

## **THE MOST COMMON BARRIERS OF SUCCESSFUL INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

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### INTRODUCTION

Globalization, advances in communication technology, educational and labour mobility, the internationalization of higher education require people to understand cultural differences and communicate across cultural borders. Intercultural communication occurs when “(...) a message produced in one culture must be processed in another culture” [1]. This circumstance is quite problematic because, “(...) culture forges and shapes the individual communicator” [2]. Due to the differences that interlocutors have to face in intercultural communication misunderstandings, problems or even conflicts can arise. If someone cannot function well in another culture, it can be a physically and mentally stressful, and disappointing experience. Therefore the aim of this paper is to describe the most common barriers of successful intercultural interactions and support the points with examples. The first part presents the problems that can occur during verbal and nonverbal communication. Then the second part shows how the lack of attention, interests or distractions can lead to miscommunication. After that, the third part discusses the differences in perception. Finally, the fourth part deals with the issues of prejudices and stereotypes.

### THE STUMBLING BLOCKS OF VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

#### *Differences and problems of verbal communication*

“Language is the primary vehicle by which a culture transmits its beliefs, values, norms, and world view. Language gives people a means of connecting and interacting with other members of their culture and a means of thinking. Language thus serves as a mechanism for communication and as a guide to social reality. Language influences perceptions, transmits meaning, and helps mould patterns of thought” [3].

Intercultural communication involves speakers of different cultural backgrounds with different mother tongues, therefore they can communicate by using the mother tongue of speaker A, or the mother tongue of speaker B, or they can choose a third language. In the first case, speaker A is at an advantage over speaker B both at linguistic and cultural levels; and speaker B is at a disadvantage. In the second case, speaker B is at an advantage over speaker A. In the third case,

both speakers have to face different linguistic and cultural differences and difficulties, because they "... bring their own sociocultural expectations of language to the encounter. Speakers' expectations shape the interpretation of meaning in a variety of ways" [4]. Due to these differences in language usage, communication may result in misunderstandings or even conflicts.

Vocabulary, syntax, idioms, slang and accents cause difficulties and can create barriers to communication. A worse language problem is when someone clings to just one meaning of a word or phrase in the new language, regardless of the context or connotation [5].

Edward T. Hall differentiates cultures as low-context and high-context cultures. In high-context cultures, many things are left unsaid, because the transmitted message contains only minimal information. In high-context communication, most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, and very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. Most of the information is available in the environment, therefore it is unnecessary to state verbally what is obvious and people are good at reading nonverbal behaviour. This type of communication is economical, fast, efficient and satisfying, but enough time should be devoted to programming. High-context communications unify, they are long-lived and are slow to change. Some examples of high-context cultures are the Middle East, Asia, Africa and South America. On the other hand, in low-context cultures the transmitted message contains most of the information in order to make up for what is missing in the context. People do not learn how to perceive information from the environment, therefore verbal messages are extremely important. In low-context communication, most of the information is vested in the explicit code. Low-context communications do not unify, they can be changed easily and rapidly. A few examples of low-context cultures are North America, Germany and the Scandinavian countries [6].

People from a high-context culture can be creative within their own system, but when they are dealing with anything new, they have to move to the bottom of the context scale. Whereas people from a low-context culture can be creative and innovative when they are dealing with something new, they have trouble when they have to work within the bounds of an old system. Therefore in intercultural communication people from a low-context culture have to go into much more detail than they are used to when they are dealing with people from a high-context culture. In low-context cultures, it is easier to foresee problems or confrontations than in high-context cultures, because in low-context cultures the bonds that tie people together are fragile, so people move away or withdraw if things are not going well. However, in high-context cultures the bonds between people are strong and there is a tendency to allow for considerable bending of the system, things go wrong without warning and the boundaries must be overstepped so far that there is no turning back [7].

