

VENTURING INTO A NEW CULTURE – MAIN CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Cultural exchanges have been around since the dawn of humankind; every new millennium and every new century have enriched them with new layers of meaning and complexity. In the past century, intercultural interactions have taken up speed due to an intricate blend of economic, industrial, social and technological factors. Nevertheless, precisely due to their complexity, these relationships have also been defined by a series of challenges that need to be overcome for efficient and mutually beneficial exchanges to be possible. This paper aims to investigate a series of such communication barriers, as well as the mechanisms through which they operate as threats to smooth intercultural communication in the absence of adequate and valid strategies to fight misunderstandings, ambiguity and confusion when two or more cultures come into contact.

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1. Introduction

The world is as diverse as it is large, and yet cultural diversity gives meaning to this immense pool of people, ideas, beliefs, values and artifacts. Exchanges among people belonging to distinct communities, groups and cultures have been a reality since the beginning of humankind, being driven by economic, social, political, educational or technological factors. But the advent of new and fast changing technological inventions in the last decades has made it easier and faster for people to connect all over the world; hence, the increased need for mechanisms necessary to cope effectively and appropriately with the distinct and sometimes downright divergent views on the surrounding world that people have inherited/formed/appropriated. Intercultural communication is the topos where cultural differences are most visible and it is also the place where misinterpretations, stereotyping and ethnocentrism are most likely to occur (cf. Georgiu 2010).

As can be noticed, intercultural interactions have quite a long history, but the concept “intercultural communication” started to receive increasing consideration from researchers in the fields of culture, communication, sociology etc. when it became apparent that cross-cultural differences and solutions on how to manage them effectively needed to be addressed in an organised and coherent manner. Scientists have strived thus to analyse and find answers to questions such as: How is it possible for persons belonging to different cultural backgrounds to communicate effectively? What influence does intercultural interaction have on people? Which is the appropriate behaviour in such

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situations? How do we make ourselves understood when we have to communicate with people with a distinct system of reference in terms of values, customs, beliefs etc.?

American anthropologist Edward T. Hall is credited to be the first who used the concept in one of his seminal books, *The Silent Language* (1959). It was in the seventies that intercultural communication turned into a field of study and an academic discipline in its own right. Its interdisciplinary nature stems from the fact that it relies on and brings together notions and methods of study from various other fields such as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, psychology, communication and linguistics.

The complexity of the intercultural communication process resides, on the one hand, in the diverse nature of the communication participants – international tourists, exchange students from universities with distinct curricula, business people, migrants and researchers involved in international projects. On the other hand, there is the rich baggage that each of these actors carries with him/her in their interactions with the others: their personal traits (which pertain to an individual's personality, profession, etc.) and their social and historical features which are deeply embedded in their culture (and which they inherited and acquired through education, observation or simply subconscious assimilation). The greatest challenge is for all these communicators to create a communication event in which conflict is reduced to the minimum and the message is carried across successfully.

According to one definition of intercultural communication, it “occurs when a member of one culture produces a message for consumption by a member of another culture. More precisely, intercultural communication involves interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems differ enough to influence the communication event” (Samovar et al. 2013, 8). These differences in perceptions and symbol systems and, actually, in all the elements that make up the above-mentioned cultural baggage of a person can turn into just as many stumbling blocks of communication. The degree to which they influence the communication event and the outcome of this influence depend on a number of factors, among which some of the most relevant are the participants' awareness of differences and their openness to deal with them effectively. Hall claims that “Difficulties in intercultural communication are seldom seen for what they are. When it becomes apparent to people of different countries that they are not understanding one another, each tends to blame it on “those foreigners”, on their stupidity, deceit or craziness” (Hall 1959, 15). It is always more convenient to see the others as the source of difference, but however frustrating foreignness may prove to be sometimes, for the sake of successful communication it is useful to also see ourselves as the Other. This change of perspective is a good exercise to embrace differences and to realize that actually our perception on the world and reality does not hold the value of absolute validity.

