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Exploring Cultural Patterns in Business Communication. Insights from Europe and Asia

Oana URSU*, Elena CIORTESCU**

Abstract: *This paper starts from the assumption that in our current world, dominated by fast-paced changes, culture has acquired increasing prominence, which is likely to affect interpersonal and business relationships alike. Therefore, relying on a number of cultural patterns (high and low context cultures, collaborative and individual cultures and polychronic and monochronic cultures (Hall, 1990, 1997; Moll, 2012), we aim to provide an overview of the dynamics of cultural differences and similarities between Europe and Asia, with a focus on the business environment. Thus, arguing language proficiency does not necessarily ensure successful (business) interaction, we will be analysing a number of elements involved in business communication (e.g. the way in which individuals in a particular culture relate to time or how they position themselves within a group). More precisely, we will be looking into the ways in which people think, negotiate, and manage conflict, in an attempt to identify the various elements that drive specific behaviours and account for cultural expectations and assumptions.*

Keywords: cultural patterns, high & low context, collaborative & individual, polychronic and monochronic, Europe vs. Asia

Introduction

Our paper starts from the premise that “culture is communication” (Hall, 2002), that meaning it is encoded in both language and in the cultural context where communication occurs and, therefore, linguistic proficiency alone does not guarantee the success of an intercultural business encounter; it depends more on the participants’ cultural awareness and their ability to understand and use cultural variables (Jackson, 2020; Moll, 2012). Moreover, we argue that in the present day globalized context, people from diverse cultural backgrounds are required to work together and share the same environment. Thus, a key concept here would be awareness, since lack of cultural awareness is likely to hinder communication and affect both interpersonal and business relationships.

Thus, starting from this hypothesis, our research goal is to identify the main business communication patterns that may affect communication in business encounters, with some insights

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from Europe and Asia. Many definitions of the word *culture* have been put forward, as the concept governs (almost) all instances of human interaction. Moreover, we argue that individuals, as members of communities, cultures and subcultures, are constantly shaped by, and in their turn, shape their own culture. A genuinely collective phenomenon, culture is defined by Hofstede as the sum of the “unwritten rules of the social game”, consisting of “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 6). In a restrictive sense, *culture* is understood as a feature of civilisation, a “refinement of the mind” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p.5), pointing particularly to products of this refinement, in the form of literature, arts, education, etc. From a broader perspective, culture is perceived as moving past the boundaries of such interpretations, encompassing “patterns of behaviour, symbols, products, and artifacts” (Jackson, 2020, p. 27).

When we hear the word *culture*, we may think about a number of things, such as the ‘national culture’, the ‘religious culture’ or ‘ethnic culture’, ‘international culture’, or even the ‘organisational or business culture’. Furthermore, while we usually associate culture with the behaviours, customs, rituals, traditions, etc. generally practiced by a certain community, in discussing business culture and business communication, we need to consider issues such as norms, values or beliefs shared by the members of that community. We may even have to take into account that climate and geography, as business practices are inherently linked to regional hierarchies and powers. In discussing “the collective programming of the mind”, Hofstede identifies five universal elements that occur – to a varying extent – in all countries/ cultures: power distance, masculinity, individualism, long-term orientation and uncertainty avoidance (1980, 13). According to Hofstede, these are in fact a reflection of the ways in which cultures have adapted to life conditions, and, consequently, they correspond to five fundamental problems – hierarchy, identity, gender, virtue and truth (Hofstede et al., 2002).

In our paper, we are far from intending to apply a “one size fits all” approach to cultures; on the contrary, we aim to identify practices that have been adopted by all cultures, practices that govern interaction in both business and general contexts. In so doing, we will rely on the terminology put forward by researchers like Melanie Moll (2004, 2012), Edward T. Hall (1976, 1991), or Geert Hofstede (2001, 2002, 2010). In particular, we will ground our investigation in the concept of cultural patterns, as defined by Moll (2012), in an attempt to discuss upon the characteristics that distinguish or bring together the Asian and the European cultures. Our main interest here is to identify the ways in which people from the two cultures under discussion relate to issues like language, time, space, or communication styles.

