CULTURE AS COMMUNICATION: COMMUNICATION STYLE ACROSS AND WITHIN CULTURES

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Abstract

Culture can be conceptualized in various ways, but it is first and foremost communication, as noted by Edward T. Hall, the American anthropologist. This article sets out to demonstrate the need for flexible conceptualization in the area of intercultural studies starting from Hall's nuanced classification of cultures as predominantly "high-context" or "low-context" according to their prevalent communication styles. It looks at a few diverging communicative tendencies in American English, a language that although generally considered a classic example of "low-context" directness, still resorts to oblique, euphemistic expression. Such contradictions as the one between the verbal glorification of the ordinary or the use of euphemism, on the one hand, and informal bluntness on the other, which can be traced either to certain socio-cultural aspects of 19th-century American frontier life, or even further back to the Puritan spirit of early colonists, illustrate the elusiveness of culture, and therefore the impossibility of strict cultural labelling.

Keywords: direct/ indirect, strategies of evasion, verbal prudery, verbal glorification, "mucker pose"

Culture as Communication

Culture can be defined in various ways: as a shared system of meanings, values, beliefs, norms, behaviour patterns, artefacts and techniques (all of which bind people together as members of a community and are passed down from one generation to another), or as the "learned and shared human patterns or models for living", the "day- to-day living patterns" that "pervade all aspects of human social interaction" (Damen, 1987: 367), or even as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another" (Hofstede, 1984: 51).

But culture is first and foremost "communication", a process largely (though not exclusively) dependent on language, as Edward T. Hall, the American

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anthropologist, points out (Hall and Hall, 1987). Language is indeed the primary medium through which both the immaterial cultural components (such as values, patterns of thought, preferences and taboos, etc.) and the material aspects of a national culture are communicated. It also mediates individuals' access to "discourse communities", understood as groups of people with similar interests, goals, communicative needs and discursive practices (from specific ways of producing meaning to the use of certain language conventions, registers, or jargons, etc.) that we can ultimately also refer to as "cultures". A point of view that emphasizes this latter aspect of the mediatory role of language is expressed by Claire Kramsch in an article significantly entitled "The Cultural Component of Language Teaching", as follows: "Culture in the final analysis is always *linguistically mediated membership into a discourse community"* (Kramsch, 1995: 85). If language identifies people as representatives of a culture, i.e. as members of a larger or smaller "discourse community", it implicitly sets world cultures and their corresponding discourse practices apart from one another.

Communication Style across Cultures

A major culture-specific aspect of language use that distinguishes one linguistic (or discourse) community from another is communication style, which over the last decades has been the object of study of more and more scholars (such as anthropologists, cross-cultural researchers, etc.) from outside the field of philology. From an anthropological perspective, Edward T. Hall thus identifies two major communication styles, "high context" and "low context", which can be found in varying degrees across cultures (Hall, 1976: 101). "Context" is rather loosely defined by him as all the "information that surrounds an event" (Hall, 1976: 101), which would include such factors as interlocutors' gender, age, social standing, relationship (e.g. father/son, teacher/ pupil, buyer/ seller, employer/ employee, etc.), the time and site of communication, etc., and even interlocutors' (or their community's) previous experience of verbal/ non-verbal interaction.

The low-context communication style is characteristic of cultures where, as Hall explains, "most of the information" is "vested in the explicit code" (Hall, 1976: 70), i.e. in the message itself, "in order to make up for what is missing in the context" (Hall, 1976: 101). By contrast, "high context transactions feature pre-programmed information that is in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal information in the transmitted message" (Hall, 1976: 101). Since its meaning has to be inferred largely from the context, high-context communication appears as indirect and incomplete, compared to low-context communication. Moreover, in high-context cultures, the scarcity of verbally conveyed information is often supplemented by non-verbal clues (facial expressions, gestures and body movements), which explains why people from those cultural environments, especially Asians, are far better "readers" of body-language than most Westerners (Hall and Hall, 1990).

