

HU110: English and Professional Communication

# Nonverbal Communication in Intercultural Context



**Keeping in view the various features of communication, read the following conversation and answer the questions that follow:**

**Situation**

Sofia works with Unitech, a US-based company. She calls up Himanshu, the Manager of one of the Unitech vendors for customer service outsourcing.

**Sofia:** Himanshu! We are planning to have a training programme for our new customer service representatives in the next two weeks. Can you get this done?

**Himanshu:** Two weeks will be tough. It seems impossible.

**Sofia:** If you create a well-planned programme, it is doable, isn't it?

**Himanshu:** It's OK. But you know Ganpati Mahotsav is around.

**Sofia:** Oh! Yes, yes. It's your festival. Wish you a great Ganesha Festival!

**Himanshu:** Thanks. It's a great festival for us.

**Sofia:** Good. So can I get the layout of the programme on my table by tomorrow evening?

**Himanshu:** I will try. ....mmm....OK, Madam. I'll send that to you.

## **After two days**

**Sofia:** Himanshu! You have not sent me the layout.

**Himanshu:** Sorry. But I told you Ganpati Festival is starting. It's taking time. I will send you by tomorrow morning.

**Sofia:** But you should have given it a priority and done it. Anyways by tomorrow 12 noon you should send it to me. You know, I'll go through it and if everything is fine I will approve it.

**Himanshu:** OK, Madam. I will send it by tomorrow morning.

**Sofia:** Make it by all means before 12 o'clock.

**Himanshu:** OK, Madam.

## **Questions**

1. Identify the process and flow of communication in the above situation.
2. Identify the problems in the given situation.
3. State the causes of failure of communication between Sofia and Himanshu.
4. What are the possible outcomes?

# CASE: COMMUNICATION FAILURE

Mr and Mrs Basu went to Woodland's apparel section to buy a pullover. Mr Basu did not read the price tag on the piece he had selected. While making the payment, he asked for the price at the counter. The answer was "₹950". Meanwhile, Mrs Basu, who was still shopping, came back and joined her husband. She was glad that he had selected a nice black pullover for himself. She pointed out that there was a 25 per cent discount on that item. The person at the billing counter nodded in agreement. Mr Basu was thrilled to hear that. "That means the price of this pullover is just ₹645. That's fantastic," said Mr Basu. He decided to buy another pullover in green. In no time, he returned with the second pullover and asked the salesperson to pack both. When he received the cash memo for payment, he was astonished to find that he had to pay ₹1,900 and not ₹1,290 as he had expected. Mr Basu could hardly reconcile himself to the fact that the salesperson had first quoted the discounted price, that is ₹950. But the original price printed on the price tag was ₹1,225.

## Questions

1. Identify the three sources of Mr Basu's information about the price of the pullover.
2. What should Mr Basu have done to avoid the misunderstanding?
3. Who is to blame for this communication gap? Why?

Inter/Cross Cultural communication

Necessity of Cross Cultural communication

Benefits of Cross Cultural Communication

Conflicts in Cross Cultural Communication

Minimizing Conflicts by Overcoming Barriers

## Cross/Intercultural Communication

- Communication between two persons/groups from culturally different background/s is called cross/intercultural communication.





## **Communication— A Complex Interactive Process**

- Involves shared assumptions & unspoken agreement between individuals
- So frequent errors and misunderstandings are quite possible!
- To avoid misunderstandings and to be able to communicate as effectively as possible cross-cultural understanding is required.



## Understanding is shaped by

- Communication climate
- Context and setting
- Background, experiences
- Knowledge, mood
- Values, beliefs, culture

*"Culture is communication and  
Communication is culture." – Edward Hall*

Culture  
is like an  
Iceberg.

6/7<sup>th</sup>'s of it is  
**UNDER** the  
water.





## Necessity of Cross-Cultural Communication

- Technological advancement that contracted the world
- Economic Boom
- Economic pressures at home, particularly affecting the landless, and the unemployed
- Mass Migrations
- Such factors force interaction between people of different races, nationalities, & ethnicities.



## GLOBAL ASPECTS

- "global village"—growth of MNCs—  
Operate in heterogeneous social environment
- Communication is culture specific—  
system of symbols, beliefs, etc, differ.  
Ignorance leads to *cross-cultural conflicts*
- ❖ *American/Chinese on a cemetery*
- *To avoid*—one needs to be open-minded, tolerant, courteous and keenly perceptive of the non-verbal symbols.
- Treat a foreigner as he would like to be treated—  
*e.g. gifting of a clock in India & China*





## Benefits

- Healthier communities: people work for the collective benefit of everyone, not just their group
- Increased national/international trade
- Reduced conflict [M. Scott Peck: overall mission of human communication is *reconciliation*] Conflict stems from our inability to see other man's point of view; & develop blatant, wrong generalizations; leading to mistrust & defensive behavior

## Benefits

- Personal growth: identify commonality between different cultures; humans have same basic needs but different ways of achieving them.
- Increased tolerance: Once people learn that their way is not the only way, they develop a tolerance for difference.  
People lower their defenses and learn to accept and celebrate differences in other cultures.

