

## TRENDS IN BUSINESS INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Christina Andreea MIȚARIU

**Abstract:** *The society in which we are living and, at the same time, the business environment, are becoming more complex as the international mobility of population has increased and jobs are no longer confined by geo-political boundaries. Obviously, the contact between different cultures may generate certain dysfunctions in the communication process as every participant is tributary to other values, habits, standards and expectations. The rise of business, IT, Internet, social networking and new media has opened new horizons in intercultural communication. But even if electronic communication tools are improving fast, it is not so easy to work with a colleague in another country without trying to understand his/her system of values and customs.*

**Keywords:** *intercultural communication, non-verbal language, cultural factors, context of communication, cultural anthropology.*

How and what we communicate define our cultural background, both individually and collectively. Difficulties in communicating between people of different cultures may be caused by the interlocutors' choice of choosing direct or indirect style. These are practically related to the concept of explicit or implicit communication in the intercultural business speech and just ignoring these concepts may cause a rupture or the occurrence of errors in the communication process.

Intercultural communication is a cultural phenomenon with historical significance. F. Graebner, a German cultural anthropologist, points out that the distance between two cultural areas is not able to hinder the intercultural communication process, irrespective of whether or not these areas are located next to each other, because of what he calls the "cultural wave". Indeed, it is hard to understand how this wave works as a historical phenomenon that we need to deal with in our everyday life: cultural habits separate individuals from each other and, most of the times, especially in the world of international affairs, many "foreign" individuals interfere with our reference culture.

We get to know each other and become accustomed to each other by observing and letting ourselves be observed, by understanding others and letting us be understood, by accepting others and letting us be accepted, by changing and letting us be changed. The cultural group we are part of is based on age, gender, family and race, as well as on professional, political or religious criteria, or on economic and social status requirements. Taking into account the delimitation of these contrasting groups, cultural interaction may be either positive or interesting, negative or uninteresting.

Which is the basis for intercultural communication? How can we overcome the obstacle to achieve a positive interaction?

Intercultural communication gathers up the interaction of the individual in the context of different cultures. The German sociologist Georg Simmel introduced the notion of "alien", so by referring to this, intercultural communication is exactly the relationship of the individual with what is "alien" to him.

Society is formed through communication between individuals. A certain form of communication shall become relatively stable after a certain period of time, representing thus the cultural and social structure that shall, in its turn, influence the interaction between individuals. When an individual is integrated into a group, he/she has an obligation to waive a certain part of his/her individuality in order to agree with the norm of the group, to share his/her values so as to form a system of a certain cultural value. Members of the group judge each other from this cultural perspective instead of doing it according to an objective criterion. In this context, when the "alien" appears, he/she is pretty different from the cultural system and, as a consequence, he/she is definitely not fully accepted by the group members. When his/her conduct proves to be unusual and unpredictable, questions are automatically raised about it, the extreme consequences being xenophobia or even the conflict.

Normally, every individual integrates either consciously or not into different cultural groups. Both in the business environment and in our everyday life, we often meet "aliens" or become ourselves "aliens" to others. Even though cultural affiliation is obvious and undeniable, we often are not able to realize to what extent we know the characteristics of the cultural group to which we belong. For example, it is difficult for a Romanian to explain clearly to other peers what he/she understands through the Romanian culture, but he/she can do it without difficulty when referring to the exponents of other cultures. In this respect, intercultural communication comes firstly from the cultural differences and from the unknowable feeling that individuals at a certain distance feel one to another.

Currently, economic globalization has had a profound impact on both the national and local characteristics. On the other hand, this phenomenon has allowed not only businessmen to travel all over the world and, implicitly, to play the role of "aliens" but all individuals who enjoy the advantages of modern civilization. From this perspective, intercultural communication is motivated by the need of socialization, a need that all individuals feel at the material and spiritual levels. In fact, the globalization of capitals has led to a relativization of political, economic and cultural powers, which is a real threat to cultural diversity.

