The Role of Culture in Communication:
How Cultures Influence the Way People Perceive Information

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Abstract
Communication is an important part of everyday. However, its perpetual presence often implies simplicity and mutual understanding. While there are a lot of description on communication, generated information and symbols, thoughts and feelings so the message from the source to be transferred to the receiver and transferred correctly understood the interpretation of this message is a process that is completed. Of course, this process is not always realized correctly because of cultural factors. To say that communication takes place, as can be seen from the definition of the message to be transmitted is not sufficient. We can say communication totally done if message understood and interpreted correctly. Therefore, this process is not always realized correctly because of cultural factors. Cultures influenced the communication ways and how the people access information. There are different cultures and culture-models. The primary aim of this paper is to show how a person's cultural background affects the communication.

Keywords: communication, culture, perception, influence, people

Introduction

Communication is an important part of everyday. However, its perpetual presence often implies simplicity and mutual understanding. While there are a lot of description on communication, generated information and symbols, thoughts and feelings so the message from the source to be transferred to the receiver and transferred correctly understood the interpretation of this message is a process that is completed. Of course, this process is not always realized correctly because of cultural factors (Gamsriegler, 2005).

Culture

Culture and communication have been defined and re-defined repeatedly, as they are concepts that are intimately linked with what is intrinsically human (García&Rising, 2006). Culture is, basically, a set of shared values that a group of people holds. Such values affect how you think and act and, more importantly, the kind of criteria by which you judge others. Cultural meanings render some behaviors as normal and right and others strange or wrong. Every culture has rules that its members take for granted. Few of us are aware of our own biases because cultural imprinting is begun at a very early age. And while some of culture's knowledge, rules, beliefs, values, phobias and anxieties are taught explicitly, most is absorbed subconsciously (www.forbes.com).

Cultures are merely different, not deficient, and each culture's norms and practices should be assed only from the perspective of the culture itself, not by standards embraced by another culture. It is the idea that one cannot make judgments about a culture just because they are not a part of that it. Outsiders should be able to see the cultural from a neutral perspective and not judge the culture before understanding it. Each culture should be viewed with respect and as an equal because no one culture is better than any other. They should be allowed to practice their own beliefs, what a cultures believes to be true, and values, a shared view about is right. Cultural relativism emphasizes that ethnocentrism, which is the belief that one's culture is superior to everyone else's, should not be forced upon cultures, and cultures should remain unprejudiced toward each other. Cultural relativism is the moral and ethical way to look at different cultures (www.wikipedia.com).

Edward T. Hall (Hall, 1976) proposed the difference between what he called high context and low context cultures. In communication in the low-context society, there must be explicit reference to the topic being conveyed. Nationalities used as examples include the Swiss-Germans, the Germans and the Scandinavians. At this point we should mention the fact that nations do not always coincide with culture. In Hall's high context communication, much of the information is found in the physical context or is internalized in the person himself. Examples given include Japan, many Arab countries and even Latin American countries. Implicature is important here, as meaning is conveyed through hints, understood signals and background knowledge.

What is Culture?

In most Western languages the word culture is usually used in the sense of "civilization" or "refinement of the mind" and in particular the results of such refinement, like education, art and literature. For example, Breyten Breytenbach

represents South Afiican culture, Shakespeare British culture and Voltaire and Sartre French culture. The word culture, however, also has a broader meaning. In the anthropological sense of the word it refers to both the activities that are supposed to refine the mind as well as ordinary and menial things in life such as how to greet people, how to show emotions, which physical distance to keep from others. what to eat when with whom. There are more than 300 definitions of the word culture in the anthropological sense of the word (Victor, 1992).

The symbols of a culture are of course things like a flag, a coat of arms, a logotype, a slogan, but also clothes, language use (such **as** which words you use to greet people, which rate and loudness of speaking you consider normal, whether or not you interrupt people) and non-verbal communication (which distance between people you consider normal [proxemics], whether or not you look at people when you speak to them [oculesics], whether or not you like long silences in a conversation) (Gerritsen, 1998).

The rituals of a culture are the activities that are, technically speaking, superfluous in reaching desired ends, but which, within a culture, are considered as socially essential: they are therefore carried out for their own sake. Ways of greeting and paying respect to others, social and religious ceremonies (birthdays, holy communions). Even business and political meetings organized for seemingly rational reasons often mainly serve ritual purposes (Hofstede, 1991).

