

**Similar words, Different Meanings:
A Natural Semantic Metalanguage Exploration of Cultural Differences**

Hazidi Bin Haji Abdul Hamid

**School of Media and Communication
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
hazi@pkriscc.ukm.my**

Abstract

Anna Wierbicka and other writers of Natural Semantic Metalanguage (henceforth NSM) often argue that anthropologists and psychologists, particularly Western ones, are wrong for applying concepts like mind, anger and depression to foreign cultures because these cultures do not have words with similar intention and extensions. Their critics on the other hand argue that the NSM critique is unjustified because while other cultures do not necessarily have similar words, they must have corresponding concepts simply because people in these other cultures, like in Malaysia, experience feelings like these (M, Immler 1991:51). This paper intends to show that the NSM critique is justified because these corresponding concepts can be similar to a certain extent but can also carry great semantic difference when broken down to their more basic elements of meaning. More importantly, this will be done using analysis of the Malay language.

Introduction

This is an exploratory essay, the first part discusses the two seemingly opposing arguments presented in the abstract. On one hand there is the position held by Anna Wierzbicka and other writers of NSM which argues that psychologist and anthropologist, particularly Western ones, are wrong in applying Western, or English language, concepts like 'mind' and 'depression' onto other cultures because these concepts, while they do have 'corresponding concepts' in the other languages, have different intentions and extensions. Alternatively, critics of NSM argue that regardless of culture, people from all cultures do share truly corresponding concepts because they are human beings, i.e. members of the same species. In the second part of the this essay, using the NSM explication technique, I will attempt to show that not only do cultures not share 'corresponding concepts' in words originating from their own languages, they also affect the semantics of borrowed words by changing the meaning of a borrowed word making its new meaning different from the meaning it had in the original language. I will be using an analysis of the Malay word 'amok' and the English word 'amok' using NSM. (see Immler 1991:51)

Part 1

It is possible to argue that the two seemingly opposing positions presented above do not contradict each other at a deeper level of analysis. If one were to shift one's perspective when looking at the issue, one will find that the two arguments set these two premises. Firstly, human beings are all the same[i], that is we have the same physical and mental faculties and because of this we experience the world in very much the same way, that is we see the same colors, we feel the same heat and cold, and other experiential stimuli. In short, we receive the same sort of stimuli from our senses because physiologically our senses are the same. Consequently, we share many concepts, particularly concepts directly built upon experiential stimuli and so we do share the same concepts or at least have corresponding concepts across cultural borders. Secondly, the alternative premise is that people do not share the same concepts and corresponding concepts do not have the same intentions and extensions, this is because human beings have culture and culture affects everything in a person's life. Thus concepts may seem to correspond but they do not have the same semantic load: they do not really mean the same things because they are nestled within different cultural and linguistic contexts.

The existence of conceptual similarities across cultures based on experiential stimuli is a relatively easy position to propose on the surface but a hard one to justify once we look at it in relation to the socio-cultural contexts. Moreover while there are many concepts directly based on experience and the senses, these tend to be basic or simpler concepts like 'hot', 'cold' and 'pain'. More complex concepts, embodied in words like 'emotion', 'disappointment' and the sort, are not based directly on external stimuli, they are abstract ideas and they are built upon abstract ideas (or concepts). Although they can be associated with certain external stimuli, that would directly link it to the cultural and linguistic contexts mentioned above..

Moreover the similarities can be read in a slightly different way. It is true that we are human beings and therefore share the same senses however we are also thinking human beings who have similar mental faculties, particularly the ability to perceive, interpret and categorize independently thereby giving us the ability to ascribe different values and / or meaning to similar even identical stimuli. So by imposing or applying concepts onto people of other cultures, as it is done by some Western psychologists and anthropologists, even linguists (see Lakoff 1990) , they are also denying the possibility that people of other cultures make sense of their world in different ways simply because they choose to react to the same stimuli in different ways which is entirely possible based on the premise that all human beings share the same mental capacity which includes the ability to interpret and creativity (see above).

