5 Commensurability Principle

'It Is Everybody's World'

Key Theme:	Generality
Problem Question:	What are the standards that make intercultural communication possible?
Objective:	To help you realize the inherent common nature of people from different cultures

Key Concepts: Cognitive, concept, corporeal, *flygskam*, 'grammar,' image-schema, lacuna, linguistic relativity, Manifested, Manifesting, semiotic, 'Standard Average European' (SAE), strong version of linguistic relativity, *shibui*, sign, speech community, weak version of linguistic relativity.

Chapter Outline

1   Introducing the Problem Question

In the previous chapter, we saw how all cultural knowledge is situated because it is generated in specific situations. This way, people create different cultural maps that structure their knowledge and guide their

behaviors. Now you might be thinking: if everything is a matter of a specific point of view, how is intercultural communication possible at all? There must be some common ground that people from all cultures can relate to.

In this chapter, thus, we take up the following question: 'What are the standards that make intercultural communication possible?'

2   Linguistic Relativity

It is only natural that people from the same cultural world can communicate with one other without much problem since they share the same or similar references and meanings. In this sense, people from a certain cultural world form the so-called '**speech community**', defined primarily not in terms of geographic boundaries but shared patterns of language use (Milburn, 2015). Outside of our speech community, though, we find ourselves on unfamiliar ground. As the famous French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss writes, "cultures are like trains moving each on its own track, at its own speed, and in its own direction." Sometimes there are trains, he says, that are "rolling alongside ours" so that "through the windows of our compartments, we can observe at our leisure the various kinds of cars, the faces and gestures of the passengers." But if "a train passes in the other direction, we perceive only a vague, fleeting, barely identifiable image" (Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p. 10). We cannot but wonder if cultures are commensurable. The concept of commensurability is based on a common measure; in fact, the word 'commensurability' goes back to Latin 'mensura,' meaning 'a measuring, a measurement; thing to measure by'—from the Proto-Indo-European root *me-, meaning 'to measure' (Figure 5.1).

Indeed, we are often so overwhelmed by the diversity of the world's cultures that it is only fair to wonder whether they share any common measure; if everything is a matter of a specific point of view, is intercultural communication possible at all?

Such questions have been raised since early antiquity through the Renaissance up to the present day. Most often, these ideas are associated with Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf—American scholars who argued that the conceptualization of the world and behaviors by people within a certain speech community are all relative and depend on the specific characteristics of that group's language; hence, the development of 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis' or '**linguistic relativity**.'

Sapir and Whorf studied Aztec, Maya, and Hopi languages—very different from what Whorf called '**Standard Average European**' language (SAE). They had discovered that those languages, through their vocabulary and grammatical structure, provide different segmentations of experience. As a result, they argued that, based on different language segmentation, people in different cultures have different views of the world and so think and act differently.

MENSVRA.

Circinus, æqualis norma, & libella fabrilis,
Commoda mensuræ sunt documenta bonæ.

32.

Figure 5.1 Mensura from Proposopographia, by Philips Galle (around 1585) *Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art*

In Sapir's words,

> human beings do not live in the objective world alone . . . but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society . . . The fact of the matter is that the "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group . . . We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.
>
> (Sapir, 1956, p. 134)

Whorf echoes these ideas about language:

> We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.
>
> (Whorf, 1956, pp. 213–214)

He goes on to note that such patterns of language "are specific for each language and constitute the formalized side of language, or its 'grammar'," adding: "From this fact proceeds what I have called the 'linguistic relativity principle,' which means, in informal terms, that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward . . . somewhat different views of the world" (Whorf, 1956, p. 221). '**Grammar**' here is a broad term, covering not only traditional grammatical structures, such as tense, agreement, or mood, but lexical structure, as well (words and expressions). Whorf's famous example of a different 'grammatical' segmentation of the world comes from the Hopi language where there exists no comparable grammatical structure referring to what Europeans would call 'time' (Whorf, 1956, p. 58).

2.1   Two Versions of Linguistic Relativity

The term 'linguistic relativity' is easy to understand. It is 'linguistic' because it is focused on the most noticeable and important component of culture—its linguistic signs (language). 'Relativity' implies that the ways in which people of a certain culture think and act are relative to (dependent on) its language.

Let's take a simple example and see what conclusions can be drawn if we follow this strand of thought all the way through. The meaning of the word 'snow' in the U.S. culture is as follows: "solid precipitation in the form of white or translucent ice crystals of various shapes originating in the upper atmosphere as frozen particles of water vapor" (Morris, 1982, pp. 1223–1224). Everybody views this particular object the same way and uses that understanding

accordingly; for instance, people enjoy the song 'Let it snow,' they know that snow is cold, that you can make snowballs with it, or that you can ski when there is enough snow. In this case, there is a complete agreement over the meaning of the word.

Now let's see how this simple sign can be interpreted by people from other cultures. If we look at what Whorf labeled 'Standard Average European' (SAE) language, we find, for example, very similar signs with very similar meaning in German and French, People in these cultures understand snow in significantly the same way and act accordingly. So, people from the United States and these SAE cultures find this particular meaning easy to agree on.

In the language of Eskimos, however, we find a large number of other signs for snow; for instance, words for falling snow, snow on the ground, snow packed hard like ice, or slushy snow. As Whorf wrote,

> we have the same word for falling snow, snow on the ground, snow packed hard like ice, slushy snow, wind-driven flying snow—whatever the situation may be. To an Eskimo, this all-inclusive word would be almost unthinkable; he would say that falling snow, slushy snow, and so on, are sensuously and operationally different, different things to contend with; he uses different words for them and for other kinds of snow.
>
> (Whorf, 1956, p. 216)

We feel the discrepancy between the meanings of snow in the Eskimo culture vs the U.S. and SAE cultures is more significant. We must admit that the Eskimos view the world differently—at least as far as snow is concerned. In this case, then, the worldviews are significantly different.

