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CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION

Beverly Rising
Universidad Pontificia Comillas de Madrid
Madrid, Spain
brising@chs.upco.es

Amparo García-Carbonell
Universidad Politécnica de Valencia
Valencia, Spain
agarcia@upvnet.upv.es
<http://www.upv.es/diaal>

Introduction

Culture and communication have been defined and re-defined repeatedly, as they are concepts that are intimately linked with what is intrinsically human. Indeed, from an anthropological point of view, culture became consolidated with all of its variables when man first appeared and established interpersonal relationships with the different individuals forming separate communities, thus allowing for intercultural communication.

Language has always been considered, from the time of the Tower of Babel, as one of the obstacles to intercultural communication, but in our world of globalization and telecommunications, this idea may be challenged by the spread of “supra-English”. Recently¹ representatives of the European Union admitted that 70% of the original texts used in the European Union are in English and that with the additions of Eastern European countries leading to 20 working languages in the European Union, English was going to become a pivot language for interpretation, used as a relay between other languages and the main language in most committee meetings. The first conclusion seems to be that everyone – or most people – speaking the same language, in this case

¹ II International Congress of the Iberian Association of Studies on Translating and Interpreting held in Madrid, Spain. February 9-11, 2005.

English, will help communication. But is this true? Is there not more to communication than just surface language? In any case, as Baumgratz-Gangl (1998) states, the teaching and learning of foreign languages should take into consideration the specifics of organizational and subject cultures.

Linguists have studied what is called “deep” meaning and other aspects of pragmatics to understand what is really needed for people to communicate. Even European diplomats have realized the problems, as evidenced in an informal guide, mentioned in an article in *The Economist* (September 4th, 2004) designed to help the Dutch understand what the English really mean when they say things like “with the greatest respect” (an icy put-down) or “I’ll bear it in mind” (meaning I plan to do nothing about it). As Cerroni-Long (1998) is convinced, two decades of research in the United States shows that multicultural education gets crucially shaped by culture-specific factors, catalyzed by the historical circumstances defining citizenship and diversity in each national context.

All these underlying meanings referred to above are definitely understood through what we call *culture*. As the world becomes more integrated, bridging the gap in cultural conflicts through real communication is increasingly important to people in all realms of society. Culture, however, is not easy to understand. It has been noted that it is more often a source of conflict than of synergy and, as Hofstede (2005;1) comments, cultural differences are a nuisance at best and often a disaster. For all these reasons, Baumgratz (1998) remarks that what is needed is a mapping out of *relevant* cultural dimensions of a *social communication situation* involving individuals or groups of different national and/or cultural origin and different forms of socialization who meet at a certain point in their lives in order to realize or contribute towards the achievement of certain general social, institutional, organizational, group and personal aims.

Some kind of training must be made available for these social communication situations to be productive. Simulation and gaming is the strategy proposed for any learning process or understanding of reality which requires knowing more about other cultures and improving communication.

Classifications of culture

Kroeber and Kluckholm (1952) in their *Culture: a critical review of concepts and definitions* listed 154 different definitions, most, if not all, of which could be considered

valid, depending on the field of science where it was being used. For our purposes in the study of multilingual communication, we will start with the definition given more recently (2000) by Spencer-Oatey:

Culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural conventions and basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member's behaviour and each member's interpretations of the "meaning" of other people's behaviour. (p. 4)

Spencer-Oatey (2000) represents the different layers of depth, ranging from inner core assumptions and values, through outer core attitudes, beliefs and social conventions, to surface-level behavioural manifestations, in the following graph:

