

Chapter 3: Cross-cultural Communication

3.1. Communication Process in a Cross-cultural Setting

The house of Music Theatre is full. The old and the young, subcultures' members and elegant business people, dedicated music-lovers and some incidental music fans who got free tickets from their friends. They are all going to sit here together for the next 2 hours in the Theatre's old armchairs. Here onto the stage comes the announcer. After a few words of warm greetings he introduces the Star. The lights go down, the chats stop and you can feel real excitement in the air. A couple of seconds passed, a minute passed and nobody enters the stage. No Star. At first, the talks volume up, then some single claps appear and after a while the whole audience becomes vibrant in common, a huge applause. But the band does not come yet... So, after half a minute some single claps appear again and again, and after a while, the whole audience claps together. This time they catch a spontaneously different rhythm: one-two-three, ... , one-two-three, ... Still no sign of the Star. So, here comes the next wave of an exuberant applause. When it trails off – onto the stage comes Nouvelle Vague band and with its energetic concert finishes the third day of Ladies' Jazz Festival in Gdynia, Poland.

The story above illustrates one of countless situations that we face everyday – communication with other people. Sometimes we communicate with the people we know well, sometimes with the strangers. We are able to communicate even without words, and, what is more interesting, we understand one another and the real communicational context. “We cannot not communicate”¹. As we realize, communication constitutes a whole complex system of behaviour². It is also worth emphasising that “all communication takes place in the matrix of culture, therefore difference in culture is the primary obstacle to intercultural communication”³.

Communication can be understood as “the process of transmitting information from one person to another”⁴, from the sender to the receiver. Cross-cultural communication occurs

¹ T. Novinger, *Intercultural Communication. A Practical Guide*, University of Texas Press, Austin 2001, p. 4

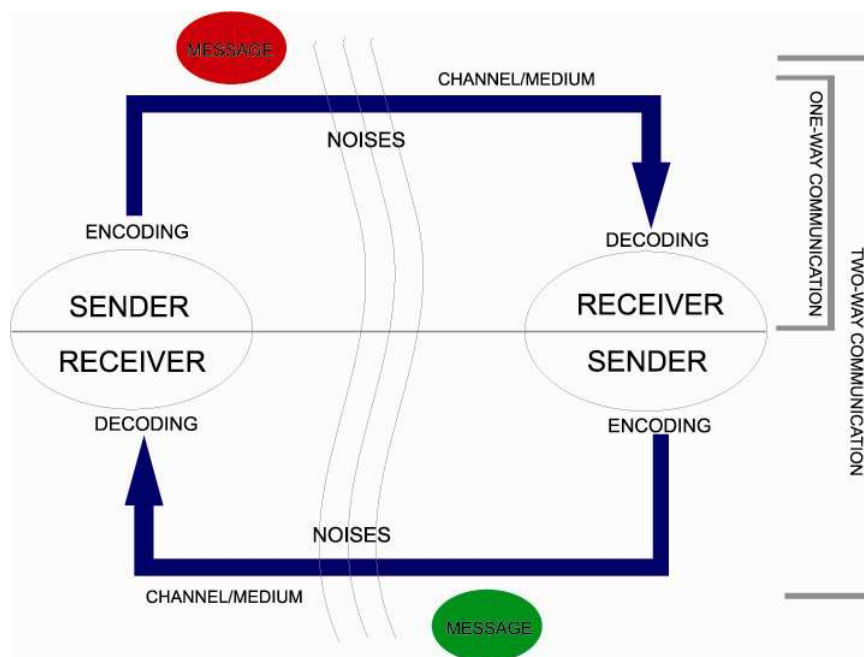
² See for example: P. Watzlawick, *et al.*, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes*, W.W. Norton, New York 1967

³ T. Novinger, *Intercultural Communication...* See subchapter 3.3

⁴ R.W. Griffin, *Fundamentals of Management*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston 2003, p. 334

when people from different cultures communicate with one another⁵. The term ‘cross-cultural’ (or ‘intercultural’) communication means “[a] transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people from different cultures”⁶ that takes place on international grounds.

In a typical communication process, the sender (or addressor) encodes the information and sends it in the chosen channel (by a chosen medium). The receiver (or addressee) gets the information and decodes it to understand and make use of it. That states a *one-way communication*. Yet the whole process may be much more elaborate. Depending on the needs and the sender-receiver relationship – the *communication style* can be also *two-way*. It means that the receiver, after getting and decoding the message, replies to it. He/she encodes his/her own message, sends it with the medium of his/her choice, and when the addressee gets it, he/she decodes and tries to make use of it as well (it is called the *feedback*). Each communication process (both one-way and two-way) can be disturbed by several noises that sometimes become the barriers to the communication process (see Figure 3.1 and Table 3.1)⁷.



Source: adapted from R. W. Griffin, *Fundamentals of Management...*, p. 337; B. Ollivier, *Nauki o komunikacji*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2010, pp. 110-120

Figure 3.1. Basic Process of Communication

⁵ A.M. Francesco, B.A. Gold, *International Organizational Behavior*, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey 2005, p. 70

⁶ W.B. Gudykunst, Y.Y. Kim, *Communicating with strangers: An approach to intercultural communication*, Reading, Mass.: Addison Wesley, 1984 cited in: T. Novinger, *Intercultural Communication...*, p.9

⁷ See subchapter 3.3

One-way and *two-way communication styles* constitute the extremes of a continuum⁸. In practice, communication usually takes place somewhere between them, approaching, from time to time, the extreme points. Each communication situation provides a choice - which type would be more useful so as to reach efficiency in the whole process⁹.

