Cultural Differences

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Words do not have twins in every language. Sometimes they have only
distant cousins, and sometimes they are not even related
(Truong 2003:223).

Introduction

Given that this conference brings together people of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds to fashion a more credible, influential and unified voice for civil society at the level of international governance, it is essential for all participants to be mindful of the multiplicity of cultural and linguistic challenges that may enhance or impede intercultural understanding. This discussion paper provides a perspective on intercultural communication and some of these challenges. Throughout the paper, recommendations are offered for facilitating intercultural communication.

Culture and Language

All human beings are captives of their culture. Culture is simply a system of models, or knowledge, about how the world works, a construction of reality that is created, shared and transmitted by members of a society. Views of everything from the nature of the physical universe to the structure and functioning of society, notions of gender and personhood, and proper ways for people to live with and treat each other are shaped by cultural models. What we come to know, to believe as true or false -- indeed, our ways of thinking and what we think about -- are constructs of culture.

For example, although the concept of time appears to be a universal, views of time and its relationship to task completion differ among cultures. In one view, time is a linear phenomenon that can be managed, measured and tightly scheduled to "get things done". In this view, relationships among those working together on task completion are left to develop incidentally, while primary emphasis is placed on completing the project "on time". In contrast, in cultures where time is viewed as an inherent quality of the task itself or as a complex web that cannot be organized sequentially, people may place more value on developing relationships at the beginning of the shared task. Its successful completion will be a function of the effectiveness of those relationships.

These cultural differences do not mean that some people will be less committed to building good working relationships or to accomplishing the task at hand. Rather, it means only that working together requires acknowledging these cultural differences and responding with flexibility and respect (Du Praw & Axner 1997:3; Hall 1984).

Moreover, since we cannot think about the whole world at once, it is language, in all its forms, that allows us to organize our knowledge of the universe and our place within it. In other words, language is how humans make sense of the cultural reality they construct, by objectifying it in various kinds of knowledge that can be communicated to others: myths, drama, ritual, scientific narrative, theories, and accounts of everyday experience. Because they are shared and accepted to some degree by most members of a given society, these cultural models are assumed to be the natural order of things. Alternative views may not even be recognized, let alone considered. That is, since most of culture operates outside our awareness, frequently we don't even know what we know or how we know it. In all societies, we learn unconsciously what to notice and what not to notice, what to consider as significant or insignificant information, how to behave as adults and children, how to fulfill our roles as family members, colleagues, workers and leaders, how to handle and delegate responsibility. From the anthropological perspective of culture, there is no such thing as "human nature."

- **It will be important for conference participants to keep in mind that "no two [cultures or] languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same reality" (Duranti 1997:60).**

Cultural diversity, communicative style and social interaction

Cultures, and languages, resemble each other and differ in myriad ways. For the purposes of understanding the most general of similarities and differences in communication across cultures, social scientists have identified numerous "dimensions of cultural and linguistic variability" (Gudykunst 1991:45), three of which seem particularly useful here:

1.   **Individualism – Collectivism:** As one might expect, members of cultures based on an ethos of individualism value individual rights and freedoms over group

obligations, with emphasis on the uniqueness of personal characteristics and goals. Individualism is reflected in interpersonal relations through a communicative style characterized by relatively forceful expression of personal opinions and emotions, the importance of individual accountability for conflict problems, and an outcome-based model of conflict resolution.

In contrast, members of cultures based on collectivist principles see themselves as embedded in a social context that subordinates individual characteristics, desires and interests to the collective good. Collectivism is displayed in interpersonal conflict through expressions of group-centred opinions and ideas, emotional restraint, a tendency to downplay individual responsibility for conflict problems, and a process-oriented model of conflict resolution (Gudykunst 1991:46-48; Ting-Toomey 1999: 1-3, 5).

Of course, no culture is completely individualistic or collectivist. There are elements of both individualism and collectivism in all cultures, in different patterns and degrees, under varying circumstances. For example, in many cultures, gender, class, and ethnic differences may cross-cut and blur the distinction between individualist and collectivist culture types; nonetheless, the categories are useful for understanding such aspects of intercultural communication as variation in how opinions and differences of opinion are expressed and handled.

2. **Low-context – High-context communicative style:** Individualistic cultures tend to rely on low-context communicative styles characterized by emphasis on the explicit, linguistically coded information contained in verbal messages, with less attention paid to non-verbal aspects of communication. Interlocutors accustomed to a low-context style tend to express their opinions and ideas directly, to avoid ambiguity and evasiveness, to disagree openly, and to "speak their minds."

