

THE DIMENSIONS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

VIORICA BANCIU

University of Oradea, Faculty of Socio-Humanistic Sciences,
str. Universității nr. 1A, Oradea, România

Tel./ Fax: 00-40-259-408439 E-mail: myconferences18@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

We live in a world where globalisation and mondialisation are the terms mostly used because they caused the most important changes of our world. Even if we live and work together and travel around the world, having connections all over the globe the best bridge to connect people is communication, which nowadays became intercultural communication.

The focus of this paper is to present and help us understand the dimensions of intercultural communication and the way they work.

Key words: culture, communication, differences, cultural learning

INTRODUCTION

Yeung Cheng in 1727 pointed clearly the differences between cultures across the world: "The people of the world are bigoted and unenlightened; invariably they regard what is like them as right and what is different from them as wrong. They do not realize that the types of humanity are not uniform, that it is not only impossible to force people to become different, but also impossible to force them to become alike" (Gibson, 2008).

The best link for these cultures is communication. It involves the sending and the receiving of information between a sender and a receiver – an exchange of meaning. The act of communication happens not only through the use of words but also through non-verbal factors: gestures, facial expressions, body movement, the way we dress, etc.

GLOBALISATION AND COMMUNICATION

In our world of globalisation communication takes place between senders and receivers from different cultures and this act can be very difficult if the difference between cultures is great but there are a multitude of reasons for this act to take place:

- technology makes it possible for people to travel further and faster than ever before;
- the Internet links people across national boundaries;

- the international labor force is more mobile;
- more people are on the move than ever before: business people are active globally, refugees are trying to escape from conflicts and natural disasters;
- the intercultural academic mobility became something usual.
- in many places of the world the work force is becoming more and more diverse (Gibson, 2008)

We live in a diverse world and we must have the ability to deal with diverse cultures and traditions. Diversity offers a broader, richer and more fertile environment for creative thinking, innovations but also for diverse contacts between people. This is why the communication science is an interdisciplinary domain relying on different areas of investigation: anthropology, psychology, business studies, linguistics, sociology, geography, history.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Then what is intercultural communication? We must accept that there are many ways of defining the word culture, and it should not be used in the sense of literature, music and art but rather in the sense of a shared system of attitudes, beliefs, values and behavior". Hofstede defined it as "collective mental programming" or "the software of the mind" but we can simply call it "the way we do things around here (Gibson, 2008).

Scientists studying culture consider it not just national culture but also a whole range of different types of culture:

- corporate culture,
- professional culture,
- gender,
- age,
- religious culture,
- regional culture,
- class culture.

Recent studies proved that in some cases, these factors may be more significant than national cultures in binding people together and the professional interests are so strong that national cultural differences become unimportant.

As we live in a changing world and people travel all over the globe the scientists defined the culture shock as "transition shock", or "the experience of foreignness" (Marx, 1999) and is the reaction to living in a new culture. "Shock" can be considered a wrong word because the process can be gradual and may include a variety of symptoms psychical (strain, sense of loss, feeling rejected, confusion, anxiety, helplessness, obsession with hygiene) or physical symptoms

(headaches, sleeplessness, overeating, desire for comfort foods (sweets), excessive consumption of alcohol, stomach pains).

We can also take into consideration the reverse culture or reentry shock which can be experienced on returning to the original culture (Gibson, 2008) ” Culture shock is the experienced confrontation with the unfamiliar. Reentry shock is the unexpected confrontation with the familiar.”

The intercultural communication can be defined as an exchange of meaning. The message received can be very different from the message that was sent because of the things or the facts that distorts the message. Intercultural communication takes place when the sender and the receiver come from different cultures (cultural noise). Communication can be very difficult if the difference between the cultures is great. It can break down completely if there is too much ”cultural noise” (Jahn, 1995).

CULTURAL LEARNING

Intercultural communication implies cultural learning which was defined by several scientists such as: D. Clackworthy (1994), Joseph Luft, Harrington Ingram and Handy (1990). In their opinion at the lowest level of is the belief that all people are alike, then comes a recognition that there are differences, seeing ways of synthesising the different ways, selecting and making things run smoothly. „Beim Lernen spielen auch noch andere Faktoren eine wichtige Rolle, wie Motivation, Emotion und soziales Lernen, Konzentrationsfähigkeit ... ” (Gibson, 2008). The process of cultural learning can be helped along by experience, reflection and training. Intercultural training not only provides information but also develops skills and encourages attitudes to enable people to progress along the cultural learning curve (Gibson, 2008).

CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF COMMUNICATION

According to Robert Gibson (2008) the studies referring to intercultural communication are relatively new and most of them come from the USA. There are several famous scientists to be mentioned in this domain of research:

- Edward Hall (anthropologist) who is particularly famous for his research on low and high context cultures and different concepts of time.
- Kluchhohn and Strodbeck (both anthropologists) identified five key orientations of basic importance to human beings: human nature, man-nature relationship, time sense, activity, social relations.