Since, according to Hall, messages themselves can be placed along a continuum, from low-context (direct statements, logical, causal explanations) to high-context (greetings, winks, etc.), it follows that the high- or low-context character of a national communication style is quantitatively determined by the predominance of one type of messages over the other. Therefore, no culture can be conceptualized as exclusively high-context or low-context, as it is obvious that people will always need to formulate both clear logical, causal, explanations, and indirect, incomplete, allusive statements, depending on the communicative situation, and regardless of their dominant cultural characteristics.

According to Marieke de Mooij, predominantly "low-context communication cultures demonstrate positive attitudes towards words, argumentation and rhetoric, whereas high-context communication cultures can be characterized by symbolism or indirect verbal expression" (De Mooij, 2004: 182). An example of linguistic positivity and directness specific to low context cultures is the use of "categorical" adverbs like "*absolutely*, *certainly* and *positively"* as opposed to the frequent use of more "cautious" words like "*maybe*, *perhaps*, or *probably"* (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988, quoted by de Mooij, 2004: 187) in high-context cultures.

It is interesting to note the correspondences between a culture's preferred communication style and its placement on the Individualism-Collectivism continuum, where Individualism (IDV) is understood as a characteristic of societies in which people tend to pursue their own interests and value their independence ("everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family", and "the ties between individuals are loose", as opposed to Collectivism, a cultural descriptor that is applicable to "societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (Hofstede, 1991: 51; Hofstede, 2012: 96)

Low-context communication is prevalent in individualistic cultures (especially in ethnically and racially diverse countries such as the US, Australia, Scandinavian countries, Germany, Switzerland, etc., where clarity of expression is needed to avoid misunderstanding arising from the lack of "context"), whereas high-context communication is mostly found in relationship-oriented, collectivistic, and ethnically homogeneous cultures (in Japan, Korea, China, Mediterranean and Arab countries, Latin America), where people stay constantly in touch with each other through extensive information networks that include extended family members, friends, acquaintances, co-workers, business partners, etc., and where the existence of "context" facilitates the "reading" of incomplete messages.

The cultural difference described by Hofstede in terms of the priority given to individuals' rights and goals (exemplified, in various degrees, by most of the Western world) versus the focus on collective interests, values and beliefs (in Asian, African, Latin American and most Eastern European countries) (Hofstede, 2001: 214) is at the origin of significant linguistic divides. The best illustration is

the obligatory use of the first person singular pronoun in a sentence, in the languages of individualistic cultures, compared to the omission of the same pronoun in several Asian languages. Moreover, the practice of ostentatiously spelling the first person singular pronoun I with a capital letter distinguishes English (a language spoken in three of the most individualistic countries in the world – the U.S., with an IDV score of 91, ranking first among world cultures, Australia [90] and the U.K. [89]) from all the other languages in the world, and brings it in sharp contrast to those Asian languages spoken in highly collectivistic cultures, in which the "pronoun drop" is quite frequent (Hofstede, 2012: 116-117). Both the emphatic capitalization of the first person pronoun in English, through which the individual "stands out from the crowd" linguistically, and the little prominence given to it through the self-effacement effect of the pronoun drop in many Asian languages (in cultures where people view themselves not in isolation, but as inextricably connected to their in-group) are in keeping with Hofstede's remark that "… individualistic cultures encourage an independent self [whereas] collectivistic cultures an interdependent self" (Hofstede, 2012: 117). The "pronoun drop", however, is not an exclusively Asian phenomenon, and may not necessarily point to high-context, collectivistic self-effacement. It is quite frequent (and extended to all persons) in many Indo-European languages spoken in countries with different IDV scores and varying degrees of linguistic contexting (Germany – IDV 67, France– IDV 71, Spain – IDV 51, Romania – IDV 30, to name just a few), but in these cases the function of signalling the referents is taken over by verb inflections.

An extreme case of high-context surfacing into linguistic expression is the use of various words to designate the self in Japanese, depending on the context (the speaker's age, social status, gender, etc.), as well as the use of different words for the second person pronoun that also depend on the context in which the utterance takes place. In literary Romanian similar "context"-based differences (on a formal/informal, polite/ colloquial scale, with different degrees of formality or politeness) are noticeable in the distinct forms of second and third person pronouns, singular and plural, masculine and feminine ("tu" [informal], "dumneata" [polite, formal], "dumneavoastră" [very polite, very formal], for the first person singular; "voi", "dumneavoastră" for the second person plural, colloquial/informal and polite/formal; "el", "dânsul", "dumnealui"; "ei", "dânşii", "dumnealor", or "ea", "dânsa", "dumneaei", "ele" , "dânsele", "dumnealor" for the third person singular and plural, informal and formal, masculine and feminine).