Nobody can claim that the contact between individuals pertaining to distinct cultures is easy. There is even a similarity-attraction hypothesis, according to which there is a higher likelihood for people to prefer the company of other persons with whom they share important features – hobbies, skills, age, language, beliefs etc. But “since cultural identification by definition categorises people according to the idiosyncratic characteristics which distinguish them from other groups, it follows that cross-cultural interactions occur between individuals who are likely to be dissimilar on at least some of these salient dimensions” (Ward et al. 2005, 9).

In this paper, our aim is to look at a number of issues that may pose a threat to successful intercultural communication. In fact, every aspect in which one's own culture manifests itself fully might represent a potential obstacle to communication across distinct groups/communities/individuals. We should mention that the higher the level of cultural specificity, the higher the likelihood for it to generate if not a cultural clash, at least certain gaps that need to be filled through negotiation and cooperation.

2. Analysis

Communication is one of the favouring factors that have ensured the progress of humanity. The exchange of ideas, opinions, techniques, methods and strategies for survival, work and cooperation has greatly contributed to the picture of the world as it is today and will continue to shape its form in the future. However, the communication flow has not always been smooth and has often been disrupted by a number of stumbling blocks. It is a known fact that not even interpersonal communication that occurs even among individuals sharing the same cultural heritage and patterns of behaviour and thinking is devoid of challenges. Imagine how much more challenging communication must be when it occurs among persons pertaining to different cultures!

The challenges of intercultural communication may be organised on levels of relevance, depending on the extent to which they impact the outcome of the communication event and on how readily identifiable they are to communicators. *Verbal communication* holds one of the top positions of relevance in the context of intercultural exchanges and it is also visible at the surface of the communication process. Edward T. Hall expresses clearly why language, one of humans' favourite tools for communication, can simultaneously turn into a barrier: "The paradox of culture is that language, the system most frequently used to describe culture, is by nature poorly adapted to this difficult task. It is too linear, not comprehensive enough, too slow, too limited, too constraint, too unnatural, too much of a product of its own evolution, and too artificial. This means that the writer [in our case, communicators in general] must constantly keep in mind the limitations language places upon him" (1959, 57).

As can be noticed, Hall finds numerous faults with this communication tool which is language and which, paradoxically again, is a human feat by definition. But he is right, since the linguistic barrier can take many forms and can impede communication to varying degrees, from simple misunderstanding and frustration (in casual conversations, when travelling for pleasure, when receiving/offering directions) to diplomatic crises (in case of mistranslation of official documents or cases of misinterpretation).

The obstacle represented by language is defined by multiple factors. One is the mastery of the common language that is supposed to be used by interlocutors. This involves language fields such as grammar, syntax and vocabulary. The use of language adjusted to the audience/interlocutor in terms of vocabulary relevance or education level may increase the chances of a successful exchange of information. Another important element refers to jargon (use of specialised terminology – sports, medicine, technical branches etc.) and slang; these are categories of language that might pose comprehension problems for persons sharing the same language, let alone when there is transfer from one language into another. Again, being aware of the interlocutor's familiarity with the topic

of conversation is of utmost relevance, as is the degree of formality of the interlocutors' relationship in the use of slang. Finally, dialects and accents are also to be considered potential problems in communication. One may have a very good command of English, but when faced with a speaker of Cockney or of some pidgin variety, the interaction may be seriously affected.

Difficulties may also appear depending on whether communicators use spoken or written language. Most problems occur in the case of written language, when expressing formality. Users should be aware that each language has its own standards of expressing it which have to be complied with for effective communication to occur. For instance, the salutation formula in an English business letter includes the term "dear" (as in "Dear Mr. Jones"), which can be used even if the receiver is unknown ("Dear Sir/Madam"). The same term is unacceptable, though, in formal correspondence in Romanian, Spanish or French.

While verbal communication may be a barrier with a certain degree of expectancy (everyone knows the level to which they master a foreign language and, if there is no knowledge of the interaction language, they know that a translator/interpreter is needed), the situation is different in the case of *nonverbal communication*. This form of communication comprises many components: body language, proxemics, haptics, chronemics, but also seating arrangements, furniture, or elements such as pauses and silence. In the case of nonverbal communication, the difficulty resides in the variability of the meaning assigned to all the above-mentioned elements across cultures. The variability scale is very wide, and ranges from positive to negative interpretations attributed to the same nonverbal cue. A relevant example is the victory sign, which has positive connotations in the USA and negative ones in some Arab countries. To further complicate things, the interpretation of the V-sign differs drastically in the UK, where it is positive if the palm faces the receiver and negative if the palm faces the signer.