In 1959, E.T. Hall published his book titled *The Silent Language*, in which she highlighted the distinction between powerful context cultures and poor context cultures, drawing his conclusions on personal observations and anecdotes. With the advent of this work, Hall establishes the subject of intercultural communication, which many researchers are interested in. Hall points out, through a pragmatic approach, the importance of "out-of-awareness" notions such as voice tones and all non-verbal, time, and space-related elements as cultural aspects. According to his opinion, cultural factors influence the individual without him knowing it. The individual puts into an antinomial relation all aspects related to the informal culture with those related to the formal culture and those related to the "technical culture". As an anthropologist, Hall reminds us that when interacting with a foreign culture, its exponents do not interpret our behaviour as we would expect, so he considers it vital to acquire a minimal luggage of knowledge about that culture. From a linguistic perspective, he emphasizes that the meaning of words / expressions is the product of language interaction with other non-linguistic cultural dimensions. Hall has succeeded to broaden the meaning of cultural anthropology, including here the communication, too. The result of this new approach has been called "anthropology of manners," whose primary objective would be to build a reference framework that allows us to better observe and discover significant differences in the interaction styles or manners.

The non-verbal, non-linguistic cultural dimensions that are meaningful will be known as the "context" in which communication is achieved. Hall highlights the distinction between powerful and low-context cultures, relying on the idea that context is the information that fits the event and which is indissolubly linked to it represents in fact the context. In a powerful context, communication would be where much of the information is already owned by the person, and only a small part of that information is contained in the explicitly coded message. Communication in a weak context is exactly the opposite, i.e. the most valuable part of the information

is embedded in the coded message. We must keep in mind that language is merely one of the many codes that can be used in communication, along with the dress code, the greetings, the gestures, the table layout, the eye contact, touching, etc.

Schein states that important parts of culture are absolutely invisible, culture being viewed as a range of "shared mental patterns" that members of an organization share and consider to be natural. This code is also called the "silent code". The context interferes in interpretation: either by dominating or by adding information. Smith goes on making a distinction between the historical and the immediate context, understanding the context by a variable signal that modulates the meaning of a set of invariant signals. This variable signal can be called "para-language" and includes voice modulations and other voice sounds such as coughing, tone picking, laughter, etc., which give information about the affective state of the transmitter. The para-language may also include nodding or the so-called "emblems," meaning those words that can be translated by words and that are capable of replacing words when verbal communication is not possible. It is well-known that both gestures and emblems differ from one culture to the other (for example: raising the thumb with the index, which in American culture signifies approval, in Japan refers to money, and in France to zero ).

Definitely, under no circumstances shall the non-verbal communication can ever substitute for the verbal communication and vice versa; they are rather consistent with different needs. The quality of communication is enhanced via the non-verbal system, which each individual acquires early in his/her life and improves it through the creation of habits.

It might be said that the context is a common code, meaning that people who have shared a certain experience need no more explanation, as they understand each other through half words or gestures. When interlocutors know each other well, communication can have a powerful context, as is the case in family relationships, whereas when interlocutors do not know each other, as in the case of business relationships, a "contextualization" is highly required. The context is a common code, and if not shared by all interlocutors, the communication needs to have a weak or explicit context. The more the common part of the code is, the less we will need additional words or explanations. Thus, members of a family or a circle of friends share a generous common fund, but they need to constantly adjust it through explicit negotiation strategies.

The cultural context regroups the rules that refer to dominant communication messages in a particular culture. These include facial

expressions, eye contact, posture, gesture and proxemics. Among all these elements, it seems that facial expressions are what people learn most quickly and control them best.

It is culture that determines how much of the feelings and emotions can be expressed. In terms of eye contact, Watson has shown how great the behavioral differences are in this respect between Arabs and Europeans on the one hand, and Asians, Indians and North Americans on the other hand. If in the first group the avoidance of eye contact is considered to be unhelpful and rude, within the second group, prolonged eye contact is rather felt as offensive, even aggressive.

And as far as proxemics is concerned, cultural differences are equally significant. Hall calls proxemia the set of observations and theories about the use that man makes having the space as a cultural product. Animals are classified as territorial and non-territorial, as they defend or not a territory. Being among the aggressive species, man is a territorial animal, the territorial attitude being a biological innate response to another's aggression.

The phrase "personal space" was initially introduced by D. Katz in 1937, being then popularized by R. Sommer in 1969, and subsequently, by Hall, meaning a territorial extension of the body.

Beyond this there is "interpersonal distance" (E. Goffman, Roger Lécuyer) that is variable, depending on the interacting circumstances and the frame culture. Hall and then one of his apprentices J.A. Scott, find significant differences in cultures, and Michael Argyle describes different cultures and places according to the cultural use of space.

Obviously, proxemic distances will appear as being dependent on the cultural model. For example, Arabic culture calls for more direct contact, including olfactory factors and a slightly higher tone than in the European culture, while the American code excludes the olfactory in official relations, and the Chinese does not allow eye-to-eye contact. The Japanese culture, like the Arabic culture, involves keeping a smaller distance in discussions (even business), breaching thus somehow the conventional personal space. Among the Europeans, the Mediterranean people (those with a warmer and more extroverted temper) are closer to interlocutors than the Nordics.