Let's take this strand of thought even further. Suppose a speech community X is discovered that has no word for snow. Such empty spaces or missing parts in a language system are called 'lacunas.' One might say that there is a lexical (word) **lacuna** for 'snow' that does not exist in the language of culture X. Its members have no knowledge of the sign 'snow'; for example, they cannot enjoy the song 'Let it snow,' they do not know how to make snowballs, have never made a snowman or a snow woman. They cannot create any metaphors with the word 'snow.' There seems to be an insurmountable gap between their view of the world and that of the people from regions with snow; since the word for snow does not exist in their language. Its members will not understand what people from the United States mean when they use 'snow' in different situations of interaction. There is no overlap between these two cultures and so there is nothing to (dis)agree on.

This view of the relationship between language and cultural knowledge is usually labeled the 'strong version' of linguistic relativity, also called 'linguistic determinism' (Wolff & Holmes, 2011). According to this version, linguistic structure is said to determine the way people think and act. If people from different cultures use different signs, they think and act in the world

differently. These ideas can be taken to mean that the segmentation of experience, reflected in one system of signs, is incommensurable with the systems of signs of other cultures. A misguided assumption may result that some cultures are more superior due to their highly developed system of signs, and also that intercultural communication may be impossible altogether.

The role of symbols cannot be completely disregarded. The consideration of the connection between language signs and our perception of reality is usually labeled the 'weak version' of linguistic relativity (Wolff & Holmes, 2011) (Figure 5.2).

As an example, let's look at two broad perceptions of time—monochromic and polychromic, mentioned in Chapter 3. As you remember, monochromic time orientation emphasizes "schedules, the compartmentalization and segmentation of measurable units of time," while the polychronic orientation sees "time as much less tangible" and stresses "involvement of people and the completion of tasks" (Neuliep, 2000, p. 122). To a degree, these two conceptualizations of time are grounded in language signs.

The first worldview is based on perceiving time as a separate entity, which is 'figured out' as part of culture, cf. traditional European cultures. Here, time is perceived as 'figure,' which is carved out of the world, as it were, in such language signs as 'time,' 'clock,' or '5 p.m.' Not surprisingly, most of these language signs are nouns and their expression cannot but influence the way the world is perceived by people from those cultures. It becomes possible for them 'to do things with time,' so to speak, creating schedules, planning activities, or meeting deadlines. This gives people a sense of power over the world: they think that they make time move, controlling the world.

The second worldview is based on perceiving time as part of the world rather than a 'figure' separate from this world. What moves, in this case, is not the hands on the clock, but the sun or the clouds or any human activity—whatever is chosen to measure and represent time. This conceptualization of time finds its language manifestation accordingly—mostly in verbs, which also influence the way the world is perceived. People do not think that time moves because of them; it moves with the world, exercising its control over people, emerging naturally as if from the environing world. In that sense, people live naturally because their actions are based on the movement of this world, not the movement of the clock. The first worldview, of course, also seems natural to those who share it; those people are used to the clock, measuring time in accordance with their own language segmentation.
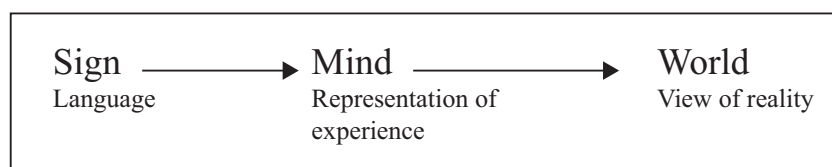
Sign	→	Mind	→	World
Language		Representation of experience		View of reality

Figure 5.2 'Weak version' of linguistic relativity *Source: Author*

3   Cultures as 'Enclaves of Mutual Incomprehension'?

If different languages don't simply influence our perception of reality, but segment and represent our experiences in different ways, those representations may lead to radically divergent views of the world. If we accept that language, as a system of signs, shapes our mind and creates a unique worldview, we must admit that communication between people from different cultures is doomed to failure, since some signs present in one language may be missing in another. In this light, cultures appear to be arranged into formally complete yet incommensurable systems (Sapir, 1964).

When talking about incommensurability, we need to mention the concept of paradigms as discussed by Thomas Kuhn—a well-known American philosopher of science—in his influential book *The structure of scientific revolutions* (Kuhn, 1962).

For Kuhn, a paradigm is an intellectual framework of shared ideas that guide the experts within a given scientific field, such as social sciences and natural sciences. Each paradigm exists in a certain context where meaning is socially constructed and is unavoidably linked to the language describing it. Different paradigms are incommensurable if they involve different scientific languages. It is only natural to draw parallels between Kuhn's ideas and the problem of understanding in intercultural communication. We cannot help wondering if this view "applies to cultures, with the implication that an insurmountable divide separates cultures as much as scientific paradigms . . . precluding the possibility of meaningful and productive intercultural communication?" (Healy, 2013, p. 269). In this light, it is tempting to view different cultures as "enclaves of mutual incomprehension" (Fay, 1996, pp. 81–82). Yes, we seem to deal with "an impressive image of the incommensurability of cultures which renders communication between them impossible. But does this image really describe what is going on between cultures?" (Bredella, 1994, p. 295).

Now is a good time to introduce the Commensurability Principle—the fifth principle underlying intercultural communication.