While pauses have more or less international values (we pause when we want to emphasize a point or a concept, when we want the content to set in with the audience or when we signal that we expect our interlocutor's intervention), silence has more complex and nuanced values. Western cultures do not have a high appreciation of silence, and it is often quite difficult to assign a certain meaning to it, since it can signal lack of interest or agreement, but also anger or contempt. Not the same can be said about most Asian cultures, where silence is used as a highly valued component of communication. "One of the basic building blocks of competence, both linguistic and cultural, is knowing when to speak in a particular community. Therefore, to understand where and when to be silent, and the meaning attached to silence, is to gain a keen insight into the fundamental structure of communication in that world" (Braithwaite qtd. in Samovar et al. 2013, 302).

In Japan, for instance, communicators are expected to infer much of the meaning of an exchange from what is left unsaid. Silence is also considered a useful strategy for avoiding conflict and awkward situations, but also instils credibility in the listeners, since it is believed that someone who speaks a lot does so in order to fill up space with useless information. Yet another interpretation of silence prevalent in Eastern societies is also common to Nordic ones, which use absence of talking and interfering as a sign of interest and respect. Imagine, thus, an encounter between an Indian and a Spaniard; their interaction would end up in complete failure unless they do their homework in

intercultural specificity beforehand. Awareness of silence patterns is of particular relevance in business, where faux pas caused by such examples of ignorance in cultural issues might completely break the deal.

The relationship and the depth of knowledge we have of our own culture with its inherent value systems and beliefs dictates to a certain degree the way we perceive other cultures with their own systems, forms of manifestation and patterns of behaviour. Whenever people are not certain about the worth of their own inherited cultural values, they tend to regard members of another cultural community with the same degree of uncertainty. In order to make sense of their own universe and of that of others, they resort to stereotypes. *Stereotyping* is assigning attributes to groups of people based on general assumptions and presuppositions related to features and behaviours of those other groups.

The formation of stereotypes is influenced by a variety of factors such as mass media, family and friends or education experience. There are positive sides to stereotyping, which create expectations and help us cope with new situations – all Germans are hardworking, all neurosurgeons are bright, old people are more patient. But, when it is taken to the extreme, stereotyping generates discrimination, contempt and difficulties in establishing solid relationships. An example of stereotype which has been quite recently generated and which is mentioned by Patel et al. refers to the image reflected on all Muslims by the tragic events of September 11th at the Twin Towers of New York. In the aftermath of the tragedy, a new stereotype of Muslims emerged according to which they are all terrorists, with unpleasant consequences for them, from customs checks to immigration-related issues (2011, 144). Many times, intercultural interactions start off from such stereotypes and the personal experience in an intercultural context may confirm, generate or destroy such preconceived opinions.

Ready-formed and inflexible views of a distinct cultural system may take quite a radical turn under the form of *ethnocentrism*, a filter through which people judge the non-members of the groups to which they belong. Ethnocentrism is “the notion that one’s own culture is superior to any other. It is the idea that other cultures should be measured by the degree to which they live up to our cultural standards. We are ethnocentric when we view other cultures through the narrow lens of our own culture or social position” (Nanda and Warms qtd. in Samovar et al. 2013, 239). Obviously, adopting an ethnocentric perspective while trying to get engaged in intercultural interactions not only impedes a successful outcome of the communication event, but may also prevent it from happening altogether.

Ethnocentrism is deemed to have three levels: positive, negative and radical. The first one, which reflects a person’s preference for one’s own culture, is natural and may even prove to have beneficial results; foreigners might be tempted to with and become better acquainted with the specifics of a culture with such loyal members. The negative aspect reflects the tendency towards the assessment of other cultures; one’s own culture is used as a unit of measurement for any other societies/communities. Finally, the radical form of ethnocentrism is most detrimental to any attempts at intercultural communication and collaboration, since the adepts of this ethnocentric view consider not only that their culture is superior to any other, but that they are of the opinion that their own system of values, practices, behaviours, attitudes should also be adopted by other societies/groups.