The last example brings into focus another pair of antonyms, Formal vs. Informal, which is frequently associated with high-context vs. low-context communication, with collectivism vs. individualism, as well as with "power distance", a cultural "dimension" that Geert Hofstede understands as a culture's attitude towards status, authority, and the unequal distribution of power in society (Hofstede, 2012: 68): people in high-context, collectivistic, hierarchical, status-oriented cultures like Japan (to use Hall's example) tend to value a formal communication style, whereas

members of low-context, individualistic, egalitarian cultures like the US prefer an informal verbal expression; as Dean Allen Foster puts it, "[American] egalitarianism makes the hierarchy 'jumpable', the red-tape 'cuttable', the CEO approachable, and plain speaking preferable" (Foster, 1995: 198).

The Case against Strict Cultural Conceptualization: Strategies of Evasion in American English

As we have already mentioned, no culture can be classified as exclusively high-context or low-context. Even American English, which is (to a greater extent than British English) a classic example of linguistic directness, resorts to oblique, euphemistic expression at times, which illustrates Hall's idea of a low-context/ high- context scale rather than a sharp opposition.

In his book *American English*, Albert H. Marcwardt points to an inaugural moment in the evolution of American English when the above-mentioned "plain speaking" usually associated with low-context bluntness co-existed on the one hand with the opposite tendency towards more elaborate expression, which he refers to as "the glorification of the commonplace" (Marckwardt, 1966: 110), and on the other hand with the use of verbal prudery, another example of indirectness – some of which has been preserved in present-day American English. Both could be broadly described as linguistic strategies of evasion – to the extent to which they are prompted by an attempt to linguistically polish, sublimate or bypass the commonplace, the mediocre, the grim, the vulgar, or the morally repugnant – and both have influenced the subsequent evolution of American English.

The "verbal glorification" of the ordinary can be traced back to two socio-cultural aspects of 19th century American frontier life: firstly, the hardship and dullness of "early national life" in the primitive communities of settlers beyond the Appalachians, where "days were long; the work seemed endless", "there were few comforts", and "at times life must have seemed a continual struggle against cold and hunger" (Marckwardt, 1966: 111); secondly, early pioneers' reminiscences of the different lifestyles they had lived before foraying into the wilderness ("They had come from cities and towns which had acquired stability and certain cultural accoutrements" [Marckwardt, 1966: 111]), and their linguistic manifestation as a strong inclination to "clothe [those] drab and commonplace surroundings with the salient features of the life they had known before" (Marckwardt, 1966: 111). Both aspects of early American frontier life led to an understandable impulse to lend elegance, attractiveness, dignity, and even sentimentality to an otherwise dismal, humdrum reality, or to make the ordinary appear as somewhat "grander" than it was, in the hope that each linguistically embellished aspect of life might one day fit the euphemistic name given to it (Marckwardt, 1966: 113-114). The "grand" pioneer vocabulary mentioned by Marckwardt (partly still in use today, or used with a different meaning, the rest being considered obsolete) consisted of

pretentious words such as "saloon" (suggesting elegance through it etymological meaning, i.e. French "salon", "drawing room") for "public house", "opera hose" for any small-town American theatre, "college" extended to various kinds of training and vocational schools (as in "barber college"), "mortician" for "undertaker" (probably by analogy with "physician"), "realtor" for "real-estate agent", "engineer" for "engine-driver", "extermination engineer" for rat and roach "eradicator", "janitor" – originally for "doorkeeper" or "porter", and later on for "caretaker", etc.

