THE CULTURAL CONTEXT IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Contents

Introduction

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1. The cultural context in international business communication

The present volume is mainly based on contributions to the 24th LAUD symposium, which was held in Duisburg, Germany, 25-31 March 1996. This symposium was organized in a twofold way: its overall topic being "The Cultural Context in Communication across Languages", it comprised two sub-symposia, namely "The Cultural Context in International Business Communication" and "The Cultural Context in Foreign Language Learning". The proceedings of this second part have been edited by Martin Pütz, 1997.

The two subtopics have more in common than might first appear. In schools, the keyword of "communicative competence" describes the aim to be reached by institutionalized language teaching in most of the Western world. Competence of course is not possible without teaching the foreign culture as well, language and culture being inseparably interwoven. Our language is shaped by our cultural environment and those fragments of our environment that we wish to discuss or draw attention to have received names in our culture.

Therefore, we tend not to talk about things and events that lack any relation or importance to our culture, but everything we say is related to our culture's view of them. Thus, while talking we subconsciously assume values and norms to be common ones that are in fact peculiar to our own culture.

Such assumptiorns can become especially important in intercultural business encounters. The role that cultural differences play in any given international business negotiation may be crucial. Here, members of two or more different nations — and thus usually two or more different languages and cultures — meet to discuss business topics. All over the world, but in the

Western world especially, they tend to use English as the *lingua franca* for business negotiations, even if it is not the mother-tongue of any of the negotiators. In that case, the English used is commonly a variety in which the mother tongue interferes not only phonetically or phonologically, but also in the cultural norms and attitudes expressed by the speakers. Their nonverbal behavior, for example, does not automatically switch to an "Englishized" nonverbal behavior but normally stays rooted in their home culture. Thus, even when they think the negotiation partner should have understood the (verbal and nonverbal) signs they are using, misunderstandings still occur because some signs may be differently encoded — and decoded — in the other's culture or may not be noticed to be signs at all.

There are many other ways in which an intercultural business negotiator may face problems which have less to do with the hard facts of the business deal than with the way those are presented and understood. The different contributions to this volume will help to shed light on several of these aspects and thus enable business negotiators or future business negotiators, or their trainers, to become aware of the different kinds of intercultural traps they may encounter when dealing with representatives of foreign cultures.

2. Structure of the volume

Though the overall topic of culture's rule in business communication is highlighted differently in each of the articles, they seem to the editors to fall into five groups:

I. Theoretical issues
II. Interculturality
III. The cultural context
IV. Linguistic perspectives
V. Training

I. Theoretical issues

The first part presents two theoretical approaches underlying business communication research. These approaches can also be considered to be the foundations of related fields of study. Thus, before talking about culture and interculturality in connection with business communication, it is advisable to get a firmly established picture of what "culture" means in this context. There are about as many definitions of culture as there are people asked for a definition; therefore, we have to find a definition that is not too general but may nevertheless serve as a common denominator for the contributions in this volume.

One glance at this book's table of contents will reveal that the word *culture* usually refers to national cultures. Such reference is of course common and legitimate for analysis' sake. Differences in communication styles occur at all levels, also within national boundaries and even within companies, and national borders do not automatically coincide with cultural borders. However, this book aims not at providing recipes for business negotiators on how to ameliorate their corporate cultures but rather at introducing various analytical and practical approaches to the topic of international business communication.

Edward T. Hall (formerly with Northwestern University, USA) looks for a very basic definition in going back to different phases of human evolution. Culture is not a definite entity, but a conceptualization in our brains, and therefore it makes sense to resort to recent research concerning the structure of our brains. Hall relies on the studies by MacLean, who postulates a three-level brain structure and who claims that those three levels — which Hall names as the *reptilian brain*, the *early mammalian or limbic system,* and the *neocortex* — reflect different periods of evolution from the lowest form (reptiles) via a higher form (mammals) to the present form (neo-mammals), and that accordingly each brain level has very distinct functions. The three kinds of brain are closely interconnected but still operate independently to a certain extent.

Hall links these three kinds of brain to the three kinds of culture he introduced in *The Silent Language*. He relates the reptilian brain to the formal/hierarchical bureaucratic culture, the limbic system to the informal/intuitive emotional culture, and the neocortex to the technical/intellectual culture. These different types of culture are present to differing degrees in national cultures; thus Hall describes Germans, Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians as placing special emphasis on a technical/neocortex-orientation, whereas Italians and Japanese are a mixture of limbic and neocortical orientation. These insights have important repercussions on international business communication.