Finally, another important roadblock to effective intercultural communication that should be addressed is *culture shock*, which is actually a natural phenomenon that accompanies any first encounter with the realities of a distinct culture. The term was first introduced by anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in the sixties who approached it as a “malady”, a negative reaction to a new and unpleasant environment or/and situation. However, since the sixties research on the topic has much advanced, and nowadays culture shock is no longer considered to be a reaction/phenomenon to fear, but to expect as part of the process of adjustment to a new culture.

However, culture shock is not easy to deal with, especially when you have to function in a new cultural/social/linguistic environment, and can seriously affect interaction with your culturally others at least in the first stages. Marx mentions the following reactions as part of the culture shock experience: anxiety, frustration, inadequate social conduct, sense of isolation, confusion about one’s own values and, in more extreme cases, depression (1999, 5).

The field literature mentions four basic stages of culture shock: honeymoon, the hostility stage, the recovery stage and the adjustment. The above-mentioned reactions usually occur in the second stage, after the initial euphoria of coming into contact with a different culture wears out and leaves room for the sense of frustration and being excluded by the members of the group/culture/society in which you wish to integrate. It is the stage when one subconsciously cancels its social and emotional availability to interact with the members of the new cultural group and looks for members of the in-group to which s/he belongs.

Culture shock affects all categories of persons involved in intercultural interactions – exchange students and staff, business people, tourists, migrants and refugees. The impact of culture shock has varying degrees (from the severe ones, which end up in the inability to adjust to the new environment to milder forms) and a variable duration (from a few weeks to several years). However, there are solutions for overcoming culture shock faster, so that one can fully enjoy the great experience of interacting with a culturally distinct group/community. Here are some suggestions: people should do their homework before leaving and try to find as much information on the new culture as possible; it is useful to expect culture shock to happen, irrespective of the location and the (geographical or cultural) distance between one’s own culture and the new one; persons experiencing this should give themselves time to adjust and should not engage in too many work projects as a means to isolate themselves from the challenges of the new environment; and finally, the positive aspect of culture shock should not be ignored – once you experience it, there are better chances to adapt faster to other culturally different situations and encounters.

3. Conclusions

Venturing into a new culture is an exciting experience which has, however, its challenges and which represents a potential for frustration, anxiety and awkwardness. Before departing on this adventure, one should be prepared that they would be faced with barriers in terms of unknown and potentially strange behaviour patterns and customs, language, nonverbal communication styles and the inevitable stress that accompanies the transfer to a new environment and new communication partners.

That is why it is of paramount importance to be well aware of two main issues that define any intercultural exchange: that differences do exist and are visible at various levels of everyday life (from interpersonal interactions to symbols, practices and mores that define the two interacting cultures), and that these differences are likely to cause a series of ‘symptoms’, most of them uncomfortable, but which are part of the process of adaptation and acceptance. This process benefits immensely the acquisition of intercultural communication competence skills. “A competent intercultural communicator is one who has the ability to interact effectively and appropriately with members of another linguistic-cultural background on their own terms” (Samovar et al 2010, 384).

In order to manage this effective and appropriate interaction in an intercultural context, one should improve (or even acquire) a series of communication competences. Understanding one’s own culture is one of the most important, as we all have this tendency to look at another society/community through the lens of our own cultural heritage. Another skill refers to increasing the awareness of one’s own communication style, which is actually the manner in which one presents oneself to others, but also how one reacts to Otherness in all its complexity. This form of self-awareness helps people monitor themselves and control their behaviour in a manner that shows sensitivity and acceptance of differences.

Practicing empathy is also a step forward toward becoming interculturally competent. This translates into the emotional availability to think as the Other, to adopt his/her perspective of the world and accommodate it into one’s own cultural framework. Active listening, which is a means to demonstrate respect and consideration to the other communicators’ opinions and behaviours, as well as the adoption of a flexible communication style are other strategies that can turn any potentially difficult and challenging intercultural encounter into a successful and enriching experience.

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