4.3: Variations in Communication Styles

As has been established, language is not culture free. If your intercultural communication is to be effective, you cannot ignore the broader cultural context that gives words meaning. Cultural rules about when and how certain speech acts can be performed may differ greatly. Routine formulas such as greetings, leave-taking, thanking, apologizing and so on do not follow the same, or even similar rules, across cultures causing misunderstandings and confusion. How language is used in a particular culture is strongly related to the values a culture emphasizes, and how it believes that the relations between humans ought to be.

An offer of coffee: what does it really mean?

In some cultures an offer of coffee after a meal is generally recognized as a polite way to indicate to the guests that they ought to leave soon if they do not wish to outstay their welcome. In other cultures, an offer of coffee on a similar occasion is just an act of the host’s kindness (or even an invitation to the guests to stay a little bit longer than they had intended). If interactants from different cultural backgrounds are unaware of the differences in their respective mental sets, misunderstandings are likely to occur. Misunderstandings of this sort involve the carryover of culture-specific knowledge from a situation of intra-cultural communication to a situation of intercultural communication.

Žegarac & Pennington, 2000, p. 169
Communication Styles

Social scientists and linguists have been studying for some time how individuals and groups interact through language, both within the same language and between languages. They have sought to discover how and why language uses vary. An understanding of communication style differences helps listeners understand how to interpret verbal messages.

High and Low Context

Think about someone you are very close to—a best friend, romantic partner, or sibling. Have there been times when you began a sentence and the other person knew exactly what you were going to say before you said it? For example, in a situation between two sisters, one sister might exclaim, “Get off!” (which is short for “get off my wavelength”). This phenomenon of being on someone’s wavelength is similar to what anthropologist Edward Hall describes as high context. In high context communication the meaning is in the people, or more specifically, the relationship between the people as opposed to just the words. In high-context cultures, body language is as important and sometimes more important than the actual words spoken. In high-context cultures, such as those found in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, the physical context of the message carries a great deal of importance. People tend to be more indirect and to expect the person they are communicating with to “read between the lines” to decode the implicit part of their message. High context cultures are very often collectivistic as well.

In low-context messages, little (or "low") context is needed for comprehension because the essence of the communication is conveyed by the words used and little information is conveyed by nonverbal means. In low context communication, the speaker is expected to be responsible for constructing a clear message that the listener can decode easily. You’re probably familiar with some well-known low-context mottos: “Say what you mean” and “Don’t beat around the bush.” The guiding principle is to minimize the margins of misunderstanding or doubt. Low-context communication aspires to get straight to the point. Many low context cultures are individualist so people openly express their views, and tend to make important information obvious to others. The American legal system, for example, relies on low context communication.

![Figure 1](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Courses/Butte_College/Exploring_Intercultural_Communication_(Grothe)/04%3A_Verbal_Proce…)

Figure 1: A graph which shows the level of context in various world cultures
While some cultures are low or high context, in general terms, there can also be individual or contextual differences within cultures. People who spend a lot of time together in the same group inevitably develop high context ways of communicating. In the example above between the two sisters, they are using high context communication, however, the United States is considered a low context culture. Countries such as Germany and Sweden are also low context while Japan and China are high context. Communication between people from high-context and low-context cultures can be confusing. In business interactions, people from low-context cultures tend to listen primarily to the words spoken; they tend not to be as cognizant of nonverbal aspects. As a result, people often miss important clues that could tell them more about the specific issue.

Direct / Indirect

The direct / indirect continuum has to do with the explicitness of one’s talk, or how much of their thoughts are communicated directly through words and how much is hinted at. Direct speech is very explicit while indirect speech is more obscure. If I say, “Close the window” my meaning is quite clear. However, if I were to ask, “Is anyone else cold in here?” or, “Geez, this room is cold,” I might also be signaling indirectly that I want someone to close the window. As the United States is typically a direct culture, these latter statements might generate comments like, “Why didn’t you just ask someone to shut the window?” or “Shut it yourself.” Why might someone make a choice to use a direct or indirect form of communication? What are some of the advantages or disadvantages of each style? Think about the context for a moment. If you as a student were in a meeting with the President of your university and you were to tell them to “Shut the window,” what do you think would happen? Can you even imagine saying that? An indirect approach in this context may appear more polite, appropriate, and effective.