Charles P. Campbell (New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, USA) bases his work on another of Hall's well-known distinctions, i.e. the distinction between high-context cultures like the French or the Japanese and low-context cultures like the Germans or the North-Americans, a distinction which has far-reaching consequences for every cross-cultural business encounter. Campbell suggests bridging the gap between these two types of cultures by resorting to what he calls "rhetorical ethos". In his argument, he uses written business texts in English and in Chinese and suggests using Western rhetorical principles to accomodate other cultural patterns. In business correspondence, people from these two cultures tend to indavertently offend or at least bewilder their business partners because they tacitly assume them to share their cultural values. By using a rhetorical framework in order to approach their addressee's conditions and in order to designate their own place and rank vis-à-vis their addressees, they may achieve better results. Although this may be difficult for communicators from low-context countries, Campbell suggests that business correspondence standards may be changing due to the extensive use of English as a *lingua franca* for business.

II. Interculturality

The second part of the volume approaches the topic from a more practical side. Businesspersons who actively participate in international negotiation are often faced with problems and misunderstandings that are not immediately connected with the topic they are discussing but which have their roots in the different cultural backgrounds of the negotiation partners. It is not enough to memorize a list with do's and don'ts of the culture/s in question, nor is it sufficient to rely on one' s common sense or on the knowledge of "culturemes" learned in some crash course on international business and management.

Stephen E. Weiss (York University, Canada) has kindly agreed to the editors' suggestion to have his fundamentally important paper reprinted after more than ten years. This also explains the paper's idiosyncracy. Weiss analyses the effects of culture on intercultural business communication under twelve different variables which he defines as culturally sensitive, namely the basic concept of the negotiation process, the most significant type of issue, the selection of negotiators, the individuals' aspirations, the decision-making in groups, the orientation towards time, the risk-taking propensity, the bases of trust, the concern with protocol, the communication complexity, the nature of persuasion, and the form of agreement. All of these factors should contribute to enhancing the negotiators' familiarity with their respective business partners' culture and may allow them to coordinate their negotiation strategies.

Weiss aims at making business negotiators aware of possible culturally-based differences concerning negotiation attitudes, behaviors, and contexts, to make them reflect on these topics and by giving them explicit advice to help them in their own research, future preparation of business negotiations as well as for further investigations. The six cultures chosen for these purposes are the Chinese (PRC), French, Japanese, Mexican, Nigerian, and Saudi cultures. These cultures were chosen on the one hand for their diversity, and on the other hand for their significance to North Americans in business.

III. The cultural context

Whereas the second part concentrates mainly on global strategies, which nevertheless have to be exemplified with actual cultures, the third part presents case studies from different cultures and from different perspectives which very convincingly show the importance of the cultural context. Without any information on this cultural context, business negotiators would not be able to perform optimally, and what is worse, they might seriously endanger their or their enterprise's business connections. Hilkka Yli-Jokipii analyzes some differences between the Finnish, the English, and the American cultures, and Fred Scharf and Séamus Mac Mathúna discuss the clash of two cultures in Ireland and its consequences for international business.

Hilkka Yli-Jokipii (University of Turku, Finland) looks into some basic questions concerning the realization of requests in current corporate writing in Finnish and in English. She discusses important issues such as how the situational conditions affect the realization of requests, or what bearing the level of acquaintance between the writer and the receiver has on the realization of the requests. Furthermore she is interested in the aspect of the power bestowed on the participants and in how far it influences the outcome of a request, and to which degree cultural aspects play a role in the realization of requests.

These issues are analyzed in a contrastive study of an extensive corpus of authentic business letters and telefax messages in Britain, America, and Finland, supplemented by texts from education materials. The aspects under scrutiny are the different concepts of power and distance that are prevalent in those different cultures and languages. These concepts very clearly show in the use of linguistic devices, for example Finnish business writers are much more distant and less creative than British business writers and seem to be more conscious of the balance of power between the interactants. British business writers, on the other hand, run into face-threatening problems when they know their addressee well but are not supposed to use an informal style due to the constraints of the context of business writing.

Fred Scharf and Séamus Mac Mathúna (University of Ulster, Northern Ireland) take a different approach to point out the interconnection between the cultural context and economic performance. With their background experience of living and working in the heated climate of Northern Ireland, they are in a position to show the importance of politics for economic growth.