➤ Hofstede (social psychologist) identified five dimensions of cultural communication: individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity/femininity, long-term orientation.

Trompenaars has tried to make the problems of intercultural communication known to a wider audience. He identified three main cultural dimensions:

The cultural dimensions of communication can be:

Non-verbal communication which is the process of communicating through sending and receiving wordless messages. Such messages can be communicated through gesture, body language or posture; facial expression and eye contact, object communication such as clothing, hairstyles or even architecture, or symbols and infographics. Non-verbal communication may include:

- ❖ Body language (kinesics) and includes body movement, body position, facial expressions;

- ❖ Eye contact (occulistics);

- ❖ Touch (haptics);

- ❖ Body distance (proxemics)

The way people dress for different situations (business negotiations diplomatic meeting, etc) differs across cultures. Normally informal dress denotes lack of respect for the partner. Again a too relaxed partner in his chair can suggest the same things. Some cultures impose that particular parts of the body should not be exposed (i.e. Arab cultures – the sole of the foot should not be exposed. Body language can very easily misinterpreted creating unpleasant situations.

- ❖ Paralanguage which is the sum of factors and totality of words, tone of voice, speed of speech and pitch of voice. Intonation patterns and the tone of voice vary widely during the act of communication and also in different cultures.

- ❖ Turn talking : the way it works in a conversation and the role of silence also differ from culture to culture. In some cultures it is acceptable and even desirable to interrupt, in other it is normal to wait for the partner to finish speaking before making one's point and in some cultures a period of silence between the contributions is the norm (Gibson, 2008).

Communication style is very important from the point of view of:

- Context and we return to what Hall called "low and high context" cultures. A high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalised in the person, while very little is in the coded,

explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context communication is the opposite, the mass information is „vested in the explicit code”(Hall, 1976)

- Directness: sometimes the language used can be seen to be as too direct. This can be a problem in intercultural communication.

- Person and task: in many cultures it is more important to preserve a relationship than to get the task done. For example jobs will be given to family and friends than to a person with the best qualifications.

Time is another dimension of intercultural communication. Time (chronemics) makes cultures be clasified as polychronic and monochronic. In polychronic cultures it is acceptable to do several things at the same time and the approach to deadlines is flexible while in monochronic cultures one thing is done at a time with great stress being laid on deadlines and schedules.

The concept of time was also clasified by Lewis, R., in his book *When Cultures Collide* in:

- Linear concept of time
- Cyclical concept of time (yearly routines)
- Event-related concept of time (Lewis, 1996)

According to Hofstede (1991) the attitude to past, present and future differs widely between cultures. For some cultures the recording of the past is more important, others stress the present and others think in the long term.

Cultures with short-term orientation tend to have the following features:

- Respect for traditions
- People are prepared to overspend to kleep up with neighbors
- Small amount of savings
- People expect quick results

Cultures with long- term orientation tend to have the following features:

- Traditions adapted to modern context
- People are thrifty
- Large amount of savings
- People perssevere for slow rezults (Hofstede, 1991).

Space. Just as body distance can vary between cultures so can the perception of space.

Individualism. Individualist cultures stress self-realization whereas collectivist ones require that the individual fits into the group. The collectivist idea is illustrated by the Japanese saying "the nail that stands out must be hammered down". In individualist cultures people look after themselves and their families whereas in collectivist ones they look after a wider group in exchange for loyalty (Hofstede, 1991).

Universalism and particularism. A universalist person may say of a particularist partner "they cannot be trusted because they will always help their friends", whereas the particularist will say of the universalist "you cannot trust them; they would not even help their friends" (Trompenaas and Hampden-Turner, 1997).

Uncertainty. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance have, according to Hofstede, "a lower tolerance for ambiguity, which expresses itself in higher levels of anxiety and energy release, greater need for formal rules and absolute truth, and less tolerance, for people or groups with deviant behavior"(Trompenaas and Hampden-Turner, 1997). For high uncertainty avoidance cultures "what is different is dangerous " while in low uncertainty cultures "what is different is curious".

Male and female. It is again Hofstede, who explains this dimension, called "masculinity and femininity" (Trompenaas and Hampden-Turner, 1997). In masculine cultures the roles of men and women are distinct and "men are supposed to be assertive tough and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life." In feminine cultures the roles of men and women overlap, men and women are supposed to be modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life (Gibson, 2008).

Nature. Brake and Walker (1995) identify three attitudes towards nature and environment:

- Control: people can dominate their environment, it can be changed to fit human needs.
- Harmony: people should live in harmony with the world around them
- Constraint: people are constrained by the world around them. Fate, luck and change play a significant role.

CONCLUSION

In a world where changes occur very often without giving us time to accustom with them we need to be tolerant and understanding. Communication builds a bridge

between people and peoples and we need to understand this because the welfare of everyone is based on a better understanding of each other and of the world around us.

There are a great deal of problems which can and must be solved communicating. The dimensions of communication should be taken into account because they offer us the opportunity to build a better world by understanding each other.

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