Communicating Across Cultures

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A New York businessman, who frequently traveled to Japan on business, often used a translator for his speeches. After one such speech, he learned that the Japanese interpreter's version of his opening remarks went like this:

"American businessman is beginning speech with thing called joke. I am not sure why, but all American businessmen believe it necessary to start speech with joke. (Pause) He is telling joke now but frankly you would not understand joke so I will not translate it. He thinks I am telling you joke now. Polite thing to do when he finishes is to laugh. (Pause) He is getting close. (Pause) Now!"

The audience not only laughed appreciatively but stood and applauded as well. Later he commented to the translator: "I've been giving speeches in this country for several years, and you are the first translator who knows how to tell a good joke" (Axtell, 1990).

Good Communication Is Crucial in International Business

- Reasons for Communication Problems

  – Urgent matters can interfere with communication.

  – Communications can come in many different forms.

  – Communications are affected by cultural background and experiences.

  – Nonverbal communication cues are often overlooked.

  – Communications can rely heavily on actions and cultural context.

Language	Approximate Number of Native Speakers (in millions)	Language	Approximate Number of Native and Secondary Speakers (in millions)
Mandarin Chinese	1,100	Mandarin Chinese	1,120
English	330	English	480
Spanish	300	Spanish	320
Hindi/Urdu	250	Russian	285
Arabic	200	French	265
Bengali	185	Hindi/Urdu	250
Portuguese	160	Arabic	221
Russian	160	Portuguese	188
Japanese	125	Bengali	185
German	100	Japanese	133

Communicating in Foreign Languages: Plenty of Room for Error

- Lack of foreign language skills is a disadvantage in international business.

- Common errors:

  - Assuming that what was intended to be communicated is what was understood

  - Assuming that the ethnicity of expatriate managers equals sensitivity to their individual ethnic cultures

  - Not recognizing differences in cultural interpretations of nuances in formal, informal, and personal communications

Examples of Translation Errors

- Microsoft had shocking errors in the Spanish version of its popular Word™ program. It likened Indians to man-eating savages and provided the Spanish word for "bastard" as a substitute for people of mixed race.

- A foreign airline operating in Brazil advertised plush "rendezvous lounges," which in Portuguese implies a room for making love.

- One German translation of the phrase "Come alive with Pepsi" literally meant "Come alive out of the grave with Pepsi."

- A sign on the elevator in a Romanian hotel read: "The lift is being fixed. For the next two days we regret that you will be unbearable."

- A sign in a Japanese hotel read: "You are invited to take advantage of our chambermaid."

- A Bangkok dry cleaner tagline read: "Drop your trousers here for best results."

Nonverbal Communication

- Nonverbal Communications
  - Often accompany messages by going beyond what is being said in providing interpretive information
- Cultural Variations in Nonverbal Communication
  - Expectations of interpersonal (physical) space
  - Gestures that amplify or substitute for messages
  - Emotions expressed in facial expressions
  - Frequency and styles of personal touching (haptics)
  - Degree of direct or indirect eye contact
  - Vocal qualities (tone, rate, volume) of speech
  - Contextual influence

Culture	Context
Chinese	**HIGH**
Korean	• What is unsaid but understood carries more weight than written and verbal comments.
Japanese	
French	• Relies on trust for agreement.
Arab	• Personal relations add to business.
Greek	
Spanish	
Italian	
English	
U.S.	**LOW**
Scandinavian	• Focus on specifics of what was said or written.
German	• Handshake is insufficient.
Swiss	• Trust secured with legal agreement; personal relations detract from business.

How to Become an Effective Intercultural Communicator

- Assume that people are different, not similar.

- When experiencing a lot of conflict, look for communication problems as the first source of the problem.

- Delay judgment; emphasize the description of events, not evaluation or interpretation.

- Practice putting yourself in other people's shoes when communicating—be patient and understanding.

- Treat your interpretations as temporary and subject to further analysis

Non-verbals

- Chronemics (time)
- Proxemics (space)
- Oculesics (gaze/eye contact)
- Olfactics (smell)
- Haptics (touch)
- Kinesics (body language)
- Chromatics (color)
- Silence

Time (Chronemics)

- Attitudes toward time vary from culture to culture.

- Countries that follow monochronic time perform only one major activity at a time (Most Western/English speaking countries).

- Countries that follow polychronic time work on several activities simultaneously (Latin America, the Mediterranean, the Arabs).

Monochronic/Polychronic Cultures

Monochronic People

- do one thing at a time
- concentrate on the job
- take time commitments seriously
- are committed to the job
- show respect for private property; rarely borrow or lend
- are accustomed to short-term relationships

Polychronic People

- do many things at once
- are highly distractible
- consider time commitments casually
- are committed to people
- borrow and lend things often
- tend to build lifetime relationships

Gaze/Eye Contact (Oculesics)

Although people in the West favor direct eye contact, in other cultures, such as the Japanese, the reverse is true; they direct their gaze below the chin.

In the Middle East, on the other hand, the eye contact is more intense than people in the West are comfortable with.

A prolonged gaze or stare in the West is considered rude. In most cultures, men do not stare at women as this may be interpreted as sexually suggestive.

Touch (Haptics)

- Touch, when used properly, may create feelings of warmth and trust; when used improperly, touch may cause annoyance and betray trust.

- Hierarchy is a consideration when using touch in the West.: people who are older or higher rank may touch those who are younger or of lower rank; equals may touch each other.

Location of the Touch Is Important

- Appropriate touch in the U.S. is limited to shaking hands in business situations - no hugs or expressions of affection.

- In Thailand do not touch the head.

- Avoid touching a person with the left hand in the Middle East.

Body Language (Kinesics)

- Body language includes facial expressions, gestures, and posture and stance.

- To interpret facial expressions correctly, it is important to take the culture and the communication context into account.

- People in some cultures rarely show emotion (China); Asians will smile or laugh softly when they are embarrassed.

Color (Chromatics)

Colors have cultural variations in connotations.

- Black is the color of mourning in the West., but white is worn to funerals by the Japanese.
- In the West white is typically worn by brides, while in India red or yellow is worn.
- Purple is sometimes associated with royalty, but it is the color of death in Mexico and Brazil.
- Red (especially red roses) is associated with romance in some cultures including the West

United Airlines unknowingly got off on the wrong foot during its initial flights from Hong Kong. To commemorate the occasion, they handed out white carnations to the passengers. When they learned that to many Asians white flowers represent bad luck and even death, they changed to red carnations.

Nonverbal Leakage

- Occurs when people are unsuccessful in attempting to control messages sent nonverbally.

- While people are successful in controlling facial expressions, leakage occurs in the arms, hands, feet, and legs; these areas are difficult to control.

- Identified in the Western cultures by physiological changes such as pupil size, as well as licking lips and tapping fingers on a table.

Business & Social Custom

- Greeting and handshaking customs
- Verbal expressions
- Male and female relationships
- Humor in business
- Superstitions and taboos
- Dress and appearance
- Customs associated with holidays and holy days
- Office customs and practices
- Customary demeanor/behavior
- Bribery
- Special foods and consumption taboos

As companies restructure and downsize, competition will become more fierce.

Getting or keeping a job or being promoted will depend not only on how well qualified you are but also on how appropriately you behave and how much you look and act the part for a particular position.

Questions and Comments?

Thank you for your time and attention