According to Melanie Moll, “a cultural pattern is a recognised behaviour or group of behaviours that defines or is defined by the people who perform it” (Moll, 2012, p. 44), which influences the “ways in which people (...) interact, socialise, and relate to one another and their surroundings” (Moll, 2012, p. 44). As the scholar shows, cultural patterns reflect both the norms of acceptable behaviour within a given culture, and the expectations that members of a particular community may have from “communicatively competent members of their society” (Moll, 2012, p. 44). One example is that of greeting styles, which vary greatly from one country to another. For example, while a handshake can usually function as a globalised greeting in European cultures, we need to bear in mind that there are cultures where any form of physical contact is avoided or even forbidden.

In order to draw a coherent illustration of the cultural data characterising the two cultural areas chosen as a case in point, we will make use of the theoretical frameworks put forth by the researchers mentioned above. We need to point out, from the very beginning, that none of the constructs we will be describing operates in a vacuum, isolated from the others but, on the contrary, they complement one another.

1. High and low context cultures

The first cultural pattern we address and apply in our paper is that of high versus low context cultures, a distinction dealing with the “amount of contextual information that members of various cultures tend to use when communicating with one another” (Moll, 2012, p. 46). In her analysis of cultural patterns, Melanie Moll draws on previous work conducted by Edward T. Hall (1976, 1991, 1997), and, similarly to the American anthropologist, she supports the view that “culture is communication”, arguing that “one of the best places to look for cultural distinctive is within our own interaction, or language use” (Moll, 2012, p. 45).

Edward T. Hall is widely acknowledged as one of the pioneers and founders of the study of intercultural communication. He began his research after World War II, a period which had familiarised him with various cultures and which had formed the basis of his keen interest in the field of intercultural communication. He became particularly interested in the study and implications of space, time and context in the complex process of intercultural communication.

In his work, *Beyond Culture*, Hall identifies a dimension which could be used to describe cultures in terms of the amount and type of information that a person can manage, i.e. the way the exchange of information is performed (directly vs. indirectly), a dimension which has been the foundation of numerous studies conducted with the purpose of describing cultures and of enabling

intercultural communication and exchanges. He distinguishes between *high and low context* cultures. In broad terms, in *high context* cultures, people speak indirectly in order to avoid conflict and maintain harmony at all costs. Politeness and display of respect are paramount in high context cultures. Consequently, non-verbal cues are extremely important since gestures, eye-contact, use of silence constitute the main communication channels – “Hall’s framework suggests that business professionals in a high-context environment (e.g., China, Japan) tend to communicate verbally and non-verbally in ways that assume that others know much of what they know (e.g., cultural scripts, historical background, social conventions).” (Jackson, 2020, pp. 282-283) On the contrary, in *low context* cultures (best exemplified by Germany and the US), people communicate directly, the focus is on the task to be carried out and all unnecessary details are eliminated from the act of communication. Excessive politeness is rather taken as a good reason for suspicion (Utley, 2007) and “business professionals who employ a low-context style of communication do not make assumptions about their communication partner’s knowledge and typically provide detailed information in their verbal message” (Jackson, 2020, p. 283).

The most appropriate contexts in business interactions which provide valuable information on *high/ low context* cultures are the ones which imply providing negative feedback. Irrespective of situation, telling a partner/ employee/ supplier, etc., that their professional input is insufficient or simply unsatisfactory requires a good deal of tact and ability to empathise. The issue becomes even more difficult to deal with when the actors involved do not share a common cultural background, when notions such as politeness and respect are perceived through a different lens. While some cultures focus on the task and tend to communicate directly whenever there is a problem in carrying it out, others are more concerned with people’s feelings and saving face. It is this difference in approaching communication which inspired Hall in classifying cultures as *high* and *low context*.