Direct styles are those in which verbal messages reveal the speaker’s true intentions, needs, wants, and desires. The focus is on accomplishing a task. The message is clear, and to the point without hidden intentions or implied meanings. The communication tends to be impersonal. Conflict is discussed openly and people say what they think. In the United States, business correspondence is expected to be short and to the point. “What can I do for you?” is a common question when a business person receives a call from a stranger; it is an accepted way of asking the caller to state his or her business.

Indirect styles are those in which communication is often designed to hide or minimize the speaker’s true intentions, needs, wants, and desires. Communication tends to be personal and focuses on the relationship between the speakers. The language may be subtle, and the speaker may be looking for a “softer” way to communicate there is a problem by providing many contextual cues. A hidden meaning may be embedded into the message because harmony and “saving face” is more important than truth and confrontation. This indirect verbal behavior is often associated with Asian cultures. The Japanese version of “yes” (Hai はい) does not necessarily mean “yes” in the sense of agreeing or accepting. It is used often to equivocate, to indicate to the speaker that you are listening, but not necessary expressing an affirmation. In indirect cultures, such as those in Latin America, business conversations may start with discussions of the weather, or family, or topics other than business as the partners gain a sense of each other, long before the topic of business is raised.

Elaborate / Understated

Elaborate and Understated communication styles refer to the quantity of talk that a culture values. The elaborate style uses more words, phrases, or metaphors to express an idea than the understated style. It includes the use of rich and
expressive language in everyday conversation. It may be described as descriptive, poetic or too wordy depending on your view. Commenting on a flower garden a Japanese (Understated) speaker may say, “That’s a beautiful garden” An Egyptian (Elaborate) speaker may go into much more detail about the specific varieties and colors of the blossoms, “This garden invokes so many memories for me. The deep purple irises remind me of my maternal grandmother as those are her favorite flowers. Those pink roses are similar to the ones I sent to my first love.” The French, Latin Americans, Africans, and Arabs tend to use exaggerated communication because in their cultures, simple statements may be interpreted to mean the exact opposite.

The understated style in contrast values simplicity and silence. As many parents usually tell their children, “If you can’t say anything nice, then don’t say anything at all.” People who speak sparingly tend to be trusted more than people who speak a lot. Prudent word choice allows an individual to be socially discreet, gain social acceptance, and avoid social penalty. In Japan, the pleasure of a conversation lies “not in discussion (a logical game), but in emotional exchange” (Nakane, 1970) with the purpose of social harmony (Barnlund, 1975). Many Asian cultures and the Amish value this form.

The conflicts in the elaborate / understated communication styles can occur from interactions among members of different ethnic groups. In one study of an immigrant Korean shopkeeper and an African-American customer in Los Angeles, the clash of styles is evident (Bailey, 1997). In a conversation Bailey analyzes, the African-American customer uses an elaborate style, featuring informal and emotional language, in an effort to establish a personal connection to the Korean shopkeeper. He uses swear words and volunteers personal information about himself. The shopkeeper, however, remains detached and impersonal, resulting in an unsatisfying conversation. This is not unusual in such encounters, as Bailey comments:

The seeming avoidance of involvement on the part of immigrant Koreans is frequently seen by African Americans as the disdain and arrogance of racism. The relative stress on interpersonal involvement among African Americans in service encounters is typically perceived by immigrant Korean retailers as a sign of selfishness, interpersonal imposition, or poor breeding (Bailey, 1997, p. 353).
Personal / Contextual

Remember when we were talking about the French and Spanish languages and the fact that they have a formal and informal “you” depending on the relationship between the speaker and the audience? This example also helps explain the third communication style: the personal and contextual. The contextual style is one where there are structural linguistic devices used to mark the relationship between the speaker and the listener. If this sounds a bit unfamiliar, that is because the English language has no such linguistic distinctions; it is an example of the personal style that enhances the sense of “I.” While the English language does allow us to show respect for our audience such as the choice to eliminate slang or the use of titles such as Sir, Madame, President, Congressperson, or Professor, they do not inherently change the structure of the language.