From the vantage point of modern American English, we can look at the pioneer "grand" vocabulary not only as the result of a verbal strategy meant to linguistically sublimate pioneers' humdrum existence, but also as the very opposite of low-context "plain speaking", an enduring characteristic of the American communication style. From a different perspective, "the glorification of the commonplace" can also be looked upon as one more linguistic illustration (in addition to the preference for hyperbole and overstatement) of the American strong tendency towards "Monumentalism", as defined by Michael Minkov [Hofstede et. al., 2012: 242-250] (a cultural dimension that we have used in a previous article to explain the propensity of American English towards linguistic excess).

Closely related to verbal glorification is another linguistic "product" of frontier life that has left an indelible mark on present-day American English: the use of euphemism, or "verbal prudery" (Marckwardt, 1966: 122). The "avoidance of the unpleasant word" (Marckwardt, 1966: 122) – a tendency illustrated by the use of such euphemisms as "casket" instead of "coffin", "limbs" instead of "legs", "toilet" instead of "water closet", "rest room" (with its earlier variants "washroom", "powder room", "comfort station") instead of the British "toilet" or "bathroom", and "unmentionables" or "inexpressibles" instead of "undergarments", as well as the entire vocabulary of "near-swearing" (e.g. "darn", "drat", "blasted", "gee whiz", etc. (Marckwardt, 1966: 122-127)) – is also clearly at odds with the predominantly low-context character of the American English communication style.

19th-century Americans' concern with linguistic propriety is, according to Marckwardt, explained by two major factors: woman's dominant position in American society, and the predominantly middle-class character of American society. Due to their "scarcity value" in those times, American women had the power to "alter the dialect, change the manners, dictate the dress and habits of life, and control the morals of every community" (Marckwardt, 1966: 124), according to an 1850 letter quoted by Calhoun and re-quoted by Marckwardt, hence a certain tendency towards linguistic delicacy and an avoidance of taboo words imposed by women especially in the lexical area associated with sex, parts of the body, and the excretive functions. The constant groping for the appropriate, decent word in an attempt to "soften the harsh facts of life" (Marckwardt, 1966: 124) can be exemplified by the long list of 19th century euphemistic synonyms for "brothel"("assignation house", "sporting house", "crib", "cat house", "fancy

house", "call house", "disorderly house", or "house of ill fame"), or the use of "cadet" for "procurer".

Historically, however, it must have been the Puritan spirit of early (17th-century) English colonists (well-known for their spiritual intransigence and resistance to profanity) that had dictated this euphemistic tendency. 19th century Americans' concern with linguistic propriety can therefore be viewed both as a continuation of the earlier Puritan bias towards verbal decorum and as a consequence of contemporary social realities. As a matter of fact, Marckwardt mentions early Puritan settlers' "intense" concern with linguistic propriety (Marckwardt, 1966: 123), and the impressive amount of New England legislation against profanity. What he finds exceptional about 19th-century American middle-class linguistic propriety is not verbal prudery in itself (which is to be found in every language, and particularly in every middle-class society) but "the lavish scale upon which it operated" (Marckwardt, 1966: 129), and the ridiculous extremes it often attained, as illustrated by the above examples.

It should be noted that the avoidance of the ordinary and the vulgar in American English has always been counteracted by the opposite inclination towards excessive directness or even "mucker pose" (Marckwardt, 1966: 129-130), understood as an extreme attitude of linguistic carelessness specific to individuals who either flaunted their lack of culture and refinement, or just feigned ignorance to gain large-scale popular support (as in the case of politicians who deliberately use "ain't" and other features of substandard English in their public speeches during election campaigns even today).

Conclusions

The diverging communicative tendencies that can be found in any language (American English included, as demonstrated by the above examples), as well as certain exceptions to the high-context/ low-context use of language (such as the pronoun drop practice, and the accompanying, strictly grammatical, self-effacement in cultures that are anything but group-oriented) bring us back to Hall's notions of high-context and low-context as categories indicative of prevalent communication styles that do not exclude the use of opposite types of messages within one and the same cultural environment. Apart from that, there are many other factors that may run counter to the dominant communication style in a country, such as generational, gender, professional and educational differences, to name just a few. Finally, there is also the element of global interconnectedness, mostly facilitated by the modern information and communication technology, and especially the widespread use of the Internet, that tends to unify communicative practices and styles and to bring people (especially the young generation) together as one more or less uniform "discourse community" beyond and despite cultural boundaries.

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