On the other hand, in collectivist cultures, where establishing and maintaining social relationships is stressed, considerable attention is paid not only to *what* is said, but also to *how* it is said. Paralinguistic features such as body posture, gestures, facial expressions, and physical distance between interlocutors form significant elements in interpreting verbal messages. Speakers socialized in high-context, collectivist cultures are comfortable with silence and ambiguity, tend to use words sparingly and to communicate in ways that are empathetic and indirect. High-context interlocutors assume a relationship in which the listener is expected to intuit the speaker's intent and meaning and where open disagreement and conflict should be avoided (Clancy 1986).

3. **Symmetrical - Asymmetrical Social Interaction:** Although some societies are marked by symmetrical, or egalitarian, relationships, with interaction between people of different social statuses assumed to be based on standards of mutual respect, consultation, and informality (Ting-Toomey 1999:3), most societies are characterized by at least some differentiation in social, economic and political status hierarchically marked by asymmetrical relationships. Those in high-status positions possess authoritarian power and privilege not accorded to those in lower-status positions who are expected to display deference and humility in interactions with their high-status "superiors."

   This dimension is particularly important because individuals reproduce their status by the way that they present themselves and engage in communicative interaction. Hierarchically-based relations, in particular, will dictate who will be most likely to give orders, provide explanations or definitions, offer criticism or justification, challenge, apologize, request permission or, in spite of objection, mutely accept someone else's interpretation of an event or situation (Troemel-Ploetz 1998:447).

▪ **Although these dimensions of cultural and linguistic variability describe tendencies rather than rigid and fixed characteristics, they can serve as useful**

guides, particularly for understanding processes of allocating responsibility, decision-making, debating, and conflict management.

Communicative competence and ambiguity

As children, we acquire communicative competence, that is, the ability to function and communicate according to models of language, through interaction as speakers and listeners with our parents, families, peers, and other interlocutors within our social world. These competencies provide us with distinctive and diverse ways of organizing and getting on with life (Hall & Noguchi 1995:1129-30). We learn to use language for achieving complex communicative goals that enable us to satisfy needs, understand our physical environment, express opinions and emotions, acquire and share information and ideas, and develop and engage in social relationships (Bonvillain 2000:266-67). Nonetheless, no matter how competently we use language, it is important to understand that

> language is always, inherently and necessarily, ambiguous. . . . [In] order to communicate we must always jump to conclusions about what other people mean. There is no way around this" (Scollon & Scollon 1995:10).

When interlocutors share the same cultural backgrounds and experiences, their communication is facilitated. They are more likely to "jump to the same conclusions". However, differences in age, gender, education, social position and culture may impede our ability to draw similar inferences from communicative exchange. For example, even among interlocutors who share knowledge of English, the meaning of "yes" may vary from "of course, definitely so" to "maybe, I'll think about it" (DuPraw and Axner 1997:2). What this means is that we can never completely control the meanings of what we say. Communication is not merely the spoken word; it is the interpreted word.

Because most cultural and linguistic presuppositions are non-conscious, interlocutors most often interpret each other's speech subjectively, listening for information that supports their own beliefs. They tend to hear what they want to hear. These subjective responses indicate a low tolerance for ambiguity.

While miscommunication can occur in any encounter, even among people of the same culture or community, cultural differences increase the chances of divergent understandings. For example, in research on intercultural communication within multinational corporations, there are repeated references to issues that arise when non-native English speakers use English with phonetic and grammatical accuracy, but nonetheless, their speech and non-verbal communication reflect their own cultural and linguistic backgrounds and thus may be prone to intercultural misunderstandings (*e.g.,* Khann-Panni & Swallow 2003; Mendez-Garcia & Perez-Canado 2005). In fact,

> the likelihood of cultural misinterpretation actually increases with the greater linguistic fluency of non-native speakers. When conversing with someone whose knowledge of the language of discourse is clearly limited, people are more likely to make allowances for their performance, but when the interlocutor demonstrates linguistic competence, . . . [speakers of the dominant language] tend to ignore possible causes of divergent meanings (Bonvillain 2000:360).

- **Communicative competence and heightened tolerance for ambiguity in an intercultural setting encompass not only how to speak, but also