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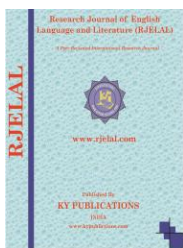
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UNDERSTANDING CROSS- CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Dr. SMITA SAHU

Visiting Faculty, National P. G College, Lucknow

E-Mail: smitasahu79@yahoo.com



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Abstract

It is an accomplished fact that today's workplace is increasingly becoming more and more global. Business environments are expanding to new geographic locations, spanning numerous cultures. In such a globalized business atmosphere, understanding how to communicate effectively with individuals, who speak different languages and come from different cultural, regional and national backgrounds, becomes imperative. It is important for people to realize that a basic understanding of cultural diversity is the key to effective cross-cultural communication. In fact it would be safe to say that culture and communication are inextricably linked to each other, as it is almost impossible to say or communicate anything that does not have an underlying cultural context.

In the present paper I wish to discuss the multifarious cultural variables and their impact on communication. I would also like to deliberate on the various cross-cultural communication strategies that may help overcome potential problems and misunderstandings thus rendering communication effective.

Keywords: Culture, Communication

It is an established fact that culture and communication are inextricably linked. It is our culture that more often than not, influences the way we interact with others, approach problems and conduct our day- to- day business. With increasing technological innovations and expanding geographical boundaries, our work place today has become highly globalized. Business environments are expanding to new geographic locations, spanning numerous cultures. In such a cosmopolitan business atmosphere, understanding how to communicate effectively with individuals, who speak different languages and come from different cultural, regional and national backgrounds, becomes imperative. It is important for people to realize that a basic understanding of cultural diversity is the key to effective cross- cultural communication as it is almost impossible to say or

communicate anything that does not have an underlying cultural context. As Edward T. Hall rightly said, "Culture is Communication and communication is culture" (Raman 87).

Culture has often been defined as a set of beliefs, values and patterns of behavior common to a group of people. It is believed that it also refers to nationality, ethnicity, race, age and gender, as these are the first to be noticed when we interact with other people for the first time. However, the term culture cannot just be restricted to the above categories. Cultural groups also include groups that people are born into as well as groups that one becomes a part of during the course of his/ her life. These groups could be formed based on religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic class and so on.

Thus, more often than not, people are a part of diverse or multicultural groups.

As mentioned earlier, organizations and businesses today are becoming increasingly globalized. People are no longer geographically confined to their own nations; they are becoming part of an international network. Every country and the regions within it have their own culture and therefore cultural differences at the work place are inevitable. In such a multicultural and diverse atmosphere, it is communication that plays a significant role in bringing the organization together because culture is created, shaped, transmitted and learnt through communication. In fact it would be safe to say that communication acts as the backbone of any business. Thus understanding the cultural similarities and differences can go a long way in ensuring effective communication at the work place.

It has been found that success in conducting business across cultural boundaries depends, to a large extent, upon one's ability to discern and deal with cultural differences. It is our cultural understanding of the world around us that influences the way we approach problems and interact with others (Anastacia 5). Much of the miscommunication occurs primarily due to people's inability to understand cultural differences. It is this inability to acknowledge intercultural affinities and disparities that often lead to stereotyping people from different backgrounds, ridiculing their cultures, and judging their specific ways of communication as fundamentally different and implicitly wrong (Raman 87).

Each culture exhibits certain verbal and non-verbal signals such as food, space, time, dress, etiquettes, decision-making patterns and other variables that affect cross-cultural communication. A brief discussion of a few such variables would enable us to understand the nuances of cross-cultural communication.

Food

Food can be seen as a form of communication. It is an important part of our lives, but not just as a means of survival, rather it also functions as a non-verbal means of sharing meaning

with others. With the advent of the twentieth century, food achieved a new significance in our lives. There was a surge of interest in the food culture owing to the boom in the advertising industry. This meant attaching a completely new and different meaning to food. Understanding this new meaning of food meant an exploration into different cultures. What we eat, how it is grown, who prepares it, who eats first, how we eat and even what time of the day we eat, all communicate something about our culture (Stajcic 5).

The French literary theorist, critic and semiotician Roland Barthes gave us the theoretical tools to understand and analyze how food is communicated, how it communicates and how we communicate about it. In "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption" Barthes introduced the idea that food is not just meant for eating anymore. He explains how every country has its own type of food and method of preparation, which is a strong reflection of its culture. According to him, food is "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior." Barthes gave the example of bread. While ordinary bread signifies day-to-day life, the French pain de mie signifies a party (Stajcic 7).