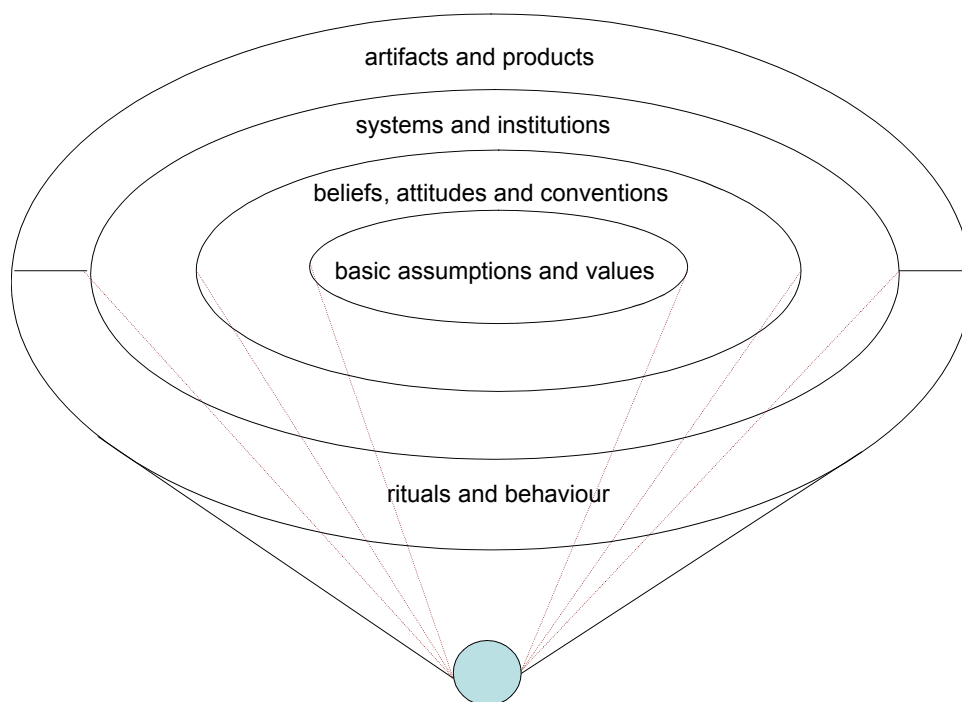


Figure 1. *Manifestations of culture at differing layers of depth. Adapted from Spencer-Oatey (2000:5) based on Hofstede (1991) and Trompenaars and Hampton-Turner (1997).*

The question at this point is how this awareness of what culture entails can improve communication between different groups. As Bond et al. (2000) explain:

Conceptualizing our physical and social environment in terms of categories... is useful, because it enables us to make more informed plans about future behaviour [communication] (p. 61).

Negative overgeneralizations and value judgements which lead to stereotypes and prejudices, unopen to change and modification are not what we are talking about. We are talking about assumptions concerning what to expect in cross-cultural

communication which can help to create a more receptive atmosphere for understanding. As Gudykunst states:

Understanding communication in any culture . . . requires culture-general information (i.e. where the culture falls on the various dimensions of cultural variability) and culture-specific information (i.e. the specific cultural constructs associated with the dimension of cultural variability). (pp. 285-6)

Consequently, we will now look at the way different authors have tried to classify cultures.

The two authors most-cited in this field are Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1980). Hall 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. We need only think of the Belgians, China, many African countries or even Germany to see this.

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.

In the Hofstede Project in 1980, a stratified sample was used of 100,000 IBM employees in 40 (later expanded to include 70) nations on a questionnaire with 32 items concerning personal goals. Hofstede, a Dutch sociologist, then found a "culture score" on each item with an average of each "nation" and through factor analysis found four major dimensions. These dimensions were:

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.