As far as culture is concerned, it is crucial to analyse its influence on the choice of communication style. If the one-way style is the usual pattern in an organisation, where the manager is the sender, it can be assumed that the very organisation features a hierarchical structure. “When this occurs regularly in a national culture, it can be deduced that power distances are high”¹⁰. In such cases there are some clues that may help in interpreting a particular difficult situation. We can try to recognise the purpose of the received message or the whole context of the communication by ‘reading’ it from the task specificity, from the situation we face, from the organisational culture (if it is a common practice of the firm), from our own experience in the contacts with the message sender – his/her gender, psychology, from non-verbal signals¹¹, or from the national culture customs¹².

Scrutinising *communication efficiency*, it can be noticed that immense attention is paid towards the meaning of a message – the message received should have identical (or almost identical) meaning as the message sent. Mead claims that “a message is most likely to be efficient and to achieve its purpose when it is appropriate to its context. This means that it should be designed for a particular context, and can be interpreted in that context”¹³. If we understand the proper context, we discover the meaning and the purpose of the message. “Almost all of our evaluations occur within some kind of context”¹⁴. But, according to Edward Hall, different cultures use different ‘amounts’ of context in their perceptions and everyday interactions with other cultures (see Table 3.2). That usually states most common cross-cultural problems in business dealt internationally.

Table 3.1 contains the contextual categories that help in making decision if “a message is appropriate and likely to be persuasive”¹⁵. It also sums up and explains in detail the whole communication process, concerning its intercultural character.

⁸ R. Mead, *International Management. Cross-Cultural Dimensions*, Blackwell UK, Oxford 2005, p.108

⁹ *Ibidem*

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p.111

¹¹ See subchapter 3.2

¹² R. Mead, *International Management...*, p. 111

¹³ *Ibidem*, p.97

¹⁴ D. B. McFarlin, P. D. Sweeney, *International Management. Strategic Opportunities and Cultural Challenges*, Routledge, New York 2011, p. 165.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p.98

Table 3.1. The Contextual Communication Model

Categories	Meaning and Significance Cross-culturally
WHAT is communicated?	It means the <i>content</i> of the message - the information communicated with its purpose. The usual purpose is to persuade. The message can be persuasive when it contains the relevant information from the addressee's point of view – when it fulfils his/her needs. The information should serve other culture's expectations – the crucial points must be highlighted and constructed as explicit as it is needed.
WHO communicates?	It defines the <i>addressor</i> . The message is perceived as efficient when the addressee trusts the addressor and believes he/she has credibility.
To WHOM is the message communicated?	It describes the <i>addressee</i> who can be a single person, an organisation or a group of people inside or outside an organisation. However, it is worth remembering that the norms regulating sender-receiver contacts valid in one culture would not work the same way in other cultures.
WHEN is the appropriate TIME for communicating the message?	It considers how long the message should last, if it should be repeated, and if so, how many times and for how long. It also regulates the time between receiving the message and responding to it. Sometimes other factors are also considered, e.g. our relation with the person we want to do business with. In low-context ¹⁶ cultures we can meet just once before the proper business contract, but in high-context cultures we might have to spend much more time on building relationships. Another factor is punctuality, e.g. the Japanese prefer to be five or ten minutes early, while Anglo-Saxon managers may be up to five minutes late for an appointment. In Scandinavia an appointment at ten o'clock means ten on the dot, while in Latin American and Arab cultures, punctuality is of minor importance.
WHERE is the appropriate location for communicating the message?	It includes the physical and organisational location. We have to realise that different types of business should be communicated in different locations, and the choice of location may have a symbolic meaning to a particular culture. Using the physical space communicates also power and status. We can observe where the boss office is - depending on how close it is to the employees' offices, whether the access is easy or difficult.
HOW is the message communicated?	If we consider how to communicate the message, we take into consideration <i>language</i> ¹⁷ , <i>medium</i> and <i>style</i> . While making a decision concerning language we consider several factors: the language of the receiver, formality or informality of the situation, the culture and the organisational policy, the language connected with the task, the language and its status in the particular industry, the status of the language in the particular country (we can find some countries where the law protects the national languages). There is a wide range of media to choose from. We can use an oral form (speech in formal and informal meetings, by telephone, etc.), a written form (like reports, e-mails, memos, faxes, etc.), pictures and combinations. The choice of proper media depends on the situation which is determined by different factors, e.g.: the number of receivers and their characteristics, the importance of the message, its complexity and function, the distance and chances for feedback, expense or whether the message is routine or original. The usage of a proper style means constructing the message in an adequate length and structure, with a proper content selection and a sequence.

Source: adapted from R. Mead, *International Management...*, pp. 99-107

¹⁶See: E. T. Hall, *Beyond culture*, New York, NY, Anchor Press, 1976. Hall recognises three cultural dimensions: language, time and space (*chronemics*). All of them play a significant role in international communication because they are differently defined by national cultures, and thus may become barriers to communication efficiency. According to E. Hall, the cultures can be described along the continuum – from low-context to high-context cultures. The type of the cultural context determines the whole communication in a particular culture. Low-context cultures communicate mostly verbally, pay more attention to what is being said and written, their trust is followed by a legal agreement and personal relations are rather separated from business. Whereas high-context cultures communicate non-verbally, treat verbal or written comments with less respect that what was unsaid but understood, agreements are based on trust (to some extent) and quite often personal relations follow business.