Instrumental / Affective

The final continuum, instrumental/affective, refers to who holds the responsibility for effectively conveying a message: the speaker or the audience? The instrumental style is goal- or sender-orientated, meaning it is the burden of the speaker to make themselves understood. The affective style is more receiver-orientated thus, places more responsibility on the listener. Here, the listener should pay attention to verbal, nonverbal, and relationship clues in an attempt to understand the message. Asian cultures such as China and Japan and many Native American tribes are affective cultures. The United States is more instrumental. Think about sitting in your college classroom listening to your professor lecture. If you do not understand the material where does the responsibility reside? Usually it is given to the professor as in statements such as “My Math Professor isn’t very well organized.” Or “By the end of the Econ. lecture all that was on the board were lines, circles, and a bunch of numbers. I didn’t know what was important and what wasn’t.” These statements suggest that it is up to the professor to communicate the material to the students. As I was raised in the American educational system, I too am used to this perspective and often look at my teaching methods when students fail to understand the material. A professor was teaching in China and when her students encountered particular difficulty with a certain concept she would often ask the students, “What do you need—more examples? Shall we review again? Are the terms confusing?” Her students, raised in a more affective environment responded, “No, it’s not you. It is our job as your students to try harder. We did not study enough and will read the chapter again so we will understand.” The students accepted the responsibility as listeners to work to understand the speaker.

Variations in Context Rules of Communication Styles

While there are differences in the preferred communication styles used by various cultures, it is important to remember that no particular culture will use the same communication style all the time. It is helpful to think about these descriptors as a continuum rather than polar opposites because it allows us to imagine more communicative options for speakers. They are not fixed into one style or another but instead, people can make choices about where to be on the continuum according to the context in which they find themselves. When a person either emphasizes or minimizes the differences between himself/herself and the other person in conversation, it is called code-switching. In other words, it’s the practice of shifting the language that you use to better express yourself in conversations. This can include, but is not limited to, language, accent, dialect, and vocalics or paralanguage.

There are many reasons why people may incorporate code-switching in their conversations. People, consciously and unconsciously, code-switch to better reflect the speech of those around them, such as picking up a southern accent when vacationing in Georgia. Sometimes people code-switch to ingratiate themselves to others. What teenager hasn’t
used the formal language of their parents when asking for a favor like borrowing the car or asking for money? Code-switching can also be used to express solidarity, gratitude, group identity, compliance gaining, or even to maintain the exact meaning of a word in a language that is not their own.

**Interracial Communication**

Race and communication are related in various ways. Racism influences our communication about race and is not an easy topic for most people to discuss. Today, people tend to view racism as overt acts such as calling someone a derogatory name or discriminating against someone in thought or action. However, there is a difference between racist acts, which we can attach to an individual, and institutional racism, which is not as easily identifiable. It is much easier for people to recognize and decry racist actions than it is to realize that racist patterns and practices go through societal institutions, which means that racism exists and doesn’t have to be committed by any one person. As competent communicators and critical thinkers, we must challenge ourselves to be aware of how racism influences our communication at individual and societal levels.

We tend to make assumptions about people’s race based on how they talk, and often these assumptions are based on stereotypes. Dominant groups tend to define what is correct or incorrect usage of a language, and since language is so closely tied to identity, labeling a group’s use of a language as incorrect or deviant challenges or negates part of their identity (Yancy, 2011). We know there isn’t only one way to speak English, but there have been movements to identify a standard. This becomes problematic when we realize that “standard English” refers to a way of speaking English that is based on white, middle-class ideals that do not match up with the experiences of many. When we create a standard for English, we can label anything that deviates from that “nonstandard English.” Differences between standard English and what has been called “Black English” have gotten national attention through debates about whether or not instruction in classrooms should accommodate students who do not speak standard English. Education plays an important role in language acquisition, and class relates to access to education. In general, whether someone speaks standard English themselves or not, they tend to negatively judge people whose speech deviates from the standard.