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. This individualist-collectivist dichotomy, however, can be

manifested in many ways (the African community spirit, the Latin American family group, the Japanese desire for “harmony”) and is mediated by individual constraints as illustrated by Gudykunst (2000:297) in the following flow chart:

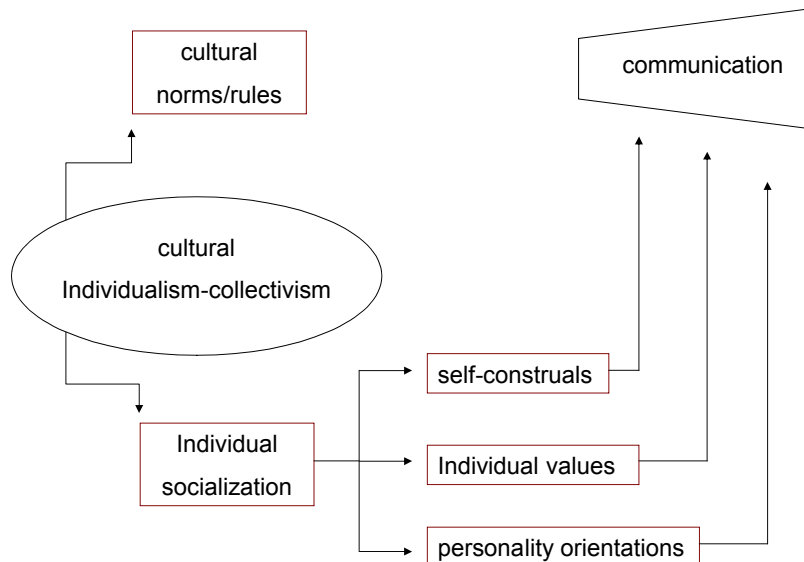


Figure 2. *Cultural and individual level influences of individualism/collectivism on communication.*
Adapted from Gudykunst (1998).

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.

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 added a fifth dimension after conducting additional international studies. This dimension was called Confucian Dynamism referring to Long-Term Orientation and studies the degree to which the society accepts long-term traditional values. A high

Long-Term Orientation ranking indicates the country values long-term commitments and respect for tradition. This is thought to support a strong work ethic. In a culture with a low Long-Term Orientation ranking, change can occur more rapidly.

Another dimension (Hall, 1983) whose understanding may help cross-cultural communication is time. Monochronic cultures with a preference for one thing at a time value punctuality highly. They adhere religiously to plans, meet deadlines, show respect for private property and are concerned about not disturbing others. Polychronic cultures do many things at once, are highly distractible, accept interruptions, are more committed to human relationships, change plans often, and accept the idea of community property. They value patience above promptness. So, if your business associate arrives twenty minutes late, it is not necessarily inconsideration on his/her part, but perhaps a matter of coming from a polychronic culture.

There are many other classifications or dimensions/dichotomies of culture, two important ones being Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's (1997) and Schwartz's (1992, 1994), and each of these classifications adds a further nuance, another focus, to intercultural studies of values or behaviour. Most of them, however, can actually be incorporated for the sake of simplicity into the dimensions explained above. As we mentioned in the section on Masculinity, the competitive/cooperative axis could be placed there. Future vs. past-oriented is similar to Hofstede's Long Term Orientation and Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's communitarianism vs. individualism sounds very similar to Individualism/Collectivism. Neutral vs. emotional as a behavioural expression might also be categorized here. Schwartz's hierarchy vs. egalitarianism as a value fits to some degree in Hofstede's Power Distance. The division mentioned by Vaknin (2005) of neurotic vs. normal cultures carries a value judgment which does not really aid communication. One possible division he describes, however, that of exogenic (cultures which find meaning in frameworks outside themselves, e.g. God, the Nation, an Enemy) vs. endogenic (cultures which center on themselves when searching for meaning), may be useful in some cases.

All in all, this brief review of some of the different classifications of culture can help us see the problems foreseeable in interpersonal communication across cultures. As we have seen in Spencer-Oatey's flow chart, other individual factors intervene in any communication, but having an idea of the possible cultural explanations for communication breakdowns can help to overcome them. These theories have been applied to a variety of different communication theories and settings; especially

interesting to us are linguistics and rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2000), marketing (Dahl, 2005) and general business (Hofstede, 1980; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997).

We will now move on to communication across cultures and how simulation and gaming can create either the “cultural awareness” or the “communicative scenario” needed in intercultural communication.