The question still remains, however, if we do not share these concepts, what do we share? NSM writers argue that what we share is a list of very basic concepts, far more basic than say mind, anger and depression. Some of these concepts reflect our physical and experiential limitations like 'front', 'back', 'up', 'down' 'hot' or 'cold' but there are also very basic prototypical abstract concepts like 'good' and 'bad'. These abstract concepts are necessary, if not quintessential to the entire endeavor, because our languages and cultures express far more than what can be built upon simple

experientially based concepts. The list of basic concepts, numbering sixty six at present, is called semantic primitives (see below).

Semantic primitives suggested by Goddard (1998:58)

Substantives	: I, YOU, SOMEONE, PEOPLE / PERSON, SOMETHING / THING
Mental predicates	: THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL SEE, HEAR
Speech	: SAY, WORD
Actions, events, movement:	: DO, HAPPEN, MOVE
Existence:	: THERE, IS
Life	: LIVE, DIE
Determiners	: THIS, THE SAME, OTHER
Quantifier	: ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MANY / MUCH
Evaluators	: GOOD, BAD
Descriptors	: BIG, SMALL
Time	: WHEN / TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME
Space	: WHERE / PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW; FAR, NEAR; SIDE, INSIDE
Intercausal linkers	: BECAUSE, IF
Clause operators	: NOT, MAYBE
Metapredicates	: CAN
Intensifiers, Augmentors	: VERY, MORE
Taxonomy; partonomy	: KIND OF, PART OF
Similarity	: LIKE

(taken from Hazidi Bin Haji Abdul Hamid 1998:xxiii)

Part of the aim of NSM is to have this list tested against as many languages as possible and have the list amended when needed so as to achieve universal isomorphism; this is when a list in one language has counterparts in other, or all, languages with a one-to-one correlation for each primitive and carrying equal expressive force. (see below)

Proposed Lexical and Semantic Primitives (English and Malay)

Substantives	I, you, someone, something, people Aku, kau, seseorang, sesuatu, orang
Determiners	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER INI, SAMA, LAIN
Quantifiers	ONE, TWO, MANY / MUCH, ALL SATU, DUA, BANYAK, SEMUA
Partonomy and typonomy	HAVE PARTS, KIND OF ADA BAHAGIAN, SEJENIS
Mental predicates	THINK, SAY, KNOW, FEEL, WANT FIKIR, KATA, TAHU, RASA, MAHU
Actions and events	DO, HAPPEN BUAT, TERJADI
Evaluates and descriptions	GOOD, BAD, BIG, SMALL BAIK, BURUK, BESAR, KECIL
Time	WHEN, BEFORE, AFTER, NOW BILA, SEBELUM, SELEPAS, SEKARANG
Place	WHERE, UNDER, ABOVE, INSIDE, NEAR, FAR DI MANA, DI BAWAH, DI ATAS, DI DALAM, DEKAT, JAUH
Metapredicates	NO, MAYBE, CAN TIDAK, MUNGKIN, BOLEH
Intensifiers and augmentors	VERY, MORE SANGAT, LAGI
Intercausal linkers	BECAUSE, IF, IF ... WOULD KERANA, KALAU, KALAU ... SUDAH TENTU
Similarity	LIKE MACAM

(Goddard 1996:429 Cf. Hazidi Bin Haji Abdul Hamid 1998:32)

This aimed at having explications done in one language transferable into another language without losing meaning or force using the list in that language thus ensuring that the semantic load of the utterance can be transferred from one language to another without any semantic loss or inflection. More importantly, by using a list of words or phrases made up of common words used in natural language the explication can be made simple enough to be both adequately expressive and intuitively accessible to the reader even when the reader is not familiar with NSM.

To show that corresponding words in different languages do not share exactly the same meaning, one could explicate a word and compare that explication to the explication of a corresponding word in another language. This essay, perhaps ambitiously, takes this one step further by explicating and comparing the same word that is available in both languages (English and Malay). For this purpose, I have chosen 'amok' (or 'amuck') A Malay word which has been borrowed into English. This comparison is made to show that not only do 'corresponding' words often do not carry the same meaning, words that are borrowed from one language into another change its meaning, to a certain extent, when used in the borrowing language.

This is important because it is possible that even when we borrow concepts, we change them for whatever reason until they do not reflect what they initially mean in the original language. Thus unless we realize and understand this creation of difference, we may well be entering cross-cultural communication thinking that borrowed words are points of similarities, where we can agree on things and begin dialogue whereas they really are points of difference and consequently we build misunderstandings which hinder more effective cross-cultural communication.