## Nature of Human Communication

- 1. Process
- 2. Dynamic
- 3. Interactive/Transactive
- 4. Symbolic
- 5. Intentional
- 6. Contextual
- 7. Ubiquitous
- 8. Cultural





- The difficulties faced by the people while communicating cross culturally . . .



# Introduction

- This age of **globalization** and **information technology** has entirely changed the face of governments, businesses, and organizations. People are not confined to the geographical walls of their own nations anymore, but have become part of an international network.
- Communication being the backbone of inter- and intra-organizational coordination, it is essential for people to comprehend the linguistic and cultural differences among organizations to get the desired results at the workplace.

## People and Movement

- Globalisation
- Distance between the different parts of the world is shrinking
- Due to Job
- Due to educational opportunities,
- For fun and entertainment (on vacations to every part of the world)
- *Challenge to adapt to a new culture*
- *Ability to understand people in new surroundings*
- *Ability to express oneself appropriately and fully*

# Culture

- **Culture** is a complex concept, with a variety of definitions. The dictionary meaning of the word 'culture' is a group or community with which we share common experiences that shape the way we understand the world.
- It consists of groups that we are born into, such as gender, race, or national origin, etc. It also includes groups we join or become part of, or the new habits we acquire as we interact with different people throughout our lives.
- Culture consists of various elements such as language, religion, politics, etc.



# Language

- Language forms the basis of all communication. It includes spoken, written, and body language.
- We are no longer restricted to one state or country during the course of our profession, relations, etc. As such, we often have to deal with people who speak different languages.

## Language Barrier

- Different languages: Absence of a translator can lead to conflicts
- Same language: dialectical variations
- Variation in pronunciation—sounds abusive
- Speaking softly and loudly
- Speaking slower and faster



## Conflict in personal space

- The people of higher population have lesser personal space as compared to people who live at lower population density regions
- American's sense of personal space is more -- Indians and Chinese
- Americans will not like close proximity with strangers



## Food

- Eating habits: Indian context
- Many Indians are vegetarians. They develop hatred for non-vegetarians.
- They resent those people and they find it difficult to work with them in the work place.
- Many find it difficult to be friends with non vegetarians.
- But, the nature of people is not determined by their eating habits.

## ■ Religion and beliefs

- An individual's religious beliefs and norms, sacred objects, philosophical systems, prayers, and rituals are all parts of culture. Religion and belief affect the communication process.
- For example in India, some religious rites have become integral to our culture and have been adopted by people from other religions.
- Before starting any important project, it is a norm in India to follow certain religious rites and offer prayers.
- In conferences, it is observed that before starting the deliberation, prayers are offered and lamps are lit.

## Religion

---

- Difference in the religion.
- Every part of India: a new way of worshipping, new beliefs, new customs, traditions.
- Even in the same religion there will be major difference in the cultures of the religion.

## Overcoming religious barrier



- Gain advance knowledge (books/documentaries)
- Awareness of the ways of unintentional offending
- Advance knowledge gives confidence and adds comfort
- Learns to accept new people and their religious beliefs. (though it may look funny)



## Values and attitudes

- Different values and attitudes of individuals towards time management, decision-making, achievement, work, change, etc, are also important parts of culture. These attributes affect communication between people with differing values to a great extent. It is important for people of different cultures to respect and appreciate each other's values to be able to communicate effectively.
- In the Indian culture, e.g., little importance is attached to the personal space and privacy of an individual. For example, when you meet someone and think of striking up a conversation, you can ask questions about that person's marital status or where he or she works or lives.

## Politics and law

- The political system of a nation consists of national intents, power, ideologies, political risks, sovereignty, law of the country in which the organization works, rules and regulations imposed by the government, etc.

## ▀ Social organization

- It consists of social institutions, the authority structure, interest groups, and status systems, etc. All these elements constitute the culture of a nation.
- For instance, maintaining eye contact with a senior during conversation was considered disrespectful in our culture until a few years ago.
- In most multinational companies, it is okay to address one's senior with his/her first name.



## Significance of Understanding Culture

- There are different cultural groups in the world with different patterns of behaviour, religions, languages, politics, values and norms, etc. Thus, the same action is interpreted differently in different nations.
- However, when we cross cultural boundaries, we carry our own culture with us. We must understand that our own cultural context cannot be used to judge the standards of another.
- For example, 'thumbs up' in America means approval, but is considered vulgar in Iran and Ghana.