4   Introducing the Commensurability Principle

Let's now formulate, based on the discussion above, the fifth principle of intercultural communication—the Commensurability Principle. We will isolate three parts that make up this principle. First, we will discuss the dynamic nature of commensurability; next, we will identify its main forms and levels; finally, we will discuss the implications of commensurability. We will discuss each part separately and then formulate the Commensurability Principle, as a whole.

4.1   *The Nature of Commensurability*

The possibility of intercultural communication cannot be adequately discussed without understating what meaning is. You may have noticed that the term 'meaning' has been used quite often in our preceding discussion, revolving

around three things—our language (or signs, in general), our thought (or the mind), and the world in which we live. Let's look at each of these separately.

People from every culture use a large number of signs, i.e., meaningful representations of something. For example, as noted earlier, the English sign 'snow' refers to white or translucent ice crystals of various shapes originating in the upper atmosphere as frozen particles of water vapor. Any system of signs can be viewed as a language, such as spoken or written language, language of music, etc. All such systems are somewhat different since people from different cultures use different signs; if, in one language system there is no correspondence to the sign of another system, we deal with lacunas, as mentioned earlier. Language is crucial for intercultural communication because "without language our sharing of perceptual experience would be confined to shared environments and shared biology: a mechanical sharing without intersubjectivity" (Majid & Levinson, 2011, p. 9).

People from every culture also use various mental processes to make sense of their experiences; in this respect, all "the raw, unorganized information that comes from seeing, hearing, and the other senses is organized into useful concepts" (Sebeok & Danesi, 2000, p. 7). When we find similarities in our experiences, we group them together into such categories as 'food,' 'game,' or 'furniture.' Different cultures are characterized by different segmentations of experiences, resulting in different conceptual representations; for instance, "what is categorized as 'food' is to a large extent culturally constructed" (Sharifian, 2013, p. 64). Sometimes, people from a certain culture come up with a unique concept for their experiences. For example, the Japanese concept of **shibui**, for which "there is no equivalent term in English," has been described as "not showy or gaudy but serene, self-possessed, with presence of mind, austere, understated" (Jandt, 2001, p. 187). A recent example is the Swiss word **flygskam** or 'flight shame':

> as a concept, "flygskam" originated in Sweden, and refers both to the guilt that individuals may feel when using a means of transportation estimated to contribute between 2 and 3% of total atmospheric carbon and to the shaming they may face should they persist in flying.
>
> (Abend, 2019)

One may find it tempting to believe that intercultural communication, like any ethnographic exploration, "begins and ends in concepts" (Tyler, 1986, p. 137). However, conception, as a way of abstracting from concrete experiences which is said to be a uniquely human characteristic, is different from perception, which is a process of giving coherence to sensory input and which is something we share with other species (Reber & Reber, 2001). Overall, perception can be understood as a process of interaction between people and the world, beginning with the body; this is how we become conscious of the world. Yes, what we all share is the body. Just think about it, every*body* has the same experience as a warm-blooded creature that is three-dimensional,

laterally-symmetrical, front-back asymmetrical, and moving on this planet according to the law of gravity. In other words, "to perceive we must take up a bodily relation to what we perceive" (Crossley, 2012, p. 132). Perception, therefore, is not simply a passive response to stimuli: it is a new experience of the body as it senses and organizes its interactions with the world. Hence, experience "is informed and organized in accordance with my body. That is, it is literally organ-ized" (Haas, 2008, p. 36).

In other words, meaning arises in the body through our interactions with the environment, and our conceptual system is "structured by various recur-ring patterns of our perceptual interactions, bodily orientations, movements and manipulations of objects" (Johnson, 1987, p. xiv). In this light, we cannot understand anything other than by experiencing the world through living in it. We must interact with the world—through our body—for our existence to become meaningful.

So, what is meaning? First, we looked at meaning as encapsulated in lan-guage signs; we saw that different cultures have different systems of signs and so people can create entirely different messages. And yet, people can grasp any meaning in spite of the lack of signs for that meaning in their language. Therefore, there is more to meaning than what is encapsulated in language signs. Second, we looked at meanings as what is encapsulated in the mind, and saw that people from different cultures have different conceptualizations of experience. And yet, people can still grasp any new meaning in spite of the lack of concept in their culture. Therefore, there is more to meaning than what is encapsulated in the mind. Third, we looked at meanings as encapsulated in the body, and we saw that different cultures occupy differ-ent positions in this world. To put it simply, one cannot be everybody—in all places at all time. And yet, people can still understand any new meaning. Therefore, there must be more to meaning than what is encapsulated in our generic (genetic) body.

These three components seem to play a game with us, so to speak. When we are ready to pinpoint meaning, each component refers us to the other two, as if saying: 'Search for meaning there.' The fact is that none of these three com-ponents, taken separately, can present us with the key to meaning. It is through their interrelations that meaning in communication is formed, which is usu-ally presented in the form of the semantic triangle that brings together 'things,' 'thoughts,' and 'sign' (Ogden & Richards, 1938; Suto, 2012) or 'the human mind,' 'the world,' and 'language' (Riemer, 2010). Therefore, for meaning to exist, these three components—thoughts (the mind), signs (language), and things (the world)—must be brought together in the process of communication.

In other words, meaning exists only insofar as it is simultaneously per-ceived (cf. things in the world), conceived (cf. the mind), and expressed (cf. signs). Meaning is a process—not something that some cultures have and other cultures do not or cannot have.

It is common to identify something that "appears under the same form in each and every culture" (Pinxten, 1976, p. 122) with housing, tools, gender

roles, etc.; such lists can be very long. However, what is truly common to people from all cultures is the general capacity to bring the human mind, the world, and language together in meaningful ways. All humans have the capacity to conceptualize abstract categories and express them on the basis of their experiences. It is this capacity that should be taken as a standard measure for people from different cultures to rely upon when communicating with one another. It is here that the nature of commensurability lies.