Part 2: Amok

In her 1993 collection of short stories titled *Melor in Perspective*, Che Husna Azhari states,

We all take this amok thing in our stride; after all we all go into an amok every now and then, though not on the same emotional and spiritual plane as Pak De and his kind. A person in amok is fully conscious and in full control of his faculties. He is very selective towards whom he directs the venom of his amok. For example, if Pak De were to go on an amok he would never harm us (my brothers and I) because he knew exactly who we were and what the consequences of his actions would be (it) would be completely illogical and a person in amok is not impaired logically.

(Che Husna Azhari 1993: 108-109)

This explanation of 'amok' indicates that the person going through 'amok' does not lose his [ii] mental faculties, he does not even suspend his logic for the duration of the amok, which means the person going through amok is still very much a sane person with undiminished mental faculties. This is quite the opposite of the explanation given by the Cambridge International Dictionary of English which states,

Amok. Adverbial. To be out of control and act in a wild or dangerous manner. The army ran amok after one of its senior officers was killed. The two dogs ran amok in a school playground. In the film a man clutching a chain saw runs spectacularly amok.

(Cambridge IDE)

In this explanation of the English use of the word 'amok', the person in 'amok' loses his mental faculties. He is reduced to something less than human; to a something that is 'out of control', 'wild' and 'dangerous' not the sane person running 'amok', who is capable of selecting his victim and who is aware of the consequences of harming the wrong people in the course of his 'amok'. The question here is, which is the original

meaning of the word 'amok'? This question is now important because from what is shown above, we can see that the English 'amok' explained in the dictionary and the Malay 'amok' explained by Che Husna Azhari are not identical in meaning. It appears that being adopted into the English language has changed the meaning of 'amok'.

'Amok' in Malay

In this section, 'amok' is explicated based on a selection of texts containing 'amok' taken from classical Malay texts. The classical Malay texts are chosen over contemporary Malay texts because the aim of this section is to show an 'original'[iii] meaning of the word 'amok'. The term 'original' however is taken with reservation because with the dates of these texts being uncertain it is hard to say that the resulting usage of 'amok' is the original one. However, dates given for the entry of 'amok' and its derivative into the English language (see below) show that it was adopted during the colonial period, and since the classical texts predate the colonial period, it can be logically speculated that the usage of 'amok' seen in these texts predate its usage in the English language.

Part of speech

Che Husna Azhari's explanation of 'amok' (see above) appears to include amok as an adjective, 'this amok thing'; as a noun, 'an amok', 'his amok' and a noun functioning with a preposition as an adverbial phrase, 'A person in amok'. Based on these usage, I am treating 'amok' in this explication as a thing, or more specifically as a noun. It is clear that 'amok' is an act of causing hurt to other people but it appears from Che Husna Azhari's explanation that a person in amok does not lose control over his or her mental faculties. Moreover, this idea that an amok does not lose control over his mental faculties is not confined to the above explanation alone. On the contrary, it also appears that the person has a great deal of control over his faculties because an amok (the person in the state of amok) can even be commanded to go into an amok by someone he regards as superior as the case of Seri Rama commanding his soldiers to go on amok against the soldiers of Rawana.

"Kamu pergi amuk ke dalam laksykar maharaja Rawana yang tiada tepermanai itu. Tatkala itu jangan kamu sekalian bercerai barang ke mana kamu mengamuk itu sama-sama setempat juga." Apabila Seri Rama sudah berkata (Hikayat Seri Rama (675:10) from PMCP) - Go amok amongst Rawanas innumerable army. When you run amok, do so in the same place and do not get separated. (my translation)

More still, after receiving the command to go on amok, the person may even make preparations to do so.

"Kamu pergi amuk ke dalam laksykar maharaja Rawana yang tiada tepermanai itu. Tatkala itu jangan kamu sekalian bercerai barang ke mana kamu mengamuk itu sama-sama setempat juga." Apabila Hikayat Seri Rama sudah berkata demikian maka hulubalang dualapan itu pun bersiaplah, sudah bersiap maka kedualapan mereka itu pergilah mengamuk ke dalam ra'yat . (Hikayat Seri Rama (675:12) PMCP) When Seri Rama had spoken the twenty eight warriors began making their preparations, and when their preparations were done they went forth to amok among the people. (my translation)

This is seen again in Hikayat Seri Rama. Showing that amok is a premeditated act, one that a person can make preparations before engaging.