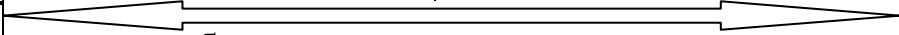
¹⁷ To learn more about a language as a barrier to communication – see subchapter 3.3

A MNC consists of many nations, absolutely different people but with the same aim. In a MNC the aim might be to cooperate smoothly to realise the main goal(s) of the employer, e.g. “to sustain long-term profitability”¹⁸. Communication facilitates the goals achievement within an organisation. In an organisational environment, there is a wide variety of different forms of communication to choose from. For the purpose of the chapter, the author is going to discuss just some of them:

- verbal and non-verbal,
- formal and informal,
- oral and written,
- horizontal and vertical communication.

Verbal communication is a communication exchange based on words while, according to some studies¹⁹, words account just for 7 percent of the message content. The rest, i.e. 93 percent of the content, comes from *non-verbal communication*. This exchange does not use words, or even if uses them, they can have more than one common meaning. As it has been mentioned earlier, language is communicated in a particular context. Low-context cultures base their communication on explicit verbal codes, whereas high-context cultures communicate much more by the context of its non-verbal form²⁰.

Table 3.2. Characteristics and Comparison of Communication in Low- and High-Context Cultures

COMMUNICATION FEATURE	LOW CONTEXT	HIGH CONTEXT
General approach	Direct/explicit	Indirect/complex
Degree of precision	Literal/exact	Approximate/relative
Dependence on words	High	Low
Nonverbal dependence	Low	High
View of silence	Negative; poor/no communication	Positive; good communication
Attention to details	High	Low
Value placed on intentions	Low	High
CULTURE EXAMPLE		
	Swiss	German
	Scandinavian	American
	English	Italian
	Spanish	Greek
	Arab	French
	Japanese	Korean
		Chinese

¹⁸ M. Porter, *The five forces that shape strategy*, “Harvard Business Review” January 2008

¹⁹ See e.g. A. Mehrabian, *Non-verbal Communication*, Aldine, Chicago 1972

²⁰ T. Novinger, *Intercultural Communication...*, p.48

Source: adapted from D. A. Victor, *International business communication*, New York: HarperCollins 1992, p. 153 cited in D. B. McFarlin, P. D. Sweeney, *International Management...*, p. 216; E. T. Hall, *Beyond culture*, Garden City, NY: Anchor Press 1976 presented in D. B. McFarlin, P. D. Sweeney, *International Management...*, p. 166.

Yet concentrating on the verbal processes of communication, they consist of:

- competency, which means how well our speaker knows the language we use together. This category includes, e.g. the language accent, cadence (rhythm), context, idioms, the polite usage (like some special language forms in German or French to underline the age or position distance), silence, where all of them can become barriers to effective communication²¹. Generally, we prefer speaking to people who present good language competence, so their accent and cadence are listener-friendly, they use the language in a proper context with understandable idioms, phrases or metaphors, and make pauses in expected moments;
- literacy/orality – there are some cultures that use a text-based language and some other cultures that are oral-based ones. Such a difference may lead to a gap in intercultural communication²².

The way how we combine words together, how they are used, reveals much information about our culture (see Table 3.2)²³.

Table 3.3. Major Characteristics of the Four Verbal Styles

Verbal Style	Variation	Major Characteristic	Cultures Where Found
Direct versus Indirect	Direct	Message is more explicit.	Individualistic ²⁴ , low-context (e.g. in North America).
	Indirect	Message is more implicit.	Collectivistic, high-context (e.g. Korea).
Elaborate versus Succinct	Elaborate	Quantity of talk is relatively high.	Moderate uncertainty avoidance, high-context (e.g. Arabic countries).
	Exacting	Quantity of talk is moderate.	Low uncertainty avoidance, low-context (e.g. England, Germany, Sweden).
	Succinct	Quantity of talk is relatively low.	High uncertainty avoidance, high-context (e.g. China, Japan, Thailand).
Personal versus Contextual	Personal	Focus is on speaker, "personhood."	Low power distance, individualistic, low-context (e.g. Australia, Denmark, Canada).
	Contextual	Focus is on role of speaker,	High power distance, collectivistic,

²¹ See subchapter 3.2

²² T. Novinger, *Intercultural Communication...*, p.48

²³ A.M. Francesco, B.A. Gold, *International Organizational...*, pp.73-75

²⁴ See subchapter 1.2

		role relationships.	high-context (e.g. Japan, India, Ghana, Nigeria).
Instrumental versus Affective	Instrumental	Language is goal-oriented, sender-focused.	Individualistic, low-context (e.g. the USA, Denmark, Switzerland).
	Affective	Language is process-oriented, receiver-focused.	Collectivistic, high-context (e.g. the Middle East, Latin America, Asia).

Source: adapted from: A.M. Francesco, B.A. Gold, *International Organizational...*

As far as the categories of the non-verbal processes of communication are concerned, they include among other things²⁵:

- context,
- *chronemics* (i.e. time sense, namely, how we treat time),
- *kinesics* (i.e. body motion communication; it includes emblems-gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, *haptics*: touch, posture, smell),
- *proxemics* (space sense).

Verbal communication is usually intentional, whereas non-verbal form is both intentional and unintentional. The verbal and non-verbal forms of communication supplement and assist each other. Nevertheless, it is much more difficult to learn non-verbal communication than verbal one. Bearing in mind that communication, mostly non-verbal, is behaviour created by a national culture, we can expect that it might provoke several intercultural problems²⁶.