Intercultural communication

Cross-cultural communication looks at how people, from differing cultural backgrounds, strive to communicate, although it is more frequently referred to as intercultural communication². The main theories for intercultural communication are based on the observations of value differences or dissimilar dimensions among cultures, which have been reviewed above.

Intercultural communication is directly related to socio-cultural anthropology, the holistic study of humanity. Anthropologists argue that culture and established areas of communication refer to the process of exchanging information, usually via a common system of symbols. Human beings have evolved a universal capacity to conceive of the world symbolically, to teach and learn such symbols socially, and to transform the world (and ourselves) based on such symbols³. The activity of understanding and adapting symbols can be defined as “intercultural practice,” since cultural practices comprise the way people do different things in a given culture. This “cultural practice” is directly linked with knowledge and “knowledge of the world,” and from this tandem an unending list of variables and contexts intervene and determine the level of understanding and, consequently, the communication between cultures.

The level of knowledge involved permits a greater or lesser degree of interaction and, as a consequence, communication between people who make up the different cultures. Knowledge and communication are two parameters which are intrinsically linked; the higher the level of knowledge, the greater the level of communication, but, at the same time, from a different angle, the greater the communication, the more

² http://encyclopedia.laborlawtalk.com/Cross-cultural_communication

³ <http://encyclopedia.learnthisthis.info/a/an/anthropology.html>

knowledge increases. In other words, communication allows us to decode many of the aspects that intervene in different civilizations.

Cultural impact and, therefore, intercultural communication have been of interest in academic, political, institutional and professional areas. For example, cultural assumptions are of great impact to commercial firms or organizations and corporate/work culture has been increasingly made the focus of research over the last two decades. Initially the term was used to describe leadership practices and later in the 80's management gurus defined culture in terms of symbols, slogans, heroes, rites, and rituals (Trompenaars 1998). Strategic development, productivity, and multiple skills and abilities at all levels depend not only on interpreting and understanding but also on “practicing” organizational culture. Nevertheless, although it has progressively become a common disciplinary framework, organizational culture is one of the numerous areas of knowledge which approaches aspects that intervene in culture, but is not itself the essence of culture.

The focus on culture, whatever the discipline being studied, must be carried out according to the patterns described by Trompenaars (1998).

Its [sic] better to regard culture as referring to the shared assumptions, beliefs, values and norms, actions as well as artifacts and language patterns. It is an acquired body of knowledge about how to behave and shared meanings and symbols which facilitate everyone's interpretation and understanding of how to act within an organization. Culture is the unique whole, the heart and soul, that determines how a group of people will behave⁴.

As numerous variables, almost a philosophy, intervene in culture, languages have no monopoly on communication. Intercultural communication also depends on multiple variables. Parameters such as cognitive and external frameworks, shared meaning and perceptions, values or behavioral codes of individuals are not only essential to culture but to communication. According to Gudykunst et al. (1995), communicating with others implies a certain level of prediction and anticipation of their responses. These levels vary with the level of knowledge of the interlocutor. Nevertheless, prediction is based on information coming from different sources. In the first place, it comes from cultural knowledge which may be the only information available when establishing communication with a new individual or group. Secondly, it comes from socio-cultural

⁴ 2005. <http://www.onepine.info/mcult.htm>

information or information regarding the group or profession to which the interlocutor belongs. This type of information is the predominant data used in intercultural communication. Thirdly, we must consider psycho-cultural information related to the individual characteristics of each subject. As we have seen, in the process of establishing or improving communication, cultural, social and individual variables intervene. As Gudykunst, et al. (1995) explain, knowledge of the unique and individual characteristics of the subjects is essential to better communication as well as socio-cultural information.