Apart from being commanded to go on amok, a person may even be invited to go on amok. In the quote below, Seri Bija Diraja even waited for Tun Isap before inviting the former to join him in amok against their enemies (orang Han - the people of Han).

..... hampir ke muka pekajangan, maka Seri Bija Diraja pun keluarlah dari kurung seraya katanya pada Tun Isap, "Encik, telah datanglah ketikanya, marilah kita amuk;" maka kata Tun Isap, "Baiklah." Maka Seri Bija Diraja dan Tun Isap pun mengamuklah, segala orang Han terlalu banyak matinya, habis berhamburan terjun lari ke air, yang setengahnya lari ke (Sejarah Melayu (165:20) from PMCP) Sir, the time has come, let us run amok And so Tun Isap said, Yes. As so Seri Bija Diraja and Tun Isap run amok, thus many of the people of Han died, some ran away jumping into the water, others ran (my translation)

It appears, once asked, a person may even hesitate before agreeing to join in the amok as in the case here when Tun Isap actually begins asking Seri Bija Diraja to join him in amok sixteen pages earlier in the text.

Maka kata Tun Isap pada Seri Bija Diraja, "Orangkaya, mari kita amuk orang Haru ini." Maka kata Seri Bija Diraja, "Sabar dahulu." Maka segala orang Haru pun datanglah ke pitak agung haluan. Maka kata Tun Isap, "Orangkaya, mari kita amuk orang Haru ini," Maka sahut . (Sejarah Melayu (165: 4) from PMCP)

To which Seri Bija Diraja replied, be patient, not yet. Moreover, if an amok is where a person relinquishes partial control over his faculties and engage another in a violent and frenzied manner, this act is preceded by anger as in the case of Hanuman fighting Pulamdewa. Thus amok is not an act in itself but part of a process where it is preceded by anger.

Maka segala ra'yat raksyasa pun bersoraklah di hadapan Seri Rama. Maka segala ra'yat dewa pun datang melindungi Mulamatani. Maka Hanuman pun amarah maka diamuknya segala dewa itu. Maka ia bertemu dengan Pulamdewa. Maka oleh Pulamdewa diambilnya sebuah gunung maka dilotarkannya kepada Hanuman maka disambut oleh Hanuman gunung itu dengan tangannya maka .. (Hikayat Seri Rama (644: 9) from PMCP). and so Hanuman became angered and then he ran amok on the Dewas. (my translation)

When a person is in amok, he is aware of what he is doing and he is aware that he is in amok, that is, he is aware that what he is doing is his way of doing amok as in Tun Hamzah's.

..... lembingnya dilambung-lambung, dan perisainya bergenta dikirap-kirapnya. Maka Tun Hamzah pun bertempik melambung-lambung dirinya, katanya, "Tahanlah amuk Hamzah akhir zaman ini!" Maka lalu ditempuhnya ke dalam rakyat Pasai yang seperti laut itu, habis pecah; barang yang bertemu habis dibunuhnya. Maka segala orang Melaka pun turut merempuh semuanya, (Sejarah Melayu (156:30) From PMCP)

Strengthening this element of control over one's faculties in amok, we find that in some cases the amok can be used as a threat in a conditional statements. It is the case where one says to another, 'if you do not do this, I will amok' or in the case of Seri Nara and Sultan Mahmud Syah, 'if you do not listen to my advice, I will go on amok'.