Formal communication means planned communication that proceeds along the organisational hierarchy through formal channels. In this respect, we can easily predict which way the message would go. In the *informal* form the organisational communication does not go through the formal channels but along the relations that exist among the workers. Culture aspects, e.g. the power distance dimension, determines how much emphasis is put on formal and informal communication modes.

“*Oral communication* takes place in conversations, group discussions, telephone calls and other situations in which the spoken word is used to express meaning”.²⁷ Its largest advantage is the possibility to receive an immediate feedback, which seems to be particularly important when the same questions or problems arise. The oral form of communication does not need any special equipment or medium, although it may be ephemeral, e.g. if the message

²⁵ T. Novinger, *Intercultural Communication...*, p.57

²⁶ See subchapter 3.2

²⁷ T. Novinger, *Intercultural Communication...*, p.337

was overloaded or too difficult, particularly in a cross-cultural setting when a foreign language was used. This explains why it might be useful to support oral communication with the *written* one, which can have a shape of an e-mail, a report, a letter, etc. The most important advantage of written communication is its persistence. Namely, we can always return to it and read once again when needed, particularly when some important details are listed. In cross-cultural communication it gives us necessary time for understanding or even translating a message. However, this form has also some drawbacks – it is time consuming and there is no possibility to receive a prompt feedback.

Horizontal communication takes place among colleagues at the same organisational level and plays an important role in animating different departments or solving problems. *Vertical communication* flows up or down the organisation, between managers and their subordinates and results in upward or downward communication mode. Upward communication (from subordinates to superiors) usually consists of requests, responses to requests, suggestions, complaints and financial information. On the contrary, downward communication (from superiors to subordinates) generally contains directives how to do some tasks, assignments of new responsibilities or the performance feedback.²⁸ The extent to which people in an organisation use horizontal or vertical communication depends, among other things, on cultural dimensions (e.g. power distance).

3.2. Barriers to Cross-cultural Communication

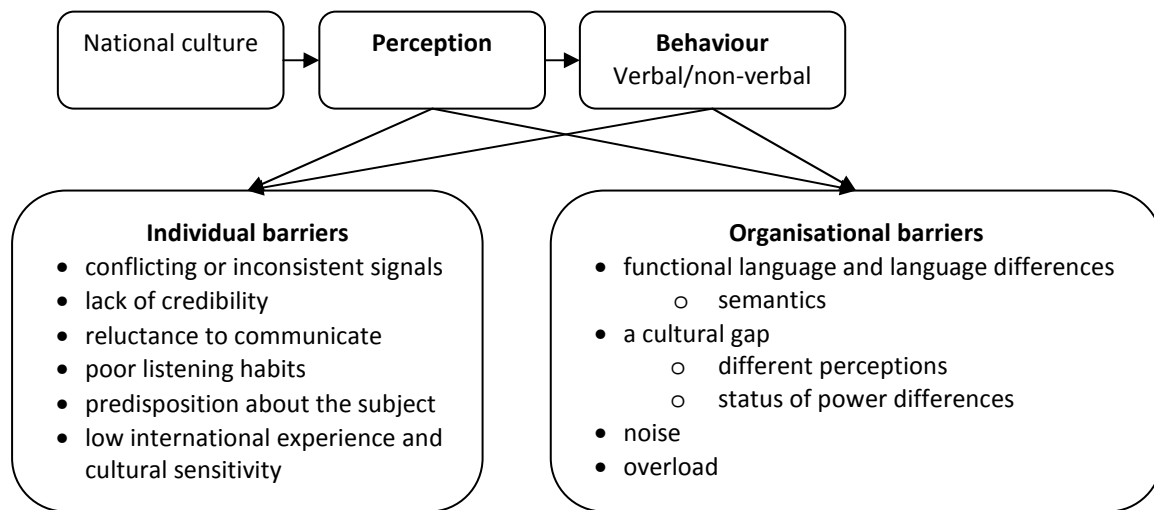
The implementation of smooth and effective communication in organisations is vital for all the employees. As discussed before, communication efficiency is high if the original information sent is received in the same shape and meaning. In some mono-cultural organisations it becomes an extremely difficult task. The situation becomes even more complicated when it comes to the intercultural interactions and communication over the national borders, among the people whose ‘software of minds’ was already differently programmed. Although efficiency of communication is the common need (or necessity) in an organisation, usually the managers are those responsible for maximizing potential benefits and minimizing potential problems of the communication processes²⁹.

During the process of communication there are plenty of factors that can appear as barriers, changing the communicational flow or even making it unable to proceed. The main division enlists them into two main groups based on a common cultural ground: *perception*

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p.341

²⁹ More in T. Novinger, *Intercultural Communication....*, pp.348-353

barriers and *behaviour barriers*³⁰ (see Figure 3.2). Both groups should be developed and deeply described through the lens of individual barriers and organisational barriers.



Source: adapted from R.W. Griffin, *Fundamentals of Management...*, p.349; M. Rozkwitalska, *Bariery w zarządzaniu międzykulturowym. Perspektywa filii zagranicznych korporacji transnarodowych*, Wolters Kluwer – Oficyna, Gdańsk 2010, pp.57-71; T. Novinger, *Intercultural Communication...*, pp.23-24

Figure 3.2. Potential Barriers to Effective Cross-cultural Communication

The national culture is the first and usually crucial barrier to intercultural communication. *National culture bonded barriers* appear as we have our minds programmed according to our national behaviours, customs and rules. Hall treats culture as a form of communication. Moreover, he perceives culture and communication as a living circle, creating and re-creating one another³¹. Culture, including a national culture, states the communication systems that means “the total communication framework for words, actions, body language, emblems (gestures), intonation, facial expression, for the way one handles time, space, and materials, and for the way one works, makes love, plays, and so on”³².