## The Cultural Context

- Culture provides an overall framework for humans to organize their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in relation to their environment.
- Although people are born into culture, culture is not **innate**. Culture is **learned**.
- Culture teaches one how to *think*, conditions one how to *feel*, and instructs one how to *act*, *interact* and *communicate* with others.

# High-Context vs. Low-Context Cultures

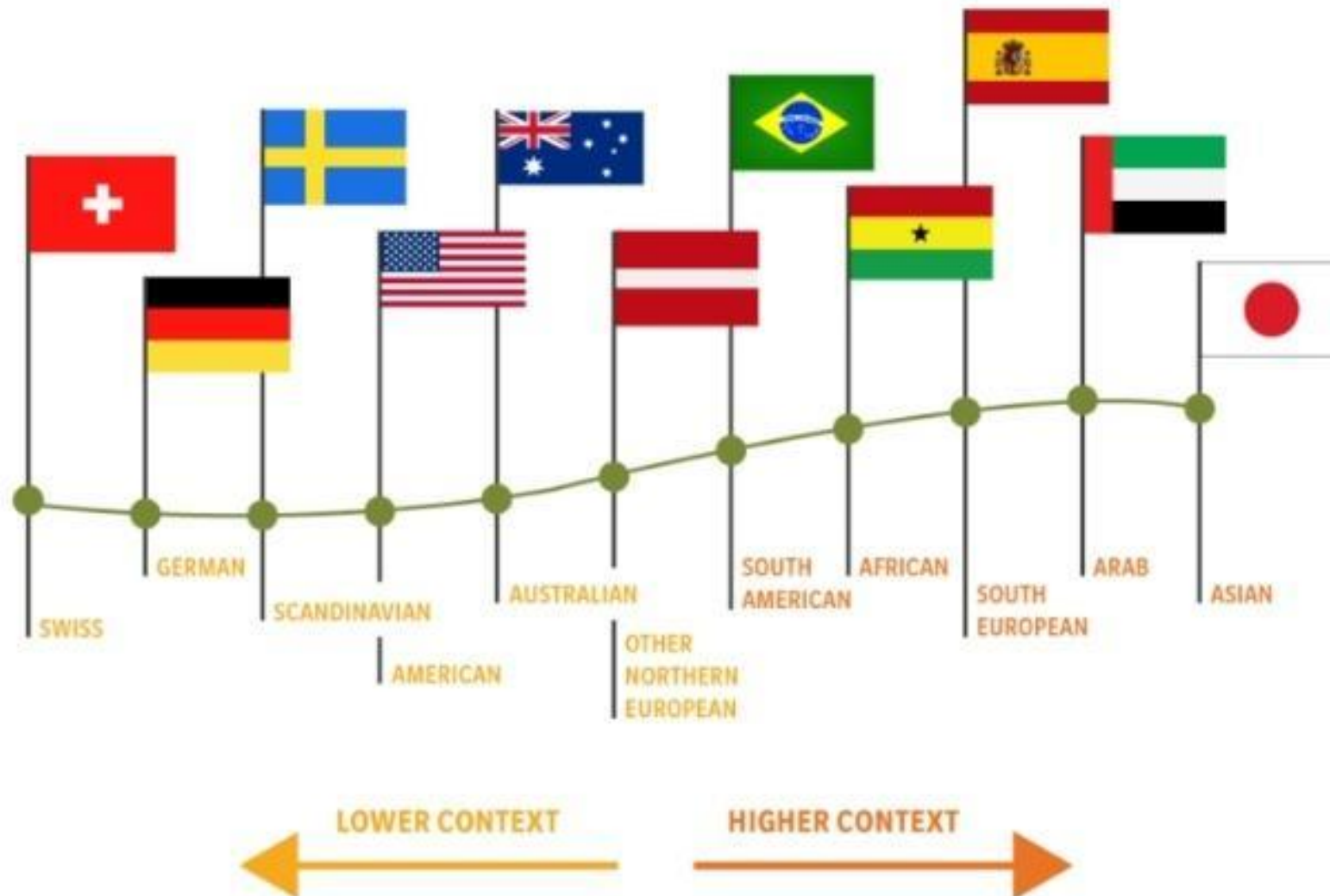
- “High-context” cultures rely heavily on nonverbal communication, using elements such as the closeness of their relationships, strict social hierarchies and deep cultural knowledge to convey meaning.
- “Low-context” cultures depend largely on words themselves. Communication tends to be more direct, relationships tend to begin and end quickly, and hierarchies are more relaxed.