Food is an important medium to learn about culture. An apple may have different connotations in different cultures. Yes, it is a fruit across all cultures, but while for the Chinese it stands for a symbol of peace and female beauty, in some cultures like the Celts and Turks, it is thought to have therapeutic properties, as it is believed to cure all diseases. Even according to a popular English proverb, "an apple a day keeps the doctor away." Most Christians, on the other hand, associate apple with the biblical story of the original sin.

Similarly if we talk about the consumption of sugar, in countries like India, it could be a food that signifies class difference. For instance high intake of sugar in the affluent class is normally associated with diseases like diabetes and obesity, while in the poorer sections of the society it is an energy booster as these people are usually involved in labour intensive work.

Roland Barthes said it would be systematic to describe food for, what it signifies rather than what the food itself is. This holds especially true in the world of advertising. For example, coffee no longer implies a caffeine beverage rather through the advertising world it has come to signify a 'break'. Thus we can see that food functions as a communicative tool through which we create and share meanings with others. Understanding these cultural nuances, rituals and traditions about food can go a long way in building effective inter-cultural communication.

Space

The concept of space too varies from culture to culture. Depending on which country or region you belong to, the amount of space or distance acceptable in social situations can vary greatly. All countries and cultures have 'bubbles' or an amount of personal space that they regard as their own. While certain cultures have big bubbles, others have smaller ones. For instance certain European countries like Germany, Scandinavian countries and England have cultural space bubbles that are quite large. People belonging to these countries like to keep a certain physical distance from each other. For instance Germans prefer maintaining an arm's length during their social interactions. Anything closer is considered to be an infringement of their personal space. In other European countries like France, Greece and Spain, social bubbles are comparatively smaller. In North Europe people avoid touching each other while talking. Even brushing of a coat sleeve would elicit an apology. On the other hand, people in Southern European countries may feel upset if a hug was rejected.

In still other countries like Saudi Arabia, people feel comfortable standing closer than an arm's length while conversing. They are comfortable touching and holding hands, although this close interaction holds true only between people of the same gender. Similarly, in many parts of Middle East, Asia and Africa it is common to see men holding hands or with an arm around the other's shoulder, as a sign of friendship and brotherhood. In the US, on the other hand, such physical proximity, between people of the same gender, is likely to be interpreted

as a romantic relationship. Thus we can see how cultural space can be a tricky area. While you want to respect the culture and space of the other, you also do not want to offend someone by keeping too much distance. It is thus advisable to learn about the practices of a culture before interacting so as not to offend the other.

Time

Cultures often differ in terms of how people conceive of and handle time. The concept of punctuality, for instance, varies widely across cultures. The Americans, for example, are known for their punctuality and promptness, whereas people in the Middle East and The Latin Americans are not. In Latin American culture it is normal to wait for long before the host meets the visitor, whereas for Americans time is precious. Germans too are very particular about time. According to the German law, opening and closing hours of shops and other businesses is fixed.

In his book *When Cultures Collide*, the British linguist Richard Lewis, plotted countries in to three categories depending on how they view time. For instance, countries like America, Switzerland, Germany, along with Britain, Netherlands, Austria and Scandinavia, have a linear vision of time and action. By linear vision we mean that people in these countries plan, schedule, organize and do one thing at a time. They are more result oriented and like to stick to their agenda.

Latin Americans and Arabs, on the other hand, are multi-active rather than linear-active, which means that they like to do many things at one time. People living in these countries do not plan their priorities according to a time schedule, rather they plan their actions according to the relative thrill or importance that each appointment brings with it. For them the present reality is far more important than appointments. For instance, an Italian will subject time considerations to human feelings. The business to be conducted and the close relationship with the other person are more important for him than the time taken. A Spaniard is likely to side with an Italian in this respect, whereas a German and Swiss will not.

Lastly Lewis talks about the Reactive Cultures, which prioritize courtesy and respect. People belonging to these cultures listen quietly and calmly to their interlocutors and react carefully to the other side's proposals. The Chinese, Japanese and Finns belong to this group. Thus we can see how the concept of time changes in every country. Having a greater knowledge about these subtle nuances and acknowledging the differences would enable us to forge deeper intercultural bonds while conducting our business.

Inter - cultural or Cross - cultural communication is thus a sensitive and complex area that has become increasingly important for effective work place success. The different cultural contexts bring new communication challenges to the workplace. Understanding these differences and adapting to them can go a long way in enhancing our work relationships and a successful business.

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Author Biography

I've done my Ph.D in the field of Ecocriticism from the University of Lucknow, Lucknow. I'm currently teaching as an Assistant Professor at National P.G. College, Lucknow. I teach Business Communication to the Undergraduate and Post Graduate students of the Banking and Software Department.