Major Dimensions of Culture

Hofstede, found a "culture score" on each item with an average of each "nation" and through factor analysis found four major dimensions. These dimensions were (Hofstede, 1980):

1) Power Distance

This refers to the acceptance by the less powerful members of the society of the idea that power differences are a natural part of their society. Cultures with a low score would not accept this inequality as easily. An example of the way a reprimand from a superior is given and received would illustrate this difference (Hofstede, 1980).

High and Low-Power Distance

Power distance is the degree of equality, or inequality, between people in a particular society. The higher the power distance of a country, the more dominant individuality and individual rights are. When power distance is low, society does not emphasize people's status, power, or wealth. In other words, individualistic cultures have high power distance and collectivist cultures have low power distance. Examples of countries with high power distance include Malaysia, Russia, and Romania while countries with low power distance include Austria, Israel, and Denmark (www.wikipedia.com).

2) Individualism/Collectivism:

This is the dimension most often used to explain cultural variability, sometimes to the exclusion of all others. Individualistic cultures are person-based, with examples coming from the Northern European countries, the United States and Australia. The group-based culture found in collectivism is exemplified by countries such as Japan and other Asian societies, African countries and Latin American countries (Hofstede, 1980). The individualism-collectivism dimension (The Me-We Dimension) is thought to be the most important of all value dimensions that distinguish cultures. The individualist culture has a "me" consciousness. Individuals are loosely linked to each other, but largely independent of group identification. Emphasis is placed on the self; they are motivated by their own preferences, needs, and goals, and personal achievement and initiative are stressed. Words such as "independence," "self," "privacy," and "rights" are common in individualistic cultural conversations. The collectivist culture has a "we" consciousness. Individuals are closely linked to one or more groups. Commitment to these valued groups is a primary goal of collectivists, and they tend to look to the goals and successes of the group rather than to the individuals. Words such as "loyalty," "responsibility," and "community" permeate collectivist cultural conversations (www.wikipedia.com).

3) Uncertainty Avoidance:

Obviously this, as all the other variables, refers to a predominant tendency within a culture and not to all the individuals within that culture. A high score, however, indicates that the tendency is for members of this culture to have higher levels of anxiety when faced with uncertainty. They feel a greater need for absolute truth and are less tolerant of people or groups who deviate from the norm. This may affect their communication with strangers (Hofstede, 1980).

4) Masculinity:

This male-female dichotomy especially affects communication within gender roles. In a "masculine" culture the roles are clearly distanced, the men being assertive, tough, and materialistic while the "feminine" involves modesty, nurturing and sensitivity. A "feminine" culture would be more concerned with the quality of life and show less differentiation between the sexes. The bipolar scales used by other authors to describe role relations, such as cooperative/competitive, equal/unequal, socio-emotional/task-oriented might also be included in this category (Hofstede, 1980).

Communication and Culture

Culture does not just lie in the way one eats or dresses, but in the manner in which they present themselves as an entity to the outside world. Language is a huge proponent of communication, as well as a large representation of one's cultural background. Cultural miscommunication often stems from different and conflicting styles of speech and messages. A perfectly normal intonation pattern for a native German speaker may seem angry and aggressive to a foreign listener. Connotations of words, as well as meanings of slang phrases vary greatly across cultural lines, and a lack of tolerance and understanding of this fact often results in misinterpretations.

Non-verbal communication greatly, greatly varies across cultural lines. One must take the time to study different cultures as to fully understand messages being transmitted. There are many aspects of non-verbal communication, such as gesture, facial expression and space, affect the way a message is construed. There are different modalities of culture, which affect communication in different ways:

High-Context and Low-Context Cultures

Every aspect of global communication is influenced by cultural differences. Even the choice of medium used to communicate may have cultural overtones. For example, it has been noted that industrialized nations rely heavily on electronic technology and emphasize written messages over oral or face-to-face communication. Certainly the United States, Canada, the UK and Germany exemplify this trend. But Japan, which has access to the latest technologies, still relies more on face-to-face communications than on the written mode. The determining factor in medium preference may not be the degree of industrialization, but rather whether the country falls into a high-context or low-context culture.

In some cultures, personal bonds and informal agreements are far more binding than any formal contract. In others, the meticulous wording of legal documents is viewed as paramount. High-context cultures (Mediterranean, Slav, Central European, Latin American, African, Arab, Asian, American-Indian) leave much of the message unspecified – to be understood through context, nonverbal cues, and between-the-lines interpretation of what is actually said. By contrast, low-context cultures (most of the Germanic and English-speaking countries) expect messages to be explicit and specific. The former are looking for meaning and understanding in what is not said – in body language, in silences and pauses, and in relationships and empathy. The latter place emphasis on sending and receiving accurate messages directly, and by being precise with spoken or written words (www.forbes.com).

