

**REMARKS ON CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATION****Filip Bacalu, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Hyperion" University of Bucharest**

*Abstract: The paper aims to discuss some aspects of cross cultural communication. Being able to recognize cultural differences is the first step towards acknowledging them and taking steps to annihilate them to the benefit of communication itself. Cultures not only differ in a major way but affect our daily communication worldwide. Our habits, traditions, non-verbal language make us what we are; yet, when it comes to communication, understanding and tolerance are the key words. Conceptualizing how those differences influence business or simply interpersonal relationships is another step forward in understanding differences. Maximizing that knowledge to minimize misunderstanding is a wise and necessary thing to do in an age of apparently non-stop globalization. Differences in communication styles arise from cultural beliefs, values and experiences that are typical to nations and communities around the world.*

*Keywords: national culture, barriers to cross-cultural communication, intercultural competence, co-cultural theory, intercultural adaptation.*

**Introduction**

Given that the Internet is now the most important way to communicate, cross-cultural interaction has become the new norm. Understanding cultural diversity is a must these days as more and more companies have turned international and have invaded the physical space of others. In an effort to optimize communication between interactants, people should realize first that each sender of a message comes from a cultural environment that may not necessarily coincide with the interlocutor's. Tolerance is another key word in this equation since it a cornerstone of effective communication as well as patience and understanding. When dealing with people in a different culture, courtesy and goodwill can assure success and efficacy. It is important to assume that one's efforts in good communication will not always be successful and one should adjust one's behaviour appropriately. You should carefully analyse and respond slowly instead of jumping to conclusions that you have grasped the meaning of what has been said. Be patient rather than hostile and aggressive. Listening is a good way to release pressure and reflection over what has been said gives you an advantage. More often than not, intermediaries who are more familiar with both cultures can be of real help in cross-cultural communication.

Anyway, there are many ways in which culture can vary from one participant to another and interactants should consider a wide range of aspects such as: perception of time or space, individualism versus collectivism, importance of hierarchy and rigidity of gender roles, degree of contextualization, nature of authority or human's relationship to the natural world. Some of the factors here can also impact the professional communication environment: hierarchy, contextualization of an individualistic versus a collectivistic mentality.

Moreover, the variables of communication can be verbal or nonverbal as detailed below. The rate and volume of speech as well as the intonation and rhythm constitute one factor. The use of pauses, silence, interruptions, questions or even laughter is another factor. The choice of who actually dominates the conversation or rules of turn-taking or topic shifting can be another cultural culture-specific element, while the content itself of the discussion is germane in point of what can or cannot be discussed with whom and under what conditions.

Let alone the verbal variables, the nonverbal ones are equally important in cross-cultural communication and suffice it to mention here only a few like proxemics and kinetics (use of space), use of silence, eye contact, touch, gestures, paralanguage or even clothing and physical appearance. Verbal and nonverbal factors that influence cultural communication shall be dealt with later.

Cultural differences can also impact teams of any kind in their work habitat, their manner of interacting with members of the opposite sex, the level of formality between each other, the willingness to socialize with another team member, the way they view leadership, their own perception of the team's targets and objectives. This, in its turn, may influence professional interactions in that building a professional relationship could take precedence over completing a task or the written word may take precedence over the spoken one or the persuasion tactics relies on reputation or on mere facts of the individual. Anyway people look at it, specialists recommend a precautionous change of attitude when it comes to cross-cultural differences. Solving or annihilating them in order to achieve a better cooperation and understanding include most importantly listening and sympathizing, being curious and trying to discuss differences in a respectful and mutually comforting way, being moderately curious to find out more details and even pushing your own comfort level a step farther thus becoming more open-minded and tolerant. Even if these factors are problematic to quantify, more theories of communication mention them as being development factors of individual proficiency.

### **Cross-cultural nonverbal communication**

Nonverbal communication uses techniques universal all around the world and here we will describe some of them. Considering that humans express themselves in both verbal and nonverbal modes, you might start wondering which takes prevalence over the other. If you think that nonverbal communication is your bail out of a problematic situation, well, think again. A substantial part of normal communication is nonverbal, hands, eyes, body posture or gestures say more about us than we'd like to reveal.

Facial expressions are relevant for a whole bunch of messages. Asian cultures deliberately suppress facial expressions and adopt the so-called *Poker face* in order to hide away any feelings or emotions that could betray them. Conversely, many Arabic and Latino cultures exaggerate their emotional states such as sadness or grief in order to impress and make the interlocutor more vulnerable and attentive at what is being communicated. Americans, though, hide "bravely" their grief and sorrow. Smiling is subject to much debate: if in some cultures is a sign of superior mental attitude, in others it is nothing but a sign of shallowness and in others it is more like a sign of internal calm and peace. It has been reported that women smile more than men.