.. datang dari mandi. Maka kata Seri Nara Diraja, "Mari patik basuh tangan tuanku, baik Yang Dipertuan santap, jikalau tuanku tiada mendengar sembah patik, patik amuk; sekali inilah Melayu derhaka." Setelah baginda mendengar sembah Seri Nara Diraja itu, lalu baginda menunjukkan tangan, dibasuh oleh Seri Nara Diraja; maka Sultan Mahmud Syah pun santaplah, dua ..(Sejarah Melayu (267: 9) from PMCP And so Seri Nara Diraja said, Come sire, let me wash your hands. Yang Dipertuan should dine, should sire not hear my advice, I will amok, this will be the only time the Malay betrays. (my translation)

Sejarah Melayu 176:16 . dekat kepadanya?" Maka kata Bendahara Paduka Raja dan Laksamana, "Sahaja tidak patik beri tuanku dekat kepada cunda. Jika tuanku dekat pada paduka cunda, patik amuk," seraya mengisar kerisnya. Maka kata Raja Tua sambil undur, "Syahidlah anak Melayu hendak derhaka." Maka sembah Bendahara Paduka Raja dan Laksamana Hang Tuah, "Sekali ini Melayu bernama

When explicated, amok could go something like this:

X is in amok, I think something like this,

Some people has done bad things to him and this made him feel bad,

because of this he wants to do bad things to them

He thinks some other people want him to do this also,

He does not think that this is a good thing but he thinks that it is good that he wants to do it.

What is important in this explication of amok is the indication that the person doing the amok (a) is angry (feels bad), (b) knows that not everybody is the target of the amok (some people) and (c) he does not lose control of his mental faculties when he does the amok (he know this is a bad thing).

'Amok' in English

Amok in English is a somewhat different affair. Here the mental faculty is in question as explained in the following dictionary entry,

Amuck (amok) (-m k) also amok (-m k , -m k).
adv. (1) In a frenzy to do violence or kill: rioters running amuck in the streets. (2) In or into a jumbled or confused state: The plans went amuck.

adj. Crazy with murderous frenzy: amuck troops. [Malay amok.]

(Allwords.com)

In Wordsmyth dictionary entry, the frenzied and violent nature of amok is further stressed,

Adverb. in a murderous frenzy; violently out of control. maniacally {maniacal} ,
murderously {murderous (1,2)} , violently {violent (1,2)}

Adjective. crazed by a murderous frenzy. berserk (1,2), wild , crazy , deranged.

(Wordsmyth)

The Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary even adds that amok, which is associated with the same violence and frenzy, happens chiefly among Malays. In addition, this entry however gives dates of entries of amok in its various senses into the English language.

Main Entry: 1 amok

Pronunciation: &-'m&k, -'mk

Function: noun

Etymology: Malay amok

Date: 1665

: a murderous frenzy that occurs chiefly among Malays

Main Entry: 2 amok

Function: adverb

Date: 1672

1 : in a murderously frenzied state

2 a : in a violently raging manner amok> b : in an undisciplined, uncontrolled, or faulty manner amok -- People>

Main Entry: 3 amok

Function: adjective

Date: 1944

: possessed with or motivated by a murderous or violently uncontrollable frenzy

(MWCD)

The Wordnet entry takes amok a step further in associating it with demonic possession. More importantly however, this entry expressly states that amok is to lose one's self-control.

amok (adjective) 1. amuck, amok, berserk, demoniac, demoniacal, possessed -- (in a murderous frenzy as if possessed by a demon; ``the soldier was completely amuck"; "berserk with grief"; "a berserk worker smashing windows")

amok (adverb)

1. amok, amuck -- (wildly; without self-control; "when the restaurant caught fire the patrons ran amuck blocking the exit")

2. amok, amuck, murderously -- (in a murderous frenzy; ``rioters running amuck and throwing sticks and bottles and stones")

amok (antonyms) amuck, amok, berserk, demoniac, demoniacal, possessed(predicate) -- (in a murderous frenzy as if possessed by a demon; ``the soldier was completely amuck"; "berserk with grief"; "a berserk worker smashing windows")

INDIRECT (VIA insane) -> sane -- (mentally healthy; free from mental disorder; ``appears to be completely sane")

(Wordnet)

In contrast to the explication of amok made on the basis of classical Malay texts above, an explication for amok as described in these dictionary entries would go something like this;

X is in amok, I think something like this,

Some people has done bad things to him and this made him feel bad,

Because of this he does very bad things to them.

He feels bad

he does not know what he is doing.

In this explication there are two elements especially that connects the two 'amok's the are (a) the person is angry because of something some people or situation has done to him and (b) in this amok, the person has no control over his mental faculties.