Individual communication barriers are caused by specific features of senders, receivers or both. These barriers are even multiplied in an international environment because the personal characteristics may vary much more. As it has been written above, according to Hofstede, the most basic and universal level of mind programming of each person is human nature. Nevertheless, since the national culture influences our behaviour, it may along with the nature and personality underlay the communicational barriers.

³⁰ For a more detailed description see subchapter 3.1

³¹ E. T. Hall, *The Silent Language*, Anchor Books, New York 1959

³² T. Novinger, *Intercultural Communication...*, p.15

Conflicting or inconsistent signals sent by one person to another may lead to serious problems not only in communicational area. If a manager establishes 3 days to complete a report, but tomorrow he/she wants the same report immediately, he/she sends conflicting signals and makes you feel disoriented. He/she sends inconsistent signals if he/she speaks out a certain piece of information but is acting contrary to the previous intentions. For instance, he/she may praise his/her employees and compliment them on good work, finally promoting workers from a different department. This incident can result in a huge personal problem in the whole department.

The problem of *lack of credibility* appears when the sender is perceived as an unreliable source of information. How could it happen? This problem evokes when the source of information, e.g. the manager, has made some serious mistakes or wrong decisions; in consequence, he/she may lose trust, support and prestige in the eyes of his/her subordinates or the cadre in general.

Reluctance to communication can be sometimes caused by emotions or individual predispositions. There are some people who just do not like starting the conversation, because they do not feel self-confident. They can also be afraid of the consequences of transferring the information to other co-workers, mainly, when it is rather bad news, e.g. about some staff reductions. Another example concerns some workers who might wish to keep the information for themselves so as to have an advantage over the others.

Poor listening habits in the act of communication are also worth mentioning. Some interlocutors make a false impression that they are listening to the speaker by looking straight into his/her eyes or even nodding their heads, being, in fact, neither focused on what is being communicated nor able to repeat the content when asked to. Some other poor listeners look around, fiddle, read something or do other things that distract their attention. Unfortunately, the features described above may concern both managers and the employees.

It is usually stated that the way people perceive different cultures is taught by various groups of culture they belong to³³, e.g. primary groups, where there are face-to-face interactions with the group members; formal groups that have their structure and organisation described in writing (like university groups); informal groups, where the structure is not defined in writing (the group members meet on a social basis and usually have friendly

³³ J.C. Mowen and M. Minor claim that “a group is a set of individuals who interact with one another over some period of time and who share a common need or goal. Groups are characterised by the exchange processes that take place among their members”. See J.C. Mowen, M. Minor, *Consumer Behavior*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1998, p. 485

relations³⁴). In an international environment the receivers can start the communication process with some *predispositions* about their communication partners. It may be harmful, because the way the interlocutors are perceived is the way they are treated. Supposing a new manager is hard to cooperate with because it was announced or rumoured so, his/her communication partners would probably be oversensitive to any difficulties in contacts with him/her.

Low international experience and cultural sensitivity can sometimes lead to ethnocentric attitudes that also can be dangerous for good intercultural relations. Cultural ethnocentrism makes the participants of one culture feel better, wiser, more intelligent, etc. than the members of the other culture³⁵.

The *organisational barriers to communication* appear in relations among the organisation participants, where different personalities meet and fight or cooperate. The organisational context of communication can extend or diminish the barriers rooted in the national cultures³⁶. In our globalised and such liquid times³⁷, where national barriers disappear, language barriers have become the most common and the most obvious difficulties – we speak different languages but we want to start doing business together. In such cases, companies search for effective solutions and adopt the *functional language* as the compulsory mean of communication. They usually choose one of those³⁸:

- the language of the subsidiary,
- the language of the headquarter,
- the third language, most often the international business one, like English, Chinese or Spanish - depending on the region.

The language problems may be much more complicated since even if we speak the same functional language, we sometimes cannot understand one another. The problems may occur in *semantics*, which means that people understand the same words or phrases differently, according to their experience and knowledge (or lack of knowledge). It can even happen more often when ambiguous words are used. Some sources and examples of the language barriers include³⁹:

³⁴ More about different types of groups and their precise meaning in J.C. Mowen, M. Minor, *Consumer Behavior...*, pp. 485-486

³⁵ See subchapter 2.2

³⁶ M. Rozkwitalska, *Bariery w zarządzaniu międzykulturowym...*, p.71

³⁷ Z. Bauman wrote a lot about that matter, see e.g. Z. Bauman. *Liquid Times. Living in an Age of Uncertainty*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2007

³⁸ M. Rozkwitalska, *Bariery w zarządzaniu międzykulturowym...*, p.85

³⁹ M. Rozkwitalska, *Barriers of cross-cultural interactions according to the research findings*, "Journal of Intercultural Management" 2010, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 37-52

- usage of technical/branch language – the knowledge of such professional language depends on the national educational systems and also on personal abilities. In many cases technical language occurs as jargon⁴⁰;
- usage of colloquial language – even if *functional language* is spoken correctly, it is common in the multinational environment that non-native speakers have problems in understanding the colloquial language, for example jokes⁴¹;
- native speakers' syndrome – sometimes it is more difficult to communicate with native speakers and easier to communicate with non-native language users. Mostly because the non-natives try to be understood by using well-known vocabulary and structures. On the other hand, native speakers are sometimes better evaluated as they probably sound more professional and fluent in what they say.
- language exclusion – some workers can feel excluded if in the multinational environment some other sub-groups speak their native languages, especially in situations when teamwork is necessary.