But, how is this cultural and communication connection made between individuals? Numerous publications support the belief that simulation and gaming offers us the possibility of mixing different cultures and generating communication. Crookall and Saunders (1989) in their introductory chapter to *Communication and Simulation* entitled “Towards an integration of communication and simulation” analyze various aspects of the relationship between simulation and communication on a number of levels and from a variety of perspectives. In the area of communication they emphasize the aspects of negotiation and interpretation between parties who may construct a variety of meanings that are rooted in culture, media and society. Within the equally interdisciplinary field of simulation, they draw attention to the usefulness of simulation in exploring communicational processes, where simulation is uniquely suited as a tool in studying fields such as conflict, decision-making, language behaviour, intergroup relations and cultural values. The link of the two disciplines, as both depend on rules, symbols and codes involving models, representation, realities and negotiated meanings is underlined and the synergy created through their union is highlighted. Their comment that “the need to understand and to accept other cultures is more urgent than at any time in the history of humankind” (p. 27) was true when the article was written and is as true now.

Ting-Toomey (1989) in her paper *Intergroup communication and simulation in low and high-context cultures* discusses the cultural aspects to be kept in mind by facilitators when working with participants from distinct cultures in a simulation setting. In this article, after discussing Hall’s classification of high- and low-context cultures, especially with regard to individualism-collectivism, direct-indirect verbal negotiation style, and monochronic-polychronic time scheduling, she discusses the potential problems and misunderstandings in intergroup simulation games. She stresses that

... by understanding the fundamental value differences between members of all cultures, the learning styles of students from all societies, and the negotiation styles of participants in different speech communities, [that] we can better understand how members from different cultures synchronize their worldviews and modify their communication patterns to adapt and adjust to one another on both the interpersonal level and the intergroup-intercultural communication level.” (pp 175-176)

A number of concrete examples of simulation games used in intergroup or intercultural communication, explaining how participants have the opportunity to develop insights which can help facilitate communication processes in similar situations in real life are given by Noesjiran and Bruin (1989) in *Culture, prejudice and simulation/gaming in theory and practice*. They warn of the effect that pre-conceived prejudices may have on distorting reality and therefore, distorting communication. Through contact during a simulation or through a reversal of roles in a simulation, the authors affirm that it is possible under certain circumstances for simulation participants to reduce their stereotyped views.

The research mentioned above focuses on cultural diversity as an asset to be fostered and pampered. Nevertheless, it has been made clear that if this cultural diversity is not accompanied by cultural awareness and understanding, it can lead to “culture shock” and misunderstanding. Training through different methodologies, especially simulation because of its gestalt view and inherent interaction, is paramount for real communication in our global society.

Conclusions

Different cultures and their variables, diversity in communities and populations, specific aspects of each individual integrating different cultures and varied interlingua settings continue to be unknown scenarios. Although quite a few significant studies and research⁵ have been carried out, culture in its different representations is unique to each moment, situation, group and individual. In this sense, communication is also unique to each situation; neither culture nor communication are unchanging concrete realities.

⁵ Dahl, S. (2004). “Intercultural Research: The Current State of Knowledge”. Middlesex University Business School Discussion Paper. http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=658202

To work with different cultures, it is essential to realize that while intercommunication and mobility in the world are more common than ever, we agree with Cerroni-Long (1998:34) when he sees most of the societies that currently present themselves as pluricultural as being pluriethnic and problematically and conflictually monocultural instead.

Human beings, however, have no opportunity to experience all possible realities and the associated communicative patterns, but through simulation and gaming they do have the possibility of practicing on models of those realities and modelling their communication patterns, broadening the participants' awareness of other possible scenarios and the strategies required to manage them communicatively.

Thus, we have seen that the classification of cultures serves to help make them more understandable; we have outlined the dynamics, problems and principles of intercultural communication and have put forth the methodology of simulation and gaming as a way to train members of many different learning and professional communities. More studies are obviously needed to maintain this changing field in focus, but more than this, what is really needed is the political will and socio-cultural willingness to implement what is already known if its full potential is to be exploited. If members of different "cultures" truly want to understand and communicate with one another, they can.

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