4.2   *The Forms and Levels of Commensurability*

You may have noticed that we began our discussion of the nature of commensurability by looking at signs. Signs are studied by the discipline of semiotics, which is derived from Greek 'semeion' ('sign'). Semiotically speaking, any system of signs—verbal or non-verbal—can be viewed as a language, and every culture has its own system of signs.

Next, we looked at how people from every culture use cognitive processes to make sense of their experiences; naturally, different segmentations of experiences lead to different conceptual representations in people's minds.

Finally, we noted that, for centuries, meaning was thought to be encapsulated in the human mind. Because they could think, people were thought to be human. Remember René Descartes with his famous phrase 'Cogito ergo sum'—'I think therefore I am?' Toward the middle of the 20th century, however, a new perspective on meaning—the embodiment perspective—took hold in Western philosophy of communication. The corporeal look at meaning is grounded in sensory experiences of the body. The word 'corporeal' comes from Latin 'corporeus' ('of the body') and means "pertaining to, or characteristic of the body; of a material nature, tangible" (Morris, 1982, p. 298).

As mentioned earlier, we can understand something only by experiencing the world through our body (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). It is crucial to remember that "our corporeality is part of the corporeality of the world" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 565). Simply put, we don't exist apart from this world because each one of us is its part. Meaning, therefore, goes beyond signs and the mind as it is grounded in the body. So, it is possible to reverse René Descartes' maxim and state: 'Sum ergo cogito'—'I am therefore I think.'

Both our language and thought are structured by the recurring patterns of our embodied interactions with the world; such patterns that arise from our bodily experience, bodily movements, manipulation of objects, and experience of force are known as 'image-schemas' that "constitute a preverbal and pre-reflective emergent level of meaning" (Johnson & Rohrer, 2007, p. 31). Image-schemas are derived from our sensorimotor experience; for example, the orientational image-schemas such as 'verticality' and 'impediment' are derived from our bodily experiences of orientation ('up,' 'down,' 'front,' 'back'), while the ontological image-schemas such as 'containment' and 'movement' are derived from our experiences associated with substances and entities. Since they're derived from sensorimotor experiences, image-schemas in theory could be very different if our body drastically changed

Form	Level
Signs	Semiotic
Concepts	Cognitive
Image-Schemas	Corporeal

Figure 5.3 Forms and levels of commensurability *Source: Author*

due to some sort of change in the world—for example, if we started to walk on our hands.

Based on the discussion above, the following three forms and levels of commensurability can be isolated as standard measures of meaning that make intercultural communication possible: the **semiotic** level taking the form of **signs**, the **cognitive** level taking the form of **concepts**, and the **corporeal** level taking the form of **image-schemas** (Figure 5.3).

All these levels are interconnected, all converging in the creation and understanding of meaning: it is possible to dissect meaning and present them separately (the way we do in this chapter) only for the purpose of analysis. At the semiotic level of signs, meanings are very diverse and more culture-specific; at the cognitive level of concepts, meanings are less diverse and more general; and at the corporeal level of image-schemas, meanings are most universal. There is a somewhat limited number of image-schemas, a larger number of concepts, and practically an unlimited number of signs. In this sense, meaning grows out of the world and up, as it were. And, paradoxically, in learning about and eventually adapting to another cultural world, we move in the opposite direction—first by learning the language, then gaining access to how others think, then inserting ourselves bodily in relation to others in the new and different cultural world, which in turn changes how we think (cognitively) and communicate (semiotically).

4.3 The Implications of Commensurability

As noted earlier, words in one language may have no corresponding words within the system of another language. The existence of such lacunas seems to suggest radically different views of the world and hence the impossibility of intercultural communication. And yet, as we all know, this is not the case. Here's one example of an intercultural encounter provided by Michael Agar who tells this story about his anthropological work in a village in South India:

> In that kinship system, the father is called *baap*. Only the actual bio-logical father is called *baap* . . . Let's say the father's brother ambles by, and Nate Notebook, as I referred to myself then, asks what he is called. *Motobaap*, they say . . . Another brother stops in, and the anthropologist,

chest swelling with pride, points at him and calls him *motobaap*. The group members laugh, do the South Indian village equivalent of slapping their knees, and once again prove that the only reason Nate was ever tolerated was because of his entertainment value . . . No, they say, he is called *kaaka* . . . Now, since a wedding is brewing, the mother's brothers show up from another village. Confused and perplexed, Nate tries *motobaap* and *kaaka* and gets that look like he just stepped out of a flying saucer. No, they are called *masi*. All of them are *masi*. There are three types of uncles, *motobaap*, *kaaka*, and *masi* . . . *Motobaap* labels the older brothers of the father, and *kaaka* labels his younger brother. *Masi* labels the brothers of the mother.

(Agar, 1994, pp. 52–53)

In this example, our anthropologist was able to understand the conceptual system of kinship of that village in South India even though the language signs were new to him. As he himself puts it, "Nate figured it out—give him credit for that" (Agar, 1994, p. 53). Similarly, we can figure out the meanings of new (to us) signs such as 'shibui' and 'flygskam,' discussed earlier. The fact is that a lack of a sign, which expresses a certain concept, does not mean people are unable to understand that concept.