**High-context**- dependent, male dominated, closed, authoritarian, formal, nature dominates human

**Low-context**- independent, equality of sexes, more open, democratic, informal, humans dominate nature

While “high” and “low” context are examples of opposing cultures, it is also true that many cultures fall in between these two extremes called “multi-active,” these cultures might include those of Spain, Italy or Latin America.

# HIGH CONTEXT VS. LOW CONTEXT CONTINUUM



# Forms of Nonverbal Communication

- Nonverbal communication can take many forms. Effectiveness as an international professional often hinges on understanding what these forms might be and how their meanings may differ between countries.
- **Seven forms** of nonverbal communication, as well as specific cultural variances.



## Eye contact

- Whether or not eye contact is made, who makes it and how long it lasts vary tremendously in meaning.
- In many Asian cultures, avoiding eye contact is seen as a sign of respect. However, those in Latin and North America consider eye contact important for conveying equality among individuals.
- In Ghana, if a young child looks an adult in the eye, it is considered an act of defiance.

## Touch

- A great number of cultural expressions are achieved through touch.
- In America, for example, using a firm handshake is considered appropriate to greet a stranger or another business professional. In France, however, it is common to kiss someone you greet on both cheeks.
- Touching children on the head is fine in North America. Yet in Asia, this is considered highly inappropriate, as the head is considered a sacred part of the body. (Thailand- disrespect)



# Gestures

- Gestures can convey wildly different meanings.
- Individuals in the United States use the “OK” sign to convey that something is acceptable. In Japan, the same hand symbol means “money.” Argentinians, Belgians, the French and the Portuguese all use the symbol to mean “zero” or “nothing.” Still other countries in eastern Europe consider that same sign an offensive swear.



## Physical Space

- Countries that are densely populated generally have much less need for personal space than those that are not.
- The Japanese, for example, are less likely to react strongly to an accidental touch by a stranger than Americans.
- Less personal space is also needed in areas such as Latin America, and, in the context of one-on-one conversations, the Middle East.

# Facial Expressions

- Winking is a facial expression particularly varied in meaning.
- In Latin America, for example, the gesture is often considered a romantic or sexual invitation.
- Europeans, especially in France, wink frequently in communication often without any romantic intention.
- The Yoruba people in Nigeria wink at their children if they want them to leave the room. And the Chinese consider the gesture rude.

# Posture

- Posture can convey power structures, attitudes and levels of civility.
- In America, standing with hands on the hips may suggest power or pride, but in Argentina, it may suggest anger or a challenge.
- Many cultures also frown upon showing the bottom of the shoe, something that is considered dirty. Therefore, sitting with the foot resting on the opposite knee is strongly discouraged in places such as many Arab countries.

# Paralanguage

- “Paralanguage” refers to factors of speech such as accent, pitch range, volume or articulation.
- In Britain, for example, people use volume to convey anger, while in India, they use it to command attention.
- The use of attitude towards silence can also be considered a type of paralanguage. The Greeks use silence as a way to refuse things, while Egyptians use it to consent.



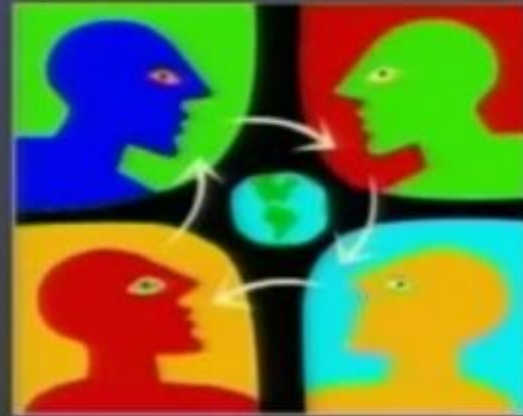
## Suggestions for overcoming cross-cultural conflicts



- Learn to Respect Difference
- What is normal in your culture may be different in other cultures
- Familiar behaviors may have different meanings
- Do not assume that what you meant is what was understood
- Do not assume that what you understood is what was meant



- If you cannot accept different behavior, try to understand where it comes from
- Look forward to interact with people from different culture.
- Learn local language.
- Keep communication simple; speak slowly, thoughtfully, and deliberately
- Manage your tone of voice; watch volume; don't be defensive



- Be an empathetic listener
- Be patient; take time to truly understand the intended message or question
- Understand the challenge of communicating in a non-native language
- Watch facial expression and body language as both the speaker and the listener
- Understand your own assumptions! (avoid categorization)



## Conclusion

- When international business professionals take the time to learn nonverbal communication in different cultural contexts, everyone benefits.
- Not only will their efforts decrease the likelihood of misunderstandings, they will improve their abilities to negotiate, solve problems effectively, create good working relationships and become better global citizens.