The authors start their argument from the assumption that in the Republic of Ireland there has been a readjustment in the emphasis attaching to those cultural values which appear to contribute to the creation of a favorable environment for economic expansion; whereas in Northern Ireland the development has been such as to place emphasis on cultural characteristics such as conservatism and introversion which detract from the creation and development of conditions favorable to economic growth. The present contribution aims at testing the validity of these assumptions by first discussing the recent and present economic trends in both parts of Ireland and then by discussing factors such as some of Hofstede's cultural dimensions (individualism vs. collectivism and uncertainty avoidance) and Hall's differentiation between high-context vs. low-context cultures in order to point out and to discuss the significant differences between the two Irish cultures, which are geographically close together but politically and economically far apart. On the basis of their analysis, the authors present the economic situation in both parts of the island and make predictions as to Ireland's economic future.

IV. Linguistic perspectives

Whereas the previous parts highlight the *business* aspect of business communication, the fourth part combines the business aspect with the *communication* aspect. Thus, in all three contributions, researchers use linguistic tools for the analysis of business texts. The concept of *text* is used in a very general sense here, because the first paper in this section (Grundy) analyzes written texts, namely business letters, and the other two papers (Li & Koole, Pörings) deal with simulated business negotiations, i.e. oral (transcribed) texts. They all look at the construction of meaning by linguistic and extra-linguistic factors and the context-dependence — and with that the culture-dependence — of these texts and suggest various ways of analysis.

Peter Grundy (University of Durham, UK) discusses parallel texts in diverging cultures, i.e. cross-linguistically variable data occurring in an identical social situation. He argues that any text, even bilingual texts that purport to be parallel in every respect to each other, invariably invoke the cultural contexts in which they are read, and that texts that fail to provide their readers with expected cultural presuppositions will not reach their readers in an adequate way.

The data used consist of a small representative sample of parallel Cantonese/English texts originating in Hong Kong, written for a Hong Kong readership. The parallel texts are intended to convey the same information to both Cantonese and English speaking residents of Hong Kong. However, the analysis highlights the fact that "parallel texts" may not exist at all.

The author shows that the texts differ in locational context, in linguistic context, and also in the use of structural and stylistic devices. Furthermore, the texts' metalinguistic and face-address features tend to reveal differing styles of audience address. The author tries to link these results to the cultural contexts in which the texts were produced and which are linguistically invoked.

Xiangling Li (University of Eindhoven, Netherlands) and Tom Koole (University of Utrecht, Netherlands) analyze business interactions between Chinese and Dutch negotiators. These cultures being very distant from each other, negotiations between them can present serious difficulties and negotiators can easily run into misunderstandings. The authors therefore discuss the relevance of understanding some of the most important keywords, i.e. words specific to cultural conventions and regularly brought up by negotiators in the negotiation process, of both cultures in question. For this purpose, they are using four simulated Chinese-Dutch and Chinese-Chinese business negotiations. The Chinese keywords that came up in their analysis were what can be called typically high-context-oriented values such as *support, understanding, friendship*, and *trust*, whereas the Dutch keywords crystallized into typically low-context-oriented terms such as *risk, fairness, long-term relationship,* and *rule*.

The authors suggest that the use of these keywords is not haphazard and that they are connected to deep-rooted cultural values, expectations, and conventions. Using these keywords during a negotiation, negotiators aim at certain argumentative or affective effects. Furthermore, general principles regarding business and business relationships seem to be coded by these keywords. However, negotiators are often not aware of the complex meaning load of these keywords, and a lack of understanding and appreciation may result in frustration, despair, or even hostility among the negotiators, causing the business negotiation to come to an abrupt end.

The contribution by Ralf Pörings (University of Gießen, Germany) contrasts the English and the German cultures. In the line of recent negotiation research, the author conceives of negotiation participants as interdependent partners looking for a mutual gain rather than competitors fighting for their positions. Thus, what negotiators should aim at is a harmoniously smooth way of interaction, i.e. a negotiation without conflict on the interpersonal level despite the conflicting interests on the topical level of the interaction. However, it is absolutely unclear what a *harmonious* relationship might entail, and the issue becomes even more problematic in an intercultural setting.