Eye contact is another vital element of communication. Staring, blinking, winking, looking or not into people's eyes is an important behaviour as it indicates a varied series of emotions. In Western countries, eye to eye contact is perceived as a positive, constructive sign showing confidence and respect. Conversely, African Americans use more eye contact when talking and less when listening (a possible effect of historical racial discrimination?) Japanese and Africans avoid eye contact to show respect while Arabic people insist on prolonged eye contact to show the truthfulness of the interlocutor and to express interest.

Gestures like pointing, waving, using fingers, etc. are themselves related to varied cultures and traditions. Some cultures are more animated than others: pointing is performed in US with the index, in Germany with the little finger and in most Asia or Japan with the entire hand. Calling a waiter can be done by whistling, by raising one hand, by signaling the fingers or by saying "Waiter" and gesturing to him. The best way to get a teacher's attention is to raise your hand and wait until the teacher sees you and acknowledges that or to call out loud the teacher's name or to snap your fingers. Yet, as queer as this may seem, it is a major cultural difference. Other examples may include ending a conversation (stop talking abruptly, back up slowly, or simply insistently look at the watch), being introduced to someone (shake hands, bow, kiss, politely say *Hello* and shake hands lightly) or, why not, a student reacting to not understanding a point made by the teacher (make some noise, raise a hand and ask for clarifications, look confused but not say a word not to seem stupid, remain silent and ask the teacher at the end of the class, leave the class in discontent).

Postures also contain *hidden* messages that differ from one culture to another. Standing with hands in the pockets is disrespectful in Turkey. Bowing is compulsory in Japan and it shows the amount of respect and social rank but it is criticized in US. In Ghana, sitting with legs crossed is offensive while showing the soles of feet is offensive in Thailand or Saudi Arabia.

Touch is culturally determined. Touching or not touching may be considered a sign of discrimination (because a person is black) or a sign of disrespect (a Korean does not touch the opposite sex if the person is a stranger). In other cultures, touch may express support, disapproval, sign of protection, etc. A handshake is common in US, a kiss is normal in France, kissing a woman's hand is polite in Romania, kissing the opposite gender or family is normal in most Western countries but on the other hand, Hindu or Islamic people do not touch with the left hand (which is used for toilet functions). Particular activities are performed only with the right hand (breaking the bread in India). Islamic people agree with touching the same gender, even hugging or hand holding but disagree with the same gesture between genders. Since the head is the host of the soul, Asians consider it must not be touched.

### **Cross-cultural verbal communication**

A number of theories have tried to explain how communication in general and cross-cultural communication in particular takes place. The most prominent of them are the *Communication Accommodation Theory* which deals with various linguistic strategies meant to widen or shrink the communicative distances; the *Intercultural Adaptation* theory which explains how participants in the act of communication try to adapt to each other in order to get along better; *Co-cultural* theory which presents the way *minority* groups like people of colour, gay and lesbians, people with disabilities cope with the *dominant, majority* cultures.

#### *Communication Accommodation Theory*

CAT relies on some principles we are going to discuss here and it is applied in many domains of communication. The socio-historical one is relevant for CAT from the perspective of past relationships that existed prior to the present contact. It has been noticed that such experiences influence the present communication. Some examples would include political relationships between nations, ideological controversies between religions or generation gaps.

The accommodative orientation factor claims that communication is influenced by the belonging to a fixed group. From this perspective, the communicator may include distortive elements like intergroup factors referring to the feelings of the communicator towards the group, intrapersonal factors, referring to differences of personality within a group or orientation factors referring to the identification within the group of potentially dangerous elements that could generate conflict. All these factors manifest a tendency to accommodate the communicator within a context.

The immediate situation factor includes issues of rather personal preference like: aims and goals of the communication, sociolinguistic strategies, elements of convergence and divergence, behaviour and tactics. Some examples of elements of convergence include the change of speech patterns that take place when a communicator interacts with a “stronger personality” or a personality that he/she admires a lot. The use of language may be altered together with the intonation pattern, the pronunciation accents, the pauses and even body language (gestures, postures, etc). Likability, charisma or credibility may concur to this social change in communication patterns. Turner and West appreciate that “when communicators are attracted to others they will converge in their conversations”. Furthermore, convergence in cross-cultural communication may also be influenced by the awareness of possible future interaction, the social norms or intermingled power relations. It has been noticed that low-rank individuals tend to converge to high-rank people, which is not necessarily a deconstructive issue but rather a trend toward effectiveness of communication. Divergence, conversely, focuses on the differences between the participants in the communication process. It highlights diversity, distinctiveness and gap in a positive manner. This can be a tool to maintain cultural identity obvious.