## *Non-verbal communication and its misinterpretations*

Non-verbal communication is closely related to verbal communication, but can often overshadow it. Both verbal and non-verbal communication are coding systems that people learn and pass on as part of the cultural experience [8]. Non-verbal communication comprises the following topics: physical appearance (attire), proxemics (space and distance), chronemics (time), kinesics (facial expressions, movement and gestures), haptics (touch), oculosics (eye contact and gaze) and vocalics (paralanguage) [9].

Physical appearance is the most obvious nonverbal code and covers the stable physical features of human beings and the strategic use of artefacts associated with appearance. During initial encounters, these elements play a crucial role. Blue jeans and business suits have become accepted attire worldwide, but clothing may signal one's culture, religion or an occupation [10].

Edward T. Hall developed the concept of proxemics, which describes how close one person gets to another person when talking to them. Hall differentiated four distance zones, such as intimate, personal, social and public distance. Intimate distance (0-50 cm) is for wrestling, comforting, embracing, protecting, touching or whispering. Personal distance (50-100 cm) is for interactions among family members or good friends. Social distance (1-4 m) is for communication of acquaintances, impersonal business and social discourse are conducted at this distance. Public distance (4 m or more) is used for public speaking, but it is not restricted to public figures, it can be used by anyone on public occasions [11]. People in different cultures have different proxemic patterns, for example, Arab males sit closer to each other than American males, and with more direct, confrontational types of body orientations. Latin Americans interact more closely than Europeans, and Indonesians sit closer than Australians [12].

Chronemics is the study of meanings, usage and communication of time. Edward T. Hall differentiated cultures as monochronic and polychronic. Monochronism means doing one thing at a time, people compartmentalize time, they schedule one thing at a time and become disoriented if they have to deal with too many things at once. Time is viewed as a commodity that can be spent, saved, used wisely or wasted. On the other hand, people in polychronic cultures do several things simultaneously. In intercultural communication, for example, monochronic northern Europeans find the constant interruptions of polychronic southern Europeans unbearable, since nothing seems to ever get done [13].

Kinesics include facial expressions, body movements and gestures. Facial expressions of emotion across cultures show that these expressions contain such nonverbal signs that identify the expresser's culture [14]. For example, for Japanese people facial expressions reflect social balance, they do not show any significant emotion through public facial displays. A smile is part of the social etiquette, aimed at sustaining harmony, and it can indicate happiness, a friendly acknowledgment, mask negative emotions or is used to avoid conflict [15]. Gestures differ in

meaning, extensiveness and intensity. Gestures can signal endearment or warmth in one culture, but may be an obscene or insulting sign in another culture [16].

Haptics also shows considerable intercultural variation. For example, in Germany both men and women shake hands at every social encounter, but in the USA, women are less likely to shake hands. In Vietnam, men do not shake hands with women or the elderly unless the woman or the elderly offers the hand first. In Thailand, people do not touch in public, and touching someone on the head is considered to be a major social violation [17].

Oculistics is the study of the messages sent by the eyes. In the USA, people maintain a good eye contact while communicating with someone, but in Asian countries, eye contact is a sign of disrespect. Eyes can express feelings as well, the meaning of eye widening is culturally diverse, for example, it indicates anger in China, a request for help or assistance in Latin America, and a persuasive effect for African Americans [18]. The Arabs gaze much longer and more directly at their partners than do Americans [19].

Vocalics or paralanguage includes all the nonverbal elements of voice. Cultures with strong oral traditions speak with more passion, for example, African Americans and Jews; Italians and Greeks talk more and talk louder than Asians do [20]. Japanese people use silence to express hierarchy, social balance and empathy. Silence is considered to be a virtue and it is also a sign of respectability and trustworthiness [21].

In intercultural communication, it is important to be aware that what may be a polite or friendly gesture in one culture may be an impolite and obscene gesture in another culture. Culture influences and directs our experiences, therefore it is a major contributor to how we send, receive and respond to nonverbal symbols [22].

## LACK OF ATTENTION OR INTEREST AND DISTRACTIONS

Not paying full attention to what the other person is saying can be a barrier in communication. For example, if a speaker is formulating a reply while the other person is still talking and when he is supposed to be still listening can lead to miscommunication. If the listeners find the communicator attractive or unattractive and pay more attention to how they feel about the communicator and their physical appearance than to what they are saying can be another stumbling block of successful communication.