Let's take a hypothetical—and radical—example of John, a businessman from Australia visiting Culture X whose language has no word for 'clock time.' People from that culture have never seen a watch or a clock. Before he leaves, John hands his friends from Culture X a box with the words: 'Please take this watch as a gift.' Now the question is: 'Will they be able to understand him?' If a sign or a concept is absent in one culture and present in another culture, communication between people from these two cultures is still possible because of the commensurability of meaning, which is a dynamic construct; hence, it can be constructed and expressed with the help of different signs.

How is the new experience of opening the box and seeing a strange object (watch) handled in our example? This experience is certainly unfamiliar to the people from Culture X—it is not part of their culture. The meaning of this object can be understood, though, in terms of something familiar, which is found in real-life experiences, represented in the form of the 'movement image-schema' (path-goal-destination). It may take a while (and a lot of creativity) for John or someone else to explain how a watch resembles the movement of the sun. Other semiotic systems of signs may have to be used, such as pictures or gestures, but, sooner or later, the members of Culture X will figure out what this strange object does and understand its meaning. They will then find signs in their language or create new signs for this object. This, too, may take a while (and a lot of creativity); for example, what is called 'a watch' in English may be called 'a little sun' or 'moving hands' in the language of Culture X. Eventually, the people from Culture X will start using these signs in creating new messages and communicating among themselves and with others.

The point is that it is possible, in principle, for successful intercultural communication to take place no matter the lack of common signs or objects. Meaning is understood by mapping from one domain (John's culture) onto another domain (Culture X). Now communication between people from these two cultures should run more smoothly because both their language systems have the signs to denote the object (watch). Later, Culture X may develop a very different view of this segment of the world as the sign 'moving hands' takes on different meanings. For instance, the watch given by John as a sincere gift may ruin the traditional fabric of Culture X, causing conflicts and the deterioration of relationships. What in the Western culture is an indispensable object, in culture X may become an object of contention. In other words, the symbolic meanings of this object in these two cultures might become quite different; nonetheless, people from both cultures could still communicate with one another by relating to the object at the basic corporeal level.

As we can see, although different cultures have different systems of signs, communication between people from those cultures is still possible conceptually and in relationship to one another corporeally. In this light, we can talk about 'untranslatable words' only in quotes (Pullum, 2011) because, in presenting them as supposedly untranslatable and so outside of comprehension, such words are in fact explained with the help of another language. For instance, "wanting to demonstrate that Hopi incorporates a metaphysics so alien to ours, that Hopi and English cannot, as he puts it, 'be calibrated,'" he at the same time "uses English to convey the contents of sample Hopi sentences" (Davidson, 1991, p. 184). Similarly, "to tell us that Galileo had 'incommensurable' notions and then go on to describe them at length is totally incoherent" (Putnam, 1981, p. 115).

It is important to remember that every language is not just an abstract system of signs but a form of life. Ultimately, we interact with the world not just by using different languages, but through the same bodily movements, manipulation of objects and experience of force (Figure 5.4).

As a result, if we can experience something, we can understand it; and, if we can understand it, we can express it. In the words of Roman Jakobson—one of the greatest linguists of the 20th century—"all cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language"; to assume otherwise, i.e., to think of some data as supposedly untranslatable "would be a contradiction in terms" (Jakobson, 1959, p. 236). We saw earlier how every new concept, for instance, that of time, can be understood based on our common experiences, e.g., those of movement and change, and how such understanding can be expressed, e.g., by using descriptive phrases, loanwords, or neologisms. While all languages are different, they differ "essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey" (Jakobson, 1959, p. 234). To put it another way, anything can be expressed in any language; the only difference is that in some languages it can be done more easily and in others with more difficulty.
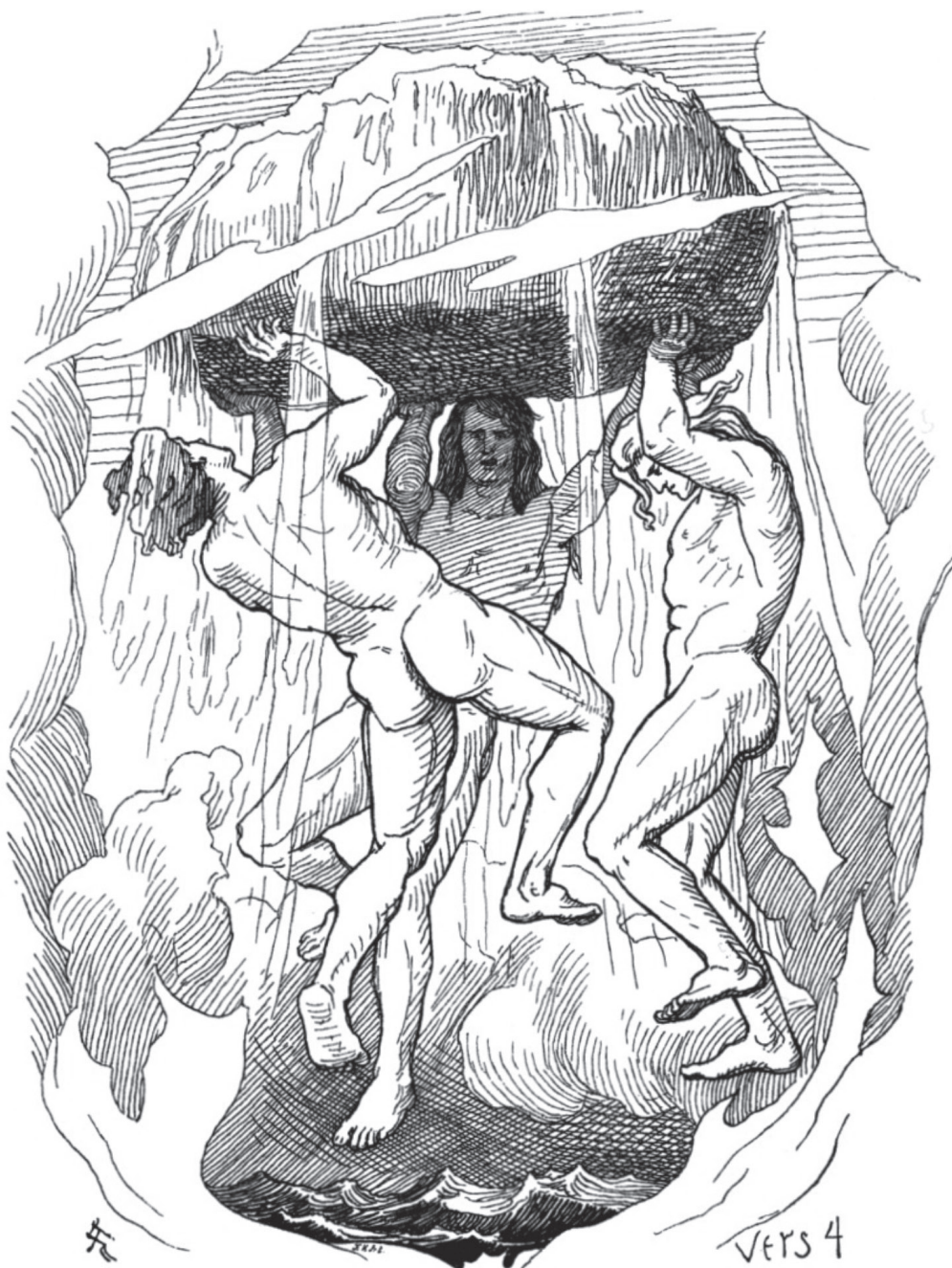
Figure 5.4 Odin and His Brothers Create the World, by Lorenz Frølich (around 1845) *Source: Project Gutenberg*