Some other language disruptions may occur when in written forms there are words or phrases in other languages than the functional one or the name of the product is not in the local language, or when during video- or teleconferences there are speakers with different accents or language abilities. Cross-cultural communication can be also costly and time-consuming – there is a need to employ (and pay to) interpreters, translators and spend time on fulfilling the same tasks twice, in two or more different languages⁴².

A *cultural gap* occurs if the organisational cultures of the headquarters and the subsidiary are different⁴³. When those differences start to disturb communicational processes, the cultural gap becomes a barrier.

Different perceptions of the same situation may be caused by several factors, e.g. different organisational cultures, individual predispositions or experiences. It can lead to misunderstandings when two or more employees have absolutely different opinions on the same incident or behaviour. Moreover, such situations are common reality in MNCs. For example, Morten, the Danish line manager working in the subsidiary in Eastern Europe, let his workers call him his name. In Eastern Europe it is rather common to call the manager 'sir'

⁴⁰“Jargon is a simplified, specific language (...) It is said to be used by particular profession groups, like lawyers, policemen, but it often appears in all the professions and is understood by the whole staff or just by a part of it which is engaged into a particular situation”. See M. Szeluga-Romańska, *The role of the manager in the process of communication*, PhD thesis in progress

⁴¹ See subchapter 3.4

⁴² M. Rozkwitalska, *Bariery w zarządzaniu międzykulturowym...*, p. 179

⁴³*Ibidem*, pp. 88-89



or 'madam'. And soon he started to regret it, because some of the subordinates called him 'Morten' and tapped his arm or back while he was standing with the clients and talking to them. For the manager it was a pure lack of respect, but for the co-workers – just a sign of friendliness⁴⁴.

Status or power differences can also provoke communicational problems. The employees may be reluctant to report any difficulties they have with their tasks, because they might be afraid of the manager's reaction or – inversely – the manager could be reluctant to receiving feedback from the subordinates, even if they notify some problems. A status or power gap can lead sometimes to *groupthink*⁴⁵, which means that group members agree with the most influential person (usually the manager) and make decisions that adjust his/her opinion. Groupthink might be harmful for the whole group when the decision is not made on a realistic basis, when the advantages and disadvantages of the decision are not evaluated, nor the alternative or critical ideas are considered.

When *noise* as a barrier to communication is discussed, a plenty of environmental factors that disrupt communicational processes can be mentioned. "Noise can be the sound of someone coughing, a truck driving by, or two people talking close at hand. It can also include such disruptions as a letter being lost in the mail, a telephone line going dead, an e-mail getting misrouted or infected with a virus, or one of the participants in a conversation being called away before the communication process completed"⁴⁶.

Overload means receiving too much information at the same time, more than one can manage to absorb. It means also getting too many tasks to do simultaneously, which concerns either managers or their subordinates. A Senior Consultant in an international consulting firm admitted: "(t)he large bureaucracies are drowning in their own communications. I get maybe 160 e-mails a day of which 100 are of no use to man or beast, but I have to read them because that is the nature of bureaucracy"⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ The example taken from the author's research conducted for the purpose of PhD Thesis

⁴⁵ Groupthink was first described by I.L. Janis (see I.L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, Houghton-Mifflin, Boston 1972) who, in the beginning, referred it just to political groups. However, he soon discovered that it occurs in the context of many other types of groups, on several antecedent conditions listed by D. H. Mitchell, D. Eckstein: "a) group cohesiveness, b) insulation of the group, c) lack of a tradition of impartial leadership, d) lack of norms requiring methodical procedures, e) homogeneity of members' social background and ideology, f) high stress from external threats with low hope of a better solution than the leader's, and g) low self-esteem, temporarily induced by recent failures that make members' inadequacies salient, excessive difficulties on current decision-making tasks that lower each group member's sense of self-efficacy or moral dilemmas", D.H. Mitchell, D. Eckstein, *Jury dynamics and decision-making: a prescription for groupthink*, "International Journal of Academic Research" 2009, Vol. 1, No.1, pp. 163-164

⁴⁶ R.W. Griffin, *Fundamentals of Management...*, p.336

⁴⁷ R. Mead, *International Management...*, p.96

Non-verbal processes may easily appear as barriers to cross-cultural communication⁴⁸. They constitute such a vast field of potential conflicts that for the purpose of the chapter only some are mentioned. For instance, perceiving time (*chronemics*) differently by different cultures strongly influences cross-cultural communication and often leads to “misunderstanding, misinterpretation and ill will”⁴⁹. As a result, the *monochronic* concept as well as the *polychronic* concept find their application. The first concept refers to situations in which “people are punctual, efficient, and “get to the point” quickly. It is more typical of the Western (predominating in North America and Northern Europe”⁵⁰) than the Eastern world. The other concept is typical of Mediterranean, Latin and partly Eastern European cultures where people do many things at the same time and do not measure it with the clock so precisely. In consequence, one of the most problematic points in the latter case may be arranging an exact time of a meeting or expecting a few meetings for a discussion and a negotiation before a deal is completed (for the members of a monochronic culture one meeting would be enough).