In her 2015 work, *The Culture Map*, Erin Meyer, a professor at INSEAD, clearly illustrates and rightfully insists on the importance of Hall’s dimensions, particularly on improving business professionals’ abilities to deal with high vs. low context cultures. In her work, Japan (the highest context culture in the world), China, Korea, Indonesia, followed by India, Saudi Arabia are top in terms of high context communication while the lowest context cultures are: the US (on the top position), Australia, the Netherlands, Germany, followed by Finland, Denmark, the UK. Therefore, linguistically speaking, low context cultures tend to make intensive use of *upgraders* in providing negative feedback (and not only), e.g., *totally*, *absolutely* while high context cultures will tend towards an intensive use of *downgraders*, e.g., *maybe*, *a little*, *sort of*, *a little*, etc. To reinforce this idea, the author exemplifies with what the British (an average low context culture) could say in certain

situations, translating what they actually mean and with what the Dutch (clearly a low context culture) understand: what the British say - “I was a bit disappointed”; what they mean – “I am very upset and angry”; what the Dutch understand – “It does not really matter”, or “I’m sure it’s my fault”, meant as “It’s not my fault” and understood by the Dutch as “It’s his fault” (Meyer, 2015, p. 67).

The same view is taken by Melanie Moll who argues that in high context cultures “much of the meaning or intended interpretation of the talk is found in the context or situation of the speakers and less (...) in the actual talk itself”, while in low context cultures “speakers encode much more of the specific information in the talk segment, and less information is shared in the situational context” (Moll, 2012, p. 46). Levels of directness, as characteristics of the high/ low context distinction can be exemplified by the following interaction: “Maria: Are you thirsty?/ John: What would you like to drink?” (Moll, 2012, p. 46), a broken conversational pattern, where the classic sequence ‘question-answer’ has been altered by the speakers’ communication styles.

Misunderstandings and communication failures are even more likely to occur in Asian-European or Asian-American interactions due to the first’s high context and the latter’s low context communication styles. Moll provides the example of the German culture, as illustrative for the low-context communication style. “Germans tend to be very direct, to the point, and often highly value efficient messages” (Moll, 2012, p. 47), as opposed to high context cultures (e.g. Asia, where indirectness is preferred).

2. Monochronic and polychronic cultures

The second pattern we make use of in our paper is that of monochronic and polychronic cultures. Hall discusses the perception of time in many of his works. Nevertheless, his most representative work in terms of perception and attitudes towards time is to be found in *The Dance of Life* (1983). According to him, cultures tend to be either *monochronic* or *polychronic*. The key feature of *monochronic* cultures is that they tend to do things in a well-organized manner, one at a time, in a sequence. Punctuality is generally associated with monochronic cultures. On the contrary, in *polychronic* cultures, people tend to do many things at a time, which is perceived as “fluid”, and punctuality is not necessarily considered a virtue.

Nowadays, business communication in English has become a field of study. Most often, business encounters take place between partners from different corners of the world and communication is performed between non-native speakers of English, whose linguistic proficiency is extremely varied. It is for these reasons that researchers’ focus has been on identifying the best

means of communication in business contexts by concentrating on extra-linguistic elements. Cultural awareness becomes thus essential in any act of performing international business and consequently, cultural knowledge turns out at least as important as linguistic proficiency due to the fact that cultural information is essential in the complex process of building trust between partners, an element which is indispensable in business. It is then only natural that E. T. Hall's cultural dimensions, as well as those fostered by other researchers in the field, namely, Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars, Richard Lewis, etc., are extremely useful to anyone involved in international business.