Coming back to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, we can see that language does influence our perception of the world; if a certain language is orga-nized in such a way that, based on people's experiences, it must convey a lot of different kinds of snow, it predisposes its speakers to see the world in such terms and express themselves more readily. Simply put, if snow is an important part of a certain culture, this fact is reflected in a large number of words pertaining to snow, which influences how the people from that culture perceive the world and communication among themselves. That is why the **weak version** of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is usually accepted by scholars. At the same time, signs do not determine the way we think and

act: "there is no evidence for the **strong version** of the hypothesis—that language imposes upon its speakers a particular way of thinking about the world" (Johnson-Laird & Wason, 1977, p. 442). Anything that can be experienced can be thought of (cognized) and expressed. Any meaning can be conceived and potentially understood by people from other cultures even though they might lack (yet) the practices or lived experiences associated with it, and, consequently, the precise sign (or system of signs) to express it.

People from every culture try to figure out and represent new experiences; once figured out and represented, these experiences become a part of that culture. It is possible to draw a parallel between the figure/ground distinction, discussed in the previous chapter, and the two broad categories introduced by Whorf—the Manifested and the Manifesting. The **Manifested** category comprises all that has been accessible to senses and represented by a certain culture by its language. The **Manifesting** category can be described as "the striving of purposeful desire, intelligent in character, toward manifestation—a manifestation which is much resisted and delayed, but in some form or other is inevitable" (Whorf, 1956, p. 60). The Manifested can be said to comprise all the established meanings (Ground), while the Manifesting can be said to comprise the meanings that appear in intercultural communication in the form of new experiences (Figure). Coming back to the example of John and his new friends from Culture X, the meaning of a watch is part of the Manifested 1/Ground 1 of John's culture. For his new friends, the watch appears as a new experience, manifesting itself as a figure (Manifesting/Figure). Once understood, this meaning is translated (mapped out) to Culture X and becomes part of its worldview, also (Manifested 2/Ground 2), even though it may have a different significance; still, despite the differences in interpretation or use, their common intersubjective ground is formed (Figure 5.5).
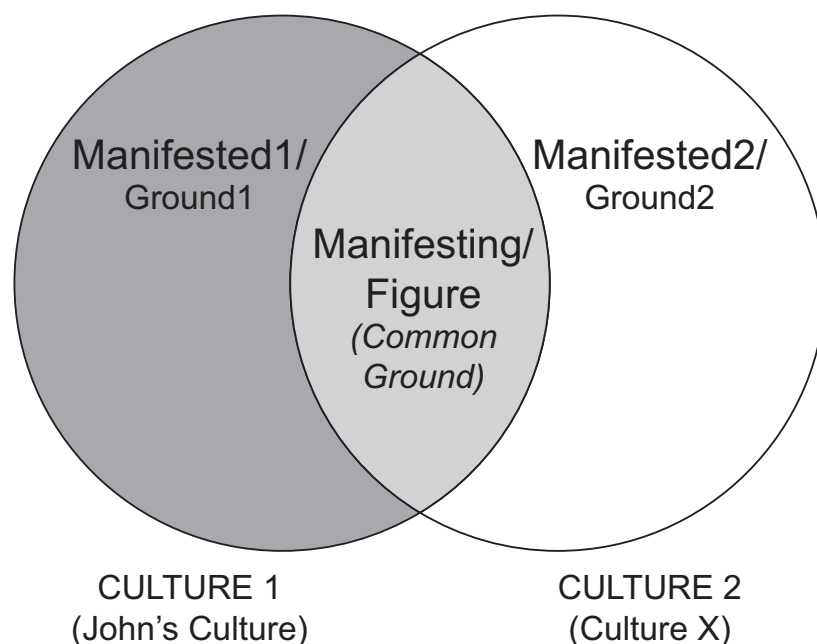

Figure 5.5 The Manifested and the Manifesting *Source: Author*

Intercultural communication, therefore, can be seen as a process of trying to figure out a new experience (a certain figure), in our case—a watch. In this process, meanings are manifested, i.e., translated from one culture to another. In this broad sense, "translation is not simply a matter of matching sentences in the abstract, but of learning to live another form of life and to speak another kind of language" (Asad, 1986, p. 149).