Kinesics is understood as a body motion reflected broadly as emblems (gestures) that express our feelings (either good or bad) or mood without using words. The emblems, being culturally taught and differing among cultures, can easily insult other culture’s members. Namely, the American ‘thumbs-up’ gesture meaning ‘OK’ in the USA, in Middle-Eastern cultures has the meaning of the obscene ‘middle-finger’ gesture. In addition, most cultures obey strict rules that regulate an *eye contact*, such as staring at somebody, maintaining a frequent eye contact, lowering the eyes, etc. In some cultures a direct, intense eye contact means honesty, whereas in other cultures – a lack of respect. For instance – when the American keeps intensive eye contact during the business talk with the Japanese it may be understood by the last one as self-confidence, aggression or pressing him. On the other hand, the American can interpret the behaviour of the Japanese as insincere or cold⁵¹. There are some collective, high-contact cultures where people touch one another more often than people in the individual cultures⁵², which may lead to a series of misunderstandings. The cultures where the level of touch acceptance is the highest are for example: Arabic, Mediterranean, Latin America. In the countries of Eastern Europe, Northern America and in Australia the touch appears only sometimes and is partly accepted. The lowest level of touch acceptance is

⁴⁸ The context of communication, its definition and conditions were already described in subchapter 3.1 and Table 3.1

⁴⁹ T. Novinger, *Intercultural Communication...*, p.61.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*

⁵¹ M. Rozkwitalska, *Zarządzanie międzynarodowe*, Difin, Warszawa 2007, p. 253.

⁵² T. Novinger, *Intercultural Communication...*, p.61.

in most Asian countries, in Great Britain and in the countries of Northern Europe⁵³. Different cultures have also different customs while greeting. In some of them men shake hands, women kiss, whereas still in other cultures both men and women kiss one another while greeting. Such situations can appear far more confusing.

Proxemics refers to space we need to have around us (and is strongly connected with the level of touch acceptance). This feature is not only acquired individually but also culturally learned. Some cultures need to stay closer while communicating face-to-face and some other ones participate in a conversation keeping a longer distance. Generally, the communicational distance depends mostly on what the people feel at the exact time of the contact, if they are angry, anxious, shy, etc.,⁵⁴ which is also taught by their culture.

3.3. Effective Communication across Cultures

How to avoid or overcome communicational difficulties? This section provides some clues.

Griffin proposes considering the problem at two levels: building *individual* and *organisational skills*⁵⁵. One of the most important individual skills is *becoming a good listener*. It means being focused on what is being communicated, asking questions when necessary, absorbing the information but not interrupting, having a positive attitude towards the communication partner. Other valuable skills may be: *encouraging feedback*, which enables answering all the questions and solving problems immediately, *being aware of the language and the proper meaning, maintaining credibility* (which means that we are not trying to be perceived as an expert on everything) and *being sensitive either to the sender's or to the receiver's perspective* (it means being aware of the feelings our communication partner may have, understanding them and trying to adjust our behaviour to the situation). When we start contacts with foreign cultures, either in our country or by going abroad, it would be extremely helpful if we develop several skills and abilities, one of which is called *interpersonal competencies*⁵⁶. Those are abilities to gain people's sympathy and solving problems fluently with no harm to anyone. Also *cultural sensitivity* – that is being empathetic to absolutely different people, open to new situations, curious, tolerant and flexible, are necessary.

⁵³ R. R. Gesteland, *Cross-Cultural Business Behaviour. Marketing Negotiation and Managing Across Cultures*, Copenhagen Business School Pres, Copenhagen 2001, p. 70 cited in: M. Rozkwitalska, *Zarządzanie międzynarodowe*, Difin, Warszawa 2007, p. 253.

⁵⁴ E. T. Hall, *Ukryty wymiar*, Warszawskie Wydawnictwo Literackie MUZA SA, Warszawa 1997, p.146

⁵⁵ R.W. Griffin, *Fundamentals of Management...*, pp.351-353

⁵⁶ See e.g. M. Kostera, M. Śliwa, *Zarządzanie w XXI wieku*, WAiP, Warszawa 2010

“Three useful organisational skills can also enhance communication effectiveness for both the sender and the receiver – *following up, regulating information flows and understanding the richness of different media*”⁵⁷. Following up is a kind of control of the communication flow. If we send an e-mail, it is worth checking if the addressee has really received it, understood and done what he/she was asked for. When we regulate the information flow, we check if there is no overload, so too much information or too many tasks to do at once. We exploit different media when we support one form of communication with the others to make sure it is efficient.

To avoid or overcome communicational difficulties, it is not enough to speak a foreign language. It is necessary to obtain training in the history, customs or social and political matters to learn a wider context of the new culture within which we are going to communicate. Every formal training in finding a ‘common language’ with other cultures should be followed by cross-cultural experiences, e.g. visits to foreign countries, work in multinational teams or any possible contact with the members of the target culture.