The author argues that harmony is an important concept not only in collectivist high-context cultures but also in individualist low-context ones, such as the English or the German culture, but is of course subject to cultural variability. The paper analyzes a simulated business negotiation in order to find out the differences in the English and German concepts of *harmony* as, for example, reflected in the use of turn-taking strategies, mitigators, and conflict styles. These linguistic findings are interpreted with regard to three underlying dimensions of the concept of harmony, namely the social distance between interactants, orientation toward self or others, and directness. The outcomes of this interpretation are stated in terms of Wierzbicka's NSM (natural semantic metalanguage) approach, which means a universal set of concepts which are culture-free and allow formulating culturally-specific concepts in a non-culturally-specific way.

V. *Training*

The final part raises the very important question of what to do with the results of analyses as those presented in the foregoing sections. Is it possible to teach business communication skills? Is it possible to train intercultural or even "global" managers or negotiators? Although these aims seem a bit far-fetched, it is certainly not too ambitious to integrate elements from business communication research into training courses for future business negotiators.

Business communication trainees have to be made aware of potentially problematic issues and they have to develop their own strategies of how to deal with them. There are no step-by-step guidelines or programs because every negotiation starts from slightly different preconditions, depending on aspects such as the national cultures, the corporate cultures, prior experience with the negotiation partner, the importance of the business deal, the political situation involved, and many more. Therefore, what can be taught are, for example, strategies of flexibility, of adaptability, of respect for the other's culture, but the central, overall issue is still a question of awareness-raising. Furthermore, the very important notion of awareness-raising is one of the central issues in today's language teaching. Thus, also negotiators have to become aware of the overriding role that intercultural differences can play in business negotiations.

Lut Baten and Mia Ingels (University of Leuven, Belgium) report on a newly developed learner-centered course for Business English for commercial engineers that has been organized at their university as part of a three-year curriculum for the foreign languages program offered by the faculty of economics. This course was intended to provide for general negotiating skills as well as for the relevant skills in the English language. In Belgium, it is quite common for managers to negotiate in English, and job applicants are expected to speak at least two foreign languages.

The authors' teaching method does not make use of the more traditional functional approach, but the teaching materials developed focus on advanced interaction patterns used in negotiations, which the students often did not even know in their mothertongue. The students were quite inexperienced regarding real business negotiations, but given their general communication skills and their motivation, they needed more than a functional approach. The overall framework had to be an autonomous learning environment so that students could work in a self-controlled and confidence-building way.

The authors discuss the development of their ESP (English for Special Purposes) teaching materials and their teaching methodology, especially focussing on discourse analysis of unprepared spoken conversations by the students in the course, modeling of decision making, and metalanguage. Furthermore, the students have to understand the generic features of meetings and of effective conversations, and the role of cultural influences. The authors' aim is to supply their students with a pragmatic and custom-tailored input and thus to guide them towards a stepwise attainment of perfection,

which should enable them to function autonomously in actual business situations.
The fifth part — and the volume — closes with a contribution by J. Piet Verckens (Handelshogeschool Antwerp, Belgium), Kenneth Davis (Indiana University and Purdue University at Indianapolis, USA), and Teun de Rycker (Handelshogeschool Antwerp, Belgium). They report on a course in international business writing for advanced students of economics and business which they developed in collaboration with U. Connor and M. Phillips. This course was based on three pillars: first, a theoretical study of a textbook on cross-cultural communication; second, a practical field-research during which the students interviewed managers; and third, an experiential interactive business game with American, Belgian, and Finnish participants. The main objective of the course is to give students the opportunity of getting acquainted with "sameness in differences", i.e. they should experience what it means to communicate and do business with different people who obviously are alike in several basic ways.

The course was designed with different aims in mind: the first two pillars of this course, i.e. the theoretical part and the practical part, were aiming at influencing and shaping the way in which participants actually communicate with each other. The third pillar, i.e. the experiential part, offered the students the possibility of participating in actual written communication with people from different cultures, of competing in a cross-cultural environment and thereby experiencing real anxiety and uncertainty, and of exercising a foreign language in a natural-functional context. In this integrated course, students are comprehensively prepared for their future professional lives.

In the name of all the editors of this volume, I would like to thank the organizing staff of the symposium, in particular Jörg Behrndt, who also assisted me to prepare this book for publication, the anonymous reviewers, as well as all the participants of this symposium who helped making it a success.

Susanne Niemeier
Bremen, April 1998

I. Theoretical Issues