Each culture structures itself in a manner commensurate with the needs of its people. No culture can be seen as inferior to all others because every cultural worldview is valid, for it sustains the lifestyle of its people. At the same time,

> we need to allow the other culture to challenge our existing presuppositions, recognizing that it is likely to embody ways of viewing the world and of thinking and reasoning about it previously unfamiliar to us but from which we could profitably stand to learn.
>
> (Healy, 2013, p. 273)

As such, communication between people from different cultures is not only possible, but also necessary; through communication, people find out how they stand in relation to one another. This way, each culture does not simply learn about other worldviews; it gains a better understanding of its own view of the world, as well. It was Whorf's hope that "a full awareness of linguistic relativity might lead to humbler attitudes about the supposed superiority of standard average European languages and to a greater disposition to accept a 'brotherhood of thought' among men" (Zhifang, 2002, p. 164). Similarly, one of the main implications of the Commensurability Principle is that different cultures not only can, but must, be compared with one another through communication. As a result, every culture is supposed to learn about other ways of seeing the world, to borrow what it needs and to reject what it does not, while also sharing its own meanings with people from other cultures. This way, people from all cultures learn what it means to be human.

We now know that there are three main forms and levels of meaning that make intercultural communication not only possible, but necessary. We understand that intercultural communication can and must be measured according to some general standards. Of course, cultures constantly develop, new meanings appear, and intercultural communication continues. In the next two chapters, we will have more to say about what drives intercultural communication.

And now, let's define the Commensurability Principle.

5 The Commensurability Principle Defined

Let's now give a more concise formulation of the Commensurability Principle, based on the above discussion of its three parts.

First, the nature of commensurability is dynamic; at its core is the general human ability of bringing the world, culture, and the mind together in meaningful ways.

Second, commensurability operates at three levels of meaning representation. At the corporeal, most concrete level meaning is manifested in the form of image-schemas; at the cognitive, intermediate level meaning is manifested in the form of concepts; and at the semiotic, most abstract level meaning is manifested in the form of signs.

Third, intercultural communication can be seen as a spiral process of different people comparing their cultural maps. In this process, meanings are manifested and cultural lacunas filled in. This way, cultures measure up against one another and understand better other worldviews and their own worldview. Finally, both the possibility and necessity of intercultural communication must be emphasized.

In a nutshell, the Commensurability Principle can be formulated as follows:

> *Intercultural communication is a process whereby people from different groups compare their cultural maps and search for common ground, using the similar forms and levels of meaning representation.*

6   Case Study: 'The Globalization of Chinese Medicine: The Case of Acupuncture'

This case study is based on the article entitled 'Intercultural incommensurability and the globalization of Chinese medicine: The case of acupuncture' (St. Clair et al., 2006)

As usual, it is recommended that you read the article in its entirety; below, you find a summary of the article.

Be ready to identify and then discuss the following topics:

1.   Differences between the Chinese and Western medical systems.
2.   How the intercultural incommensurability is resolved.
3.   The implications of this resolution.

The article focuses on how intercultural incommensurability can be resolved between different medical systems—the practice of acupuncture within Chinese medicine and Western modern medicine. The authors refer to the incommensurability thesis as formulated by Thomas Kuhn and show how conflicts between supposedly incompatible medical frameworks can be addressed.

The article starts by reviewing how Western medicine defines illness and how this differs from the traditions of Chinese medicine.

The earliest conceptualization of disease in the West, which goes back to Hippocrates (460 BC to 330 BC), started to change in the 16th century with the contagion theory of Fracastoro, and was scientifically framed within the context of germ theory based on Louis Pasteur's studies of fermentation in the 19th century that presented evidence for germs in the form of bacteria

to be the cause of infectious disease. Hence, diseases are classified by modern Western science in terms of causal networks, represented by relations among the symptoms, the causes, and the treatment of a disease. In this light, a disease is due to a specific etiology (a cause or set of causes), develops over time, and is characterized by symptoms as its observable manifestations.

The disease is treated by affecting the symptoms and the causal factors that produced those symptoms.

The foundations of Chinese medicine are based on observations of natural phenomena by Daoist masters over 3,000 years ago. According to the principles of the Dao, usually translated as 'The Path' or 'The Way,' all things exist in relation to other things. Human life is embodied and depends on its environment, having evolved on earth under the same primal forces that constitute the Five Element Theory of Chinese medicine (Fire, Earth, Metal, Water, and Wood). This system of checks and balances is sophisticated and contains acupuncture points throughout the body, aligned as Ying–Yang oppositions and pathways that connect them known as 'meridians.' The energy that flows within these meridians is known as Qi; when there is a lack of energy flow in the body, there is stagnation, resulting in disease.

The germ theory of Western medicine and the Five Element Theory of Chinese medicine appear to be incompatible. Western medical science is quantitative and grounded in reductionism, linearity, and causality. The scientific approach to disease calls for formulating hypotheses and conducting experiments to (dis)prove them. This way, causes are revealed and laws are established; based on such laws, diseases are treated.

In its turn, Chinese medical science is qualitative and sees everything as interconnected, concurrent, and holistic. Disease is treated by a balancing of Yin and Yang as two complementary forces that interact to form a dynamic system of homeostasis.