The future intentions and the evaluation of the upcoming results may constitute another important factor in the CAT. A positive, constructive, culture-friendly attitude will be perceived as encouraging for future relations between interactants. This may improve communication at various levels.

#### *Intercultural Adaptation*

The competence of communication is subjected to adaptation. The initiators of this theory, Gudykunst and Kim (2003), claim that cross-cultural adaptation implies a process of culture destruction or “deculturation and acculturation” which could affect many social layers of people. Immigrants would be the best example of people who are subjected to this process. They tend to think, feel and behave in ways that are characteristic to them and their culture and therefore could be rejected by the mainstream culture they are part of. The discussion could be more complex if we analyse the difference of attitude between conformism and individualism but this is a rather different issue not treated here. Any newcomer in a host culture will probably bring their religious faith, ethnic traditions, beliefs, language associations, etc. and will be perceived as either unfit or incompetent communicatively or,

simply different and fascinating, depending on the degree of open-mindedness of the host culture.

### *Co-cultural Theory*

Initiated in the 1970s on the grounds of Muted Group concepts, this theory states that subordinate social groups are somehow neglected in the cross-cultural communication process and replaced with the dominant groups. The theory was brought to the surface of communication studies in the 1990 by Mark Orbe from the University of Michigan. He suggests that “co-cultural theory seeks to uncover the commonalities among co-cultural group members as they function in dominant society while substantiating the vast diversity of experiences between and among groups” and later studies confirmed his discoveries. Yet, considering that the process is not very extensive and it applies only in some sub-cultures, it is mentioned here only referentially.

### **Intercultural Competence**

The dimension of intercultural competence comprises two distinct elements: appropriateness and effectiveness. The former ensures that the norms and values are not violated while the latter guarantees that the valued costs are accomplished. The ability to avoid ethnocentrism (the ability to consider your group as valid and correct while all the other groups are mistaken) is also considered a quality of cross-cultural communication. Another important element is pure knowledge. This means the interlocutor must have a consistent amount of information about the interactants so as to build a mental background about them. This is also relevant when it comes to interpretation of the information given or meanings. On a second level there are cultural traditions and habits that are preferable to be known or understood. Motivation plays an important part here as we deal with intercultural exchanges. Feelings, intentions and motivation are interrelated and set up the behaviour.

Some important methods to improve cross-cultural competence would include empathy and understanding, tolerance and open display of interest, respect and a true inclination to knowledge in general, a thirst for information. Some advantages in practicing cross-cultural communication comprise not only understanding the traits of another culture, not only having references about its time and space but also understanding its language, its grammar and vocabulary, its dynamics and pragmatics, its nonverbal secrets and the overall scent. A proficient user of cross-cultural communication must be a flexible and tolerant person, with a high degree of open-mindedness, adaptability and sensitivity, a person willing to engage in life-changing, thinking-altering experiences.

### **Cross-cultural communication and tourism**

One of the most productive grounds where cross-cultural communication takes place is in tourism. All over the world there are tourists that come into contact with locals. Communication accommodation theory (CAT) states that even if tourists have no/little competence in the culture of the visited space, they provide a constant and consistent source of income for the respective economy. The only reasonable conclusion is that there is a necessity to accommodate the style of the tourists while the locals should try to be as hospitable as possible. The interest is mutual. When dealing with cultural differences between native and non-native speakers of a language, it has been noticed that non-natives always tend to imitate the natives and to “borrow” together with this imitation some of the locals’ habits, traditions or, why not, accent and intonation, strictly linguistically speaking. Not strangely

enough, when the influence of the natives is too large and the non-natives sense a touch of patronizing trend, they are discouraged from further imitation and, conversely, engage in divergence.

Moreover, when native speakers are engaged in cross-cultural communication with non-natives, they tend to use simpler sentences and grammatical structures along with a slower pace and greater pronunciation attention in order to make themselves understood. These methods increase efficiency especially when the non-native is perceived as not such a skillful user of the respective language. Sometimes intentional mistakes are inserted in the speech, mistakes that mirror the mistakes made by the non-native. This gives a feeling of empathy and general understanding, even if the grammatical and discursive complexity suffers.

### Conclusion

This paper dwells on describing and exemplifying more types of cross-cultural communication, identifying some of the valences of culture, different underlying elements of national culture, barriers to cross-cultural communication and a few measures that could be taken to enhance better communication and intercultural competence.

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