Adler and Gundersen propose a set of rules that are helpful if cross-cultural communication causes misunderstanding. They claim that we should consider communication at the levels of⁵⁸:

- *verbal behaviour*, at which we should focus on the words and sentences we say, try to make them simple, omit jargons or a colloquial language, pronounce correctly and repeat the information if necessary;
- *nonverbal behaviour*, where we can support words said with some visuals, like graphs, pictures or slides, or with proper gestures and a tone of voice; we should also pay attention to the pace of our communication and rather make frequent pauses; a written summarizing seems to be very useful here ;
- *accurate interpretation*, means, e.g. putting some caution to silence and its role in communication of different cultures; sometimes it is advisable not to interrupt the silence because it may be an essential part of the correct communication process; we also have to be aware that even if somebody speaks a worse language than we do, it does not mean that he/she is less intelligent;
- *comprehension*, meaning that we check if the audience has understood our message or presentation properly and can repeat it with their own words;

⁵⁷ R.W. Griffin, *Fundamentals of Management...*, pp.351-353

⁵⁸ N. Adler, A. Gundersen, *International Dimensions of Organizational Behavior*, 5th ed., South Western, International Edition 2008, pp. 90-91

- *design*, which refers to the organisation and ‘outlook’ of a message – there ought to be breaks, a message should be divided into small portions and the non-native speakers must receive as much time as they need to absorb the information or presentation;
- *motivation*, which means showing our own motivation to good communication contacts as well as encouraging the participants to active speaking, reinforcing their pro-communicational attitudes.

As it has been written above –managers are usually those responsible for the proper intercultural relations in an organisation. They should focus on and perceive similarities rather than differences, observe their co-workers precisely before any interpretation or evaluation is conducted, attempt to understand a particular situation through the lens⁵⁹ of other cultures, not his/her own, be sensitive to the interpretations of a situation made by all the employees⁶⁰. Moreover, managers should also remember what Hall said, i.e. “we communicate our real feelings in our silent language – the language of behaviour”⁶¹.

To sum up the complex process of cross-cultural communication, it is worth quoting what one successful Japanese executive said: “to be effective in two cultures is like handling two swords at the same time. In one culture you must be assertive, quick and to the point. The other culture may require you to be unassertive, patient and indirect. You have to learn to shift styles, like handling two swords”⁶². Undoubtedly, this is not an easy task but absolutely possible with a bit of inner strength and good will.

3.4. Case Study: International Sense of Humour

Introduction

Lewis claims that “humour crosses national boundaries with difficulty, especially when heading east”⁶³. Different nations generally laugh at different jokes, and with great resistance perceive anecdotes of their nation funny. It is accepted that in an unknown, multinational environment jokes about religion, underprivileged minorities or sex are not told. Similarly, “black” or “sick” humour is forbidden. However, it is proved that a phenomenon like an

⁵⁹ There are very interesting definitions of culture understood as ‘lens’ or ‘glasses’ in M. Kostera, *Antropologia organizacji. Metodologia badań terenowych*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2003, pp.33-34; and as ‘a bubble of meaning’ in B. Czarniawska-Joerges, *Nice work in strange worlds: Anthropological inspiration for organisation theory*, in: T. Polesie, I-L. Johansson (ed.), *Responsibility and Accounting: The Organisational Regulation of Boundary Conditions*, Studentlitteratur, Lund 1992, pp.59-77

⁶⁰ N. Adler, A. Gundersen, *International Dimensions...*, p. 89

⁶¹ E.T. Hall, *The Silent Language...*, p.15

⁶² R.T. Moran, J. D. Abbott, *NAFTA: Managing the Cultural Difference*, Gulf Publishing, Houston 1994 cited in: T. Novinger, *Intercultural Communication...*, p.153

⁶³ R.D. Lewis, *When Cultures Collide. Leading Across Cultures*, Nicholas Brealey International, Boston-London 2007, p.12

international humour also exists.⁶⁴ The funniest stories are usually those that really happened in organisational life.

*Humour in a multinational company*⁶⁵

The story took place in a multinational corporation operating all over the world. The company's main business aim is to provide information, news or data analysis to its clients. One clerk, called Tom, came back to his office in the company's headquarters in New York after holidays. He noticed that while he was having fun far away from everyday duties, somebody had taken his desk-lamp and had not brought it back. Therefore, he sent an e-mail entitled 'Where is my lamp?', complaining about the whole situation. A person who was supposed to receive it was the building administrator. However, the person who really got it was the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the second important person in their huge international company. The clerk did not realise the mistake at that time, because he had just unconsciously dropped one letter in the e-mail address. The CEO replied that he knew nothing about the lamp and did not know how to help him either. In his next e-mail Tom suggested the receiver could ask people about the lamp, look for it, generally, do anything to find it! Then the CEO, staying calm and polite as he was, sent an e-mail to the building global administrator, asking for solving this problem. And then... the correspondence between the CEO and the clerk was sent further... During the next few hours the whole company, all over the world, was laughing at the story. All the co-workers wanted to help to find the lamp somehow. Some psychical support groups were created, at one of the biggest social network portals a post appeared 'Where is my lamp?' and during one day a few thousands of people clicked the 'like it' button. Finally, the clerk discovered his mistake. Being very, very sorry in his last e-mail to the CEO did not make the corporation's employees stop laughing at least for a week. All the meetings and trainings that took place during that week in all the international subsidiaries started with 'Where is my lamp?' story. It was difficult to forget it.

Questions to the case study:

1. Why was the story so funny for the employees of the corporation?
2. The CEO seemed to have a good sense of humour. What would have happened if the boss had had a different sense of humour or no sense of humour at all?
3. What would you have done if you were the boss?

⁶⁴ R.D. Lewis, *When Cultures Collide...*, p.13.

⁶⁵ Based on the author's own research

4. Refer to the cultural dimensions. How such a situation could have been perceived by members of a different cultural group?