A lack of interest in the topic or issue that is being discussed can stop the flow of communication and the listeners can become bored and stop paying attention to what is being said.

The receiver of the message might be distracted by something in his environment, such as an uncomfortable chair or poor lighting, therefore he cannot listen carefully [23]. Mechanical barriers can also cause the failure of intercultural communication, there can be some noise in the immediate environment and the interlocutors cannot hear each other well, or they cannot see each other because they are having a telephone conversation [24]. The listeners can be distracted and not

paying full attention to what is being said if they are thinking of other things, for example, if their minds are busy with the thoughts of what they are going to have for dinner that evening. If the audience feels unwell, tired, hungry, or thirsty or need to use the toilet, these factors can distract the communication process.

## DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTION

Perception is an important mental process, in which people classify and categorise the input from an object, person or event according to the patterns and categories that are stored in their memory, therefore we may see things that do not exist in reality [25]. "People behave as they do because of the ways in which they perceive the world and that these behaviours are learnt as part of their cultural experience" [26]. When people judge beauty or describe snow, they respond to stimuli because their own cultures have taught them to do so. People notice, reflect on and respond to those elements that are important to them, for example, in the USA people principally respond to the size and cost of a thing, whereas in Japan, colour is an important criterion [27].

Another example of differences in perception is the concept of snow, which in the Sami languages of Norway, Sweden and Finland have 180 snow- and ice-related words and 300 different words for types of snow [28].

In intercultural communication it can cause problems because people make assumptions very easily and categorise people according to unreliable attributes, which may lead to stereotyping and prejudice [29].

## PREJUDICES AND STEREOTYPES

Prejudice is a preconceived judgement or opinion of people belonging to a certain group, and it is not based on actual experience. Prejudice can be positive or negative depending on whether a feeling is favourable or unfavourable toward a person [30]. People can be prejudiced by race, gender, age, religion, accent or past experiences. Examples of prejudice from the past include that until the early years of the twentieth century, women were not allowed to vote; or in the United States, black people could not sit in the front of buses or use the same water fountains as white people until the 1950s and 1960s; or some companies used to hire only females to be secretaries. There are several examples from the present, such as that all tall people or all Blacks are assumed to be good at basketball; or if someone who is physically disabled is thought to be mentally disabled, too [31].

Stereotypes are standardised ideas about groups of people that all have the same quality. In the cultural framework it means that a specific product, ritual or value of a person in a group is thought to be characteristic of all the members of the group [32].

Stereotypes can be negative or positive. A negative stereotype is a stereotype about an individual or group which displays them in a poor light and it is usually entirely unrepresentative of the actual situation, for example stating that the Irish are

alcoholics or the Russians are violent [33]. On the contrary, positive stereotypes are good qualities, they depict the admirable, favourable or advantageous factors of the members of a specific group. However, even though they are positive, they are still false or incorrect perceptions as they are normally based on minimal evidence. Positive stereotypes are those that bring out people in good light, for example, the Italians are good cooks and the Asians are good at math [34].

Stereotypes help “(...) reduce the threat of the unknown by making the world predictable” [35]. However, stereotypes are barriers of intercultural communication, because they hinder the objective viewing of the stimuli and people perceive only those pieces of information that correspond to the image held. For example, an Asian person who is accustomed to privation and the values of self-denial and self-help will experience American culture as materialistic and wasteful, and this stereotype will become a reality for the Asian person [36].

## CONCLUSION

This paper first presented the problems that can occur during verbal and non-verbal communication, and then discussed how the lack of attention, interests or distractions can lead to miscommunication. The third part described the differences in perception. The last part discussed the issues of prejudices and stereotypes. The study proved the importance of learning about the most common barriers of successful intercultural communication, because “A knowledge of intercultural communication, and the ability to use it effectively, can help bridge cultural differences, mitigate problems, and assist in achieving more harmonious, productive relations” [37].

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