Sequential or Synchronic Cultures

Some cultures think of time sequentially – as a linear commodity to "spend," "save," or "waste." Other cultures view time synchronically – as a constant flow to be experienced in the moment, and as a force that cannot be contained or controlled.

In sequential cultures (like North American, English, German, Swedish, and Dutch), businesspeople give full attention to one agenda item after another. In many other parts of the world, professionals regularly do several things at the same time. I once cashed a traveler's check at a Panamanian bank where the teller was counting my money, talking to a customer on the phone, and admiring the baby in the arms of the woman behind me. To her, it was all business as usual.

In synchronic cultures (including South America, southern Europe and Asia) the flow of time is viewed as a sort of circle – with the past, present, and future all inter-related. This viewpoint influences how organizations in those cultures approach deadlines, strategic thinking, investments, developing talent from within, and the concept of "long-term" planning.

Synchronic cultures have an entirely different perspective. The past becomes a context in which to understand the present and prepare for the future. Any important relationship is a durable bond that goes back and forward in time, and it is often viewed as grossly disloyal not to favor friends and relatives in business dealings (www.forbes.com).

Affective or Neutral Cultures

With much angry gesturing, an Italian manager referred to the idea of his Dutch counterpart as "crazy." The Dutch manager replied. "What do you mean, crazy? I've considered all the factors, and I think this is a viable approach. And calm down! We need to analyze this, not get sidetracked by emotional theatrics." At that point, the Italian walked out of the meeting.

In international business dealings, reason and emotion both play a role. Which of these dominates depends upon whether we are affective (readily showing emotions) or emotionally neutral in our approach. Members of neutral cultures do not telegraph their feelings, but keep them carefully controlled and subdued. In cultures with high affect, people show their feelings plainly by laughing, smiling, grimacing, scowling – and sometimes crying, shouting, or walking out of the room (www.forbes.com).

Culture in Communication

In the first part of my paper I have tried to show that there are major differences between cultures in values and that those differences result in differences in communication. In this part I will try to indicate that differences in communication between cultures may lead to miscommunication. I will do this on the basis of the so-called layer-based pragmatic communication model of Targowski and Bowman (Targowski&Bowman, 1988). Their model consists of two parts: one part depicts the relationship between sender, receiver and external environment in communication. I will not deal in detail with this part of the model. I will only mention two so-called paths of communication in this model, which may lead to miscommunication if the culture of the sender of the message is different firom the culture of the receiver (Targowski&Bowman, 1988):

Non-Verbal Communication

This holds for both conscious and unconscious nonverbal communication. Conscious non-verbal communication is, for example, how to beckon people. In some parts of the world you do it with the palm of your hand upwards (for example Western and Northern Europe), in others with the palm of the hand downwards (Southern Europe). In some cultures (Ethiopia) you use the first way of beckoning for animals and the second for human beings. This may lead to a great miscommunication when people with different manners of beckoning communicate with each other. Whereas one person means to beckon a human being, the other believes that he or she is treated as an animal.

There are also many cultural differences in unconscious non-verbal communication. For example, the distance in normal face-to-face communication. In the United States and Europe this is about 60 centimetres, in Asia about one meter and in South

America about 45 centimetres. Whether or not you look at a person to whom you speak is also culturally determined. In most Northern European cultures it is very impolite to not look at people. When you do so people believe that you have to conceal something. In China and India on the other hand it is impolite to look at people, because then you do not show respect (Gerritsen, 1998).

The Interpretation of the External Environment

When cultures largely differ in their basic values, for example the dimensions of Geert Hofstede, they will differ in their interpretation of words. The meaning of the sentence "Go to the boss" is different in a culture with a high index for power distance than in one with a low index. The statement "You are the best at your school" is a real compliment of which one is proud in a masculine. individualistic society, but a shame in a feminine and collectivistic society. The statement: "You look much older than you are" is a compliment in a culture such as China with a high power distance where elderly people automatically have respect, but it is not in cultures with a low power distance (Gerritsen, 1998).

Conclusion

Cultures influenced the communication ways and how the people access information. There are different cultures and culture-models. They affect interpersonal communication. The primary aim of this paper was to show how a person's cultural background affects the communication. What was found was that the process ofcommunication involves the perception, interpretation and evaluation of aperson's behavior. Eventually, all three are dependent on a person's cultural background,which determines the meanings attached to a specific behavoir. As it is a vast topic, it was focused on the differences in high-context and low-context communication styles across cultures and their influence on the way people perceive information (Gamsriegler, 2005).

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