Some proxemic correlations are random or are determined by certain circumstances (such as a loud noise or low light intensity can bring people who are completely strangers to reading an ad in a station without this meaning having any significance). Beyond these, there are a number of proxemic constraints dictated by the specific uses of the community to

which the individual belongs. In some cultures, social status influences spatial relationships, and in others the family / non-family distinction, i.e. varna / non-varna affiliation (such as in India). Ignoring such codes may cause serious problems of proxemic acculturation and even communication failures caused by the ethnocentric interpretation of other cultures. Hall mentions the situation of the Americans in the Orient, who were clearly disturbed by the unwelcomed rapprochement of the Arab interlocutors in direct communication process, as well as the discomfort of the Arabs who feel offended and rejected by interlocutors seeking to keep their integrity of their personal space continuously.

"To touch the interlocutors, to direct your breathing into their direction or to try to avoid them, to look in their eyes or to divert their eyes, here are some examples of perfectly acceptable proxemic behaviours in a culture, but taboo in another»<sup>1</sup>.

In the American culture, things are different in terms of interactions at work and vis-à-vis clients and business partners. If in their relationships with colleagues and peers, the Americans are perceived as direct and transparent, when it comes to feedback, things are completely different. When working with people from other cultures, they prefer to be overly positive and not very convinced and coherent in reporting various positive or negative circumstances they have observed, and this can often create confusion or unclarity among employees. In other regions of the world, this process is treated altogether and completely differently. For example, a Thai manager knows that it is not appropriate to criticize an employee in front of the others while a Danish manager will be as honest and direct as possible. The French are trained to criticize as openly as possible and to provide positive feedback only rarely, while in Germany praises and appraisals to employees are only made when remarkable results are achieved. We find China at the opposite pole, where employees are accustomed to frequent recognition of even the smallest merits.

A first solution to avoiding syncope in the proper conduct of relationships between exponents of different cultures would be to have the mind open and remain flexible, leaving aside stereotypes and what we can know about the cultural particularities of our interlocutors.

It is also very important to have a perfect understanding of the environment from which they come in order to know better how to approach them and how to better meet the needs or demands they may have. Active listening is also of great help because it demonstrates to others that they are

---

1 HALL, E.T., 1981, Proxémique in Bateson, Birdwhistell, Goffman, Hall, Jackson, Schefflen, Watzlavick (eds), *La nouvelle communication*, Paris, Seuil, p. 207.

taken into account and that their message is received correctly and entirely, and attention to non-verbal language and observance of instructions such as maintaining visual contact with the interlocutor and maintaining an open attitude can provide the interlocutor with a positive impression of our attention and engagement in the conversation.

## References

- DINU, Mihai, 1997, Comunicarea, Bucuresti, Ed. Stiintifica.
- FABBRI, P., 1969, "Considérations sur la proxémique" in Langages, 10, pp. 66-75.
- HALL, E.T., 1959, The Silent Language, New York, Doubleday.
- HALL, E.T., 1966, The Hidden Dimension, New York, Doubleday (trad. fr. La dimension cachée, Paris, Ed. du Seuil).
- HALL, E.T., 1981, Proxémique in Bateson, Birdwhistell, Goffman, Hall, Jackson, Schefflen, Watzlavick (eds), La nouvelle communication, Paris, Seuil.
- MARTIN. Judith N. NAKAYAMA Thomas K. *Experiencing Intercultural Communication An Introduction*. Mayfield Publishing Company.2001
- NÖTH, Winfried, 1990, Handbook of Semiotics, New York, Academic Press.
- ROGERS, Everett M., STEINFATE Thomas M. *Intercultural Communication*. Waveland Press. 1999.
- XIANG. Li Hui. *Amtropologie culturelle*. Edition Shang Wu. 1991.
- BO SHAN, « La communication interculturelle : ses fondements, les obstacles à son développement », *Communication et organisation* [En ligne], 24 | 2004, mis en ligne le 27 mars 2012, consulté le 13 mars 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/communicationorganisation/2928> ; DOI : 10.4000/communicationorganisation.2928

## NOTES ON THE AUTHOR

**Christina Andreea MIȚARIU** – PhD. - is a lecturer at the Faculty of Management in Tourism and Commerce Timisoara Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University. She holds a PhD. in Philology. She has published numerous books and articles.