Erin Meyer (2014) points to E.T. Hall's concepts of time, i.e. monochronic vs polychronic and, starting from the fact that polychronic cultures approach time in a flexible manner, she describes them as *linear* (equivalent to monochronic) or *flexible* (equivalent to polychronic). The most representative examples of a linear approach to time come from Germany, Scandinavia, the US, the UK while the most eloquent examples of a flexible one come from the Middle East, Africa, India, South America. The author further points to the risk of conflicts which may arise in business interactions due to such fundamentally different approaches and perceptions of time and, implicitly, scheduling. These may determine people from a flexible (*polychronic*) culture to misjudge those from a linear (*monochronic*) culture as rigid and inadaptatable while the latter would consider the first chaotic and incapable to focus on the task. Perception among cultures can vary immensely depending on the degree of flexibility considered: for example, Germans may complain about French lack of punctuality while Indians can hardly cope with French rigidity in scheduling. Nevertheless, Meyer draws a flexibility scale, with linear-time cultures on the left and flexible-time cultures on the right side, which proves quite revealing for our purpose. While Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Sweden, the US, the UK and Denmark are on the left side of the scale, countries such as Spain, Italy, Russia, Brazil, Mexico, China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, India, Nigeria, Kenya and Turkey are on the right. The average score is obtained by Poland, the Czech Republic, France. According to Meyer, in linear-time cultures, "project steps are approached in a sequential fashion, completing one task before beginning the next. One thing at a time. No interruptions. The focus is on the deadline and sticking to the schedule. Emphasis is on promptness and good organisation over flexibility." (Meyer, 2014, p. 227) In flexible time cultures, on the other hand, people do not mind interruptions, tasks may be changed as a consequence of new opportunities ahead and adaptability is praised. One extremely interesting aspect that Jane Meyer identifies is that, despite sharing the Asian cultural heritage, Japan and China differ in terms of time approaches: while "Japan is linear-time, China and (especially) India practice flexible-time" (Meyer, 2014, p. 228). However, despite the fact that we have initially pointed out that punctuality is most frequently associated to monochronic cultures, this does not apply in all cases. A

major exception to the rule is the case of China compared to Japan, best illustrated in Jane Meyer's above quoted work: while the Chinese are highly punctual (a feature most common among monochronic and therefore, linear-time cultures), their flexibility (a feature most common to polychronic, i.e. flexible-time cultures) is world famous and it is this feature which ultimately places them among the most representative polychronic cultures. Asian cultures, with the notable exception of Japan, tend towards a polychronic approach to time while most European ones, led by Germany, tend towards a monochronic (linear) approach to time. Nevertheless, while countries such as Poland or France adopt a well-balanced attitude towards time management and scheduling (i.e. they fall on the middle of the scale drawn by Meyer), Spain, Italy (Latin cultures) and Russia tend towards a higher degree of flexibility.

3. Collaborative and individual cultures

As regards the collaborative versus individual cultures pattern, the central issue revolves around the concept of speech styles. According to Moll, speech styles provide information about the extent to which a culture is more individualist or collaborative (often in conjunction with the notion of low versus high context cultures). This refers to whether or not the message is transmitted directly, or it is packed with politeness and softening markers, and corresponds to a direct or indirect speech style. In order to soften the message, speakers may resort to special words, called "hedges" (Moll, 2012, p. 47), which may take the form of polite words or phrases (e.g. please; I was wondering), modal verbs or question forms. While the reasons for using a direct or indirect communication style may vary widely, the prevalence of one over the other is often associated with the adherence to a high or a low context culture.

Let us consider the following example taken from Gibson's *Intercultural Business Communication*:

A Belgian manager working in Thailand is unhappy that his secretary regularly arrives at work at least 30 minutes, and sometimes as much as one hour, late for work. He knows that the traffic in Bangkok is bad, but this is getting ridiculous. One morning, when she arrives late again, he explodes in front of the others in the busy office. He then takes her aside and tells her that if she can't get to work on time she may risk losing her job. She responds by handing in her resignation (Gibson, 2009, p. 34).

The example above can be explained by the different communication styles characterising the two cultures exemplified, the Belgian and the Thai one, respectively. In this precise situation, direct criticism – even used in a private, face-to-face interaction – is not permitted, as it could lead to ‘loss of face’. As Moll also shows, “enormous social problems can occur when someone from a highly direct culture uses their conversational norms in a place or culture where indirectness is more highly valued and seen as polite” (Moll, 2004, p. 33). Reliance on an indirect communication style could have been a good alternative to the blunt criticism shown by the Belgian manager. One example would be the use of indirect questions that could have hinted at the problem (e.g. Have you had your car fixed yet, or are you still using public transportation? or Has your mother got out of hospital yet?). This strategy, although without mentioning the problem directly, would have enabled the manager to hint at his secretary’s repeated late arrivals. Moreover, a communicatively competent interlocutor would have read between the lines that the Belgian manager was unhappy with his secretary’s attitude to schedules, working hours and punctuality. In Verluyten’s terms (1999), this strategy is called ‘blurring the message’, and it fosters better understanding and conflict avoidance. On the other hand, the Belgian manager’s attitude is explained by his cultural background; as Moll argues, some cultures “tolerate quite high levels of directness. (...) [and where] open, frank, and often quite blunt utterances are the norm for conversation” and “are part of the normal cultural makeup” (2004, p. 33).

