should therefore work on widening the net of languages for comparison as well as broadening the cultural base on which research findings can be built. Exploring how some of the languages of relatively low profile that open certain highly idiosyncratic grammatical operations could further the prospects for the universality or relativity debate (Evans & Levinson, 2009). More so, research designs that follow up participants with an aim of establishing the cognitive outcomes of bilingualism as well as language change over time may further unravel how two or more frameworks of language work within a learner's mind (Kroll & Bialystok, 2013). One more potential line of research for the future is studying modern language and culture contacts and its effects on the processes occurring in the human brain and actions which are performed by people within the frame of digital and global communication (Pennycook, 2017). Last but not the least, research could also be dedicated to the exploration of various practical implications of the linguistic relativity, specifically with reference to the field of education, translation, and international relations where the results would speak to practical policies of facilitating cross cultural.

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