Another national controversy has revolved around the inclusion of Spanish in common language use, such as Spanish as an option at ATMs, or other automated services, and Spanish language instruction in school for students who don’t speak or are learning to speak English. As was noted earlier, the Latinx population in the United States is growing fast, which has necessitated inclusion of Spanish in many areas of public life. This has also created a backlash, which some scholars argue is tied more to the race of the immigrants than the language they speak and a fear that white America could be engulfed by other languages and cultures (Speicher, 2002). This backlash has led to a revived movement to make English the official language of the United States.
The US Constitution does not stipulate a national language, and Congress has not designated one either. While nearly thirty states have passed English-language legislation, it has mostly been symbolic, and court rulings have limited any enforceability (Zuckerman, 2010). The Linguistic Society of America points out that immigrants are very aware of the social and economic advantages of learning English and do not need to be forced. They also point out that the United States has always had many languages represented, that national unity hasn’t rested on a single language, and that there are actually benefits to having a population that is multilingual (Linguistic Society of America, 2011). Interracial communication presents some additional verbal challenges.

Some people of color may engage in code-switching when communicating with dominant group members because they fear they will be negatively judged. Adopting the language practices of the dominant group may minimize perceived differences. This code-switching creates a linguistic dual consciousness in which people are able to maintain their linguistic identities with their in-group peers but can still acquire tools and gain access needed to function in dominant society (Yancy, 2011). White people may also feel anxious about communicating with people of color out of fear of being perceived as racist. In other situations, people in dominant groups may spotlight nondominant members by asking them to comment on or educate others about their race (Allen, 2011). For example, I once taught at a university that was predominantly white. Students of color talked to me about being asked by professors to weigh in on an issue when discussions of race came up in the classroom. While a professor may have been well-intentioned, spotlighting can make a student feel conspicuous, frustrated, or defensive. Additionally, I bet the professors wouldn’t think about asking a white, male, or heterosexual student to give the perspective of their whole group.

Attitudes Towards Speaking, Silence, and Writing

In some cultures, such as the United States, speech is highly valued, and it is important to be articulate and well-spoken in personal as well as public settings. People in these cultures tend to use language as a powerful tool to discover and express truth, as well as to extend themselves and have an impact on others. Such countries tend to take silence as a sign of indifference, indignation, objection, and even hostility. The silence confuses and confounds them since it is so different from expected behavior. Many are even embarrassed by silence, and feel compelled to fill the silence with words so they are no longer uncomfortable. Or if a question is not answered immediately, people are concerned that the
speaker may think that they do not know the answer. Countries reflecting these attitudes would include the United States, Canada, Italy, and other Western European countries.

Silence in some Asian cultures can be a sign of respect. If a person asks a question, it is polite to demonstrate that you have reflected on the question before providing an answer. In differences of opinion, it is often thought that saying nothing is better than offending the other side, which would cause both parties to lose face. Sometimes words do not convey ideas, but instead become barriers. In his ethnographic study of the Western Apache Native American tribe, Keith Basso (1970) reported that silence was used for "unscripted" social situations, such as unforeseen encounters, talking with strangers, first dates, times of mourning, or greeting those who had been away for an extended period of time. Later, Charles Braithwaite (1999) expanded the study of the role of silence to a variety of cultures, in which silence tends to be part of the communicative pattern. He confirmed Basso's findings that silence is seen in communication situations in which there is uncertainty, ambiguity, or unpredictability. He also found that silence is often used in conversations in which the participants represent different positions of power or authority. In hierarchical cultures, speaking is often the right of the most senior or oldest person so others are expected to remain silent or only speak when spoken to and asked to corroborate information. In listening cultures, silence is a way to keep exchanges calm and orderly. In collectivistic cultures, it is polite to remain silent when your opinion does not agree with that of the group. In some African and Native American cultures, silence is seen as a way of enjoying someone's company without a need to fill every moment with noise. Or silence could simply be a case of the person having to speak in another language, and taking their time to reply.

The act of writing also varies widely in value from culture to culture. In the United States written contracts are considered more powerful and binding than oral consent. A common question is “did you get that in writing?” The relationship between writing and speaking is an important reinforcement of commitment. Other cultures tend to value oral communication over written communication or even a handshake over words.

Contributors and Attributions

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