It may appear as if these two medical approaches to disease are incommensurable. And yet, a common measure between them can be found in the field of bio electromagnetism (BEM) or the study of how the biological cells and biological processes are sensitive to infinite small electromagnetic fields and fluctuations. Unlike medical treatments based on drug therapies and surgical interventions, BEM is still a scientific approach as it is based on the investigations of the interrelationships between high-frequency electromagnetic fields within the body. At the same time, the ancient Chinese description of Qi and its pathways and accumulations in the body closely correlate with research in BEM. In this light, disease is viewed as the oscillatory disequilibrium of cells originating from external causes. Since the body is capable of producing magnetic fields and exchanging such energies with other life forms, disease can be treated through harmonious electromagnetic communication. The units of such energies are known as biophotons—light particles generated within the body that could be measured as they emanate from the skin: they regulate such physiological processes as growth, maturation, cell differentiation, enzymatic activity, and immune system functions.

Thus, although the languages and the medical practices involved in this case were different, traditional Chinese medicine and modern medical science were found to be commensurable when viewed from the perspective of BEM research. Moreover,

Western scholars understood the significance of the Chinese tradition and its implications while Chinese scholars were able to benefit from the scientific achievements of Western medicine, each side having adjusted its views of disease. As a result, modern medicine within the context of the globalization has incorporated these views into what is now known as medical acupuncture—a model consistent with the tenets of both Western and Chinese scientific thought.

1.   Differences between the Chinese and Western medical systems.

As was discussed in the chapter, people from different cultures organize all stimuli into concepts and label them differently. This is very clear when turning to how Western medicine and Chinese medicine define illness. The former sees it in the form of bacteria causing infections, the medical vocabulary including such terms as 'etiology,' 'symptoms,' and 'causal networks,' while the latter relates it to the action of primal forces leading to a lack of energy flow in the body, with the vocabulary including such terms as 'the Dao,' 'Ying and Yang,' and 'Qi.' The differences between the Chinese and Western medical systems appear to be diametrically opposed: quantitative vs qualitative; reductionistic vs holistic; and experimental vs experiential.

2.   How the intercultural incommensurability is resolved.

It must be remembered that intercultural communication doesn't begin and end in signs and concepts only; after all, we constantly interact with one another and the world around us through our body. As noted earlier, we interact with the world through the similar bodily movements, manipulation of objects and experience of force. And it is in the biological processes within our bodies, which are sensitive to infinitely small electromagnetic fluctuations, that a common measure is found between the Chinese and Western medical approaches to disease.

One of the image schemas, derived from our bodily experience, is the 'force' schema that is experienced through interaction, involves a directionality and is characterized by degrees of intensity (Evans & Green, 2006; Slingerland, 2008). It is on the basis of magnetic fields and an exchange of such forces with other life forms that disease can be treated through harmonious electromagnetic communication. When the idea of resonance is discussed in communication theory, it is usually taken metaphorically—as a fit between a message and an audience's worldviews (McDonnell et al., 2017). And yet, this idea can, and must, be taken literally—as an electromagnetic fit between people and the Earth since we are all part of this world because of the shared corporeality.

3.   The implications of this resolution.

This case shows that every cultural worldview is valid to the extent that it sustains the lifestyle of its people. At the same time, it demonstrates how two cultural worldviews that seem to be incompatible can be brought together on the basis of a common measure. As noted in the chapter, any meaning can be conceived and potentially understood by people from other cultures. Moreover, this case shows that not only is intercultural communication possible, in spite of seemingly unsurmountable differences, but it is necessary, as well. Only this way can people find out how they stand in relation to one another, and only this way do we gain a better understanding of what it means to be human.

7   Side Trips

7.1   *Language and Money*

In his TED Talk, entitled 'Could your language affect your ability to save money?', Keith Chen (see also Roberts et al., 2015) argues that our money spending habits depend on the language we speak. English, for instance, is a 'futured' language and so English-speakers are forced to draw distinctions between the past, present, and future. That is not the case, however, in some other languages, such as Chinese, where there is no clear distinction between times. Because in 'future' cultures there is a clear distinction between the present and the future, their people have a tough time imagining and therefore preparing for that future. For people in 'futureless' cultures, their language makes it easier to plan for their future.

** Do you agree with Chen's argument that the language we speak affects our financial decisions? How could this have an impact on intercultural interactions?

7.2   *Chinese and American Toddlers*

A new study (Gopnik, 2019) shows that very young Chinese and American toddlers start out thinking about the world in similar ways; for example, the Chinese toddlers, like the toddlers in the United States, were really good at learning the relationships; but so were the three-year-olds. However, by the time they are three years old, they were already showing differences based on their cultures; for instance, unlike the American children, the Chinese toddlers hadn't developed a bias toward objects. When they saw an ambiguous pattern, which could either be due to something about the individual objects or something about the relationships between them, the Chinese

toddlers preferred to focus on the relationships, whereas the American children focused on the objects.

    ∗∗ In this light, can you think of some possible problems in interaction between American and Chinese children when they grow up?

7.3   *Translate Mobile App*

Today, there are many translation devices that make talking to people in other countries easier. For instance, during the FIFA World Cup in Russia, Google reported a 30% rise in the use of its Translate mobile app from the country, with searches for 'World Cup,' 'stadium,' and 'beer' increasing by 200%, 135%, and 65% respectively. While many people believe that translation devices bring cultures together, some think that automated translation leads to a different social interaction from a human attempt, because we cannot really understand one another (Ward, 2018).

    ∗∗ How do you see the role of such technology for the future of intercultural interactions?

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