The critical incident involving the Belgian manager who tells-off his secretary in front of the whole office is an illustration of the high and low context cultures divide. The Thai culture is high context; face saving is paramount, and, in general, communication is structured in more polite forms. However, high context communication moves beyond the mere use of softeners, polite forms and modal verbs. One case in point is that of Asian cultures, where agreement – even on a surface level – is highly valued; blunt disagreement, on the contrary, is hidden under smiles, and face-saving and politeness prevail over other aspects of the instance of communication.

As we have seen, the high versus low context cultural pattern is closely connected to people’s attitude towards time. Thus, we notice that high context individuals tend to be polychronic, they perceive time as a flexible entity, placing less weight on punctuality, and consider that the overall aim is far more important than the means of achieving it – time-related aspects included. Such an attitude could hinder communication with a monochronic, low context (business) counterpart, for whom punctuality and strict observance of schedules and deadlines is critical.

According to Melanie Moll, high context cultures also tend to be more collaborative. They value solidarity and they tend to focus on the group as an entity. Moreover, even in a work-related context, it is not uncommon in high context cultures to inquire about one’s family (sometimes it is

even desirable and used as a means to build relationships with business partners). Conversely, low context cultures tend to be more individualistic and to “separate social categories of work, family, entertainment, etc. into clear divisions” (2012, p. 51). For low context cultures (e.g. Germany, Austria) it is rather uncommon to inquire about the private life of a business acquaintance, since the private and public spheres are separated.

Conclusions

Our investigations have confirmed previous research conducted in the field, showing a clear connection between monochronic/ polychronic cultures and high/low context cultures (Jackson, 2020). While drawing a detailed description of monochronic/polychronic cultures based on Hall’s and Kaufman-Scarborough’s works, Jackson concludes that while in monochronic systems, people tend to stick to plans, value privacy, are accustomed to short-term relationships and are low-context, in polychronic systems, they tend to build long-term relationships, they borrow and lend things quite easily and, most importantly, are high context. Her findings are supported by examples from high context cultures such as: Egypt, India, Saudi Arabia. Another interesting association that Jackson points out is that between Hall’s high/low context cultures and Hofstede’s individualist/ collectivist cultures: “For Hall (1976), there is a strong correlation between high-context and low-context cultures and collectivism (...). He posits that membership in a collectivist or individualistic culture influences how business professionals relate to co-nationals and plays a role in determining how much information is provided in intercultural interactions.” (Jackson, 2020, p. 283) We may therefore assume that while Europe, as a whole, may be described as a low context culture, particularly if compared to Asia, we should nevertheless bear in mind the fact that there are various degrees of directness across the old continent and that, also, while Japan leads the world in terms of indirectness, by comparison, the Chinese are much more direct.

Having analysed these cultural patterns, we emphasise, once again, that they do not represent universals; instead, they should be interpreted within their context, since behaviour within the different cultural groups is subject to variation. Thus, members of high context groups could share low context characteristics and vice-versa. One case in point is that of low context cultures (e.g. the US) which, urged by political correctness, have started to rely more on indirect speech strategies. The constructs discussed are instrumental in broadening awareness of how intercultural communication works, and in acknowledging the fact that linguistic proficiency is not enough to ensure the success of the (business) interaction. Meaning is far from being encoded in language alone, but also in context,

in the ways in which people position themselves in society or how they related to notions of time and space.

Thus, beyond all cultural knowledge that any professional in international business should acquire in order to be able to cope with such challenges, we should all be prepared to adapt to the particular context that we are to participate in and to bear in mind that culture is a dynamic phenomenon, with various layers which reflect cultural dimensions manifesting at various levels and to different degrees.

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