Discussion

This when amok is explicated, we find that the amok as it is understood in older Malay and in the stories of Che Husna Azhari, it bears the following traits in the core meaning of the word. Amok is something done as a retaliation to something others have done to the patient. Hence the line Some people has done bad things to him and this made him feel bad,. Here we find that the moral; faculties of the actor is not in question, he knows that what he is about to do is a bad thing. A person who can still tell the difference between a bad act and a good act may not be morally challenged but act, in this case amok, remains something he must do because of the initial bad deed done to him, because of this he wants to do bad things to them. This deed still needs to be done in his reckoning and doing it is not a bad thing although the act itself may be one as gory as killing other people, He does not think that this is a good thing but he thinks that it is good that he wants to do it. Especially in the case of the older use of the word, he further thinks that he has, perhaps, an obligation to others, to engage in the act, He thinks some other people want him to do this also

Similarly in the Anglicized use of amok, the motivation remains the same, Some people has done bad things to him and this made him feel bad. As an effect of the bad thing others have done to him, he feels a need to react, Because of this he does very

bad things to them. Thus the main motivation lies still in his own feelings and not in relation to other people as in the version of amok above, He feels bad . The crucial difference lies in the notion that in the Anglicized use of amok, the person engaged in amok, no longer has control over his actions, he does not know what he is doing. Consequently, we now have an added notion that the person who go amok, or the people from whose culture the concept of amok has a tendency to run amok, when pushed far enough. This differs from the latter version of amok where the person neither loses his mental faculties nor his moral judgment but still runs amok because he feels that he has to do.

Conclusion

It appears then that when amok was borrowed into the English language, it made the trip as an act that one commits after having lost control of one's mental faculties or even having been taken over by supernatural powers, whereas in, as used in the selected classical texts, Malay it was a premeditated act, even a social act where one retains control over one's mental faculties at least in terms of direction or target of the violence and the timing of the act. It is possible that the amok borrowed into English is an incomplete concept, it is a part of the whole concepts of amok as understood and used in the examples given above.

To propose a reason for this phenomenon, it is possible that the borrowing of amok follows an imperative borne out of a way of thinking that isolates things and concepts, taking them as independent entities; the-thing-itself: a thinking that breaks down phenomenon into its elements then isolating aspects of it, selecting one aspect on subjective (or agenda driven) reasons, then labeling it as the generic which envelopes the whole. Alternatively, the phenomenon as a whole comes from a thinking that encapsulates the said element, in this case being a frenzied act of violence and, social and cognitive aspects that encompass not only the act but also the nature of the relationship between the self (actor - the person-in-amok) and the other, including the people around him on both sides of the conflict, or even not immediately present (see above) and anything else that may be relevant to the amok. Somewhere between this elemental[iv] thinking and holistic thinking lies the individual acts of amok or perhaps we could reach a between understanding of this and other such phenomena by conceptualizing a continuum between the two modes of thought: a continuum upon which each phenomenon can be located and understood.

Similarly, while applying Western concepts onto non-Western cultures is wrong, so too is uncritical acceptance of 'corresponding concepts'. Cultures do not differ without reason, particularly when it is undeniable that we do share some things by the simple virtue of being of the same species, as argued by critics of NSM, What we need is a way of understanding conceptual and lexical differences simply, which is what NSM does, and a way to conceptualize and understand the basis of that difference, a framework (named the Concrete-Abstract Continuum (DCruz and Steele (2000)) part of which is described above[v], only then perhaps we could achieve effective cross-cultural communications.

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[i] Also known as 'Psychic Unity Hypothesis' (see A. Wierzbicka 1991:391: Hazidi Bin Haji Abdul Hamid 1998:11)

[ii] The male pronouns like 'he' is used here to refer to both sexes without any sexist intentions.

[iii] 'Original' meaning before it was borrowed into the English language.

[iv] Possibly 'Cartesian' thinking.

[v] For a more elaborate explanation see DCruz and Steel 2000)

Biodata

Hazidi Abdul Hamid taught linguistics at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics but has recently moved to the School of Media and Communication, UKM. His areas of interest include the study of meaning (semantics, pragmatics and semiotics), Cross-cultural communications and writing. His current projects include developing courses to introduce analytical study for students of communication studies and cross-cultural communications. His works are greatly influenced by works on the Dialogic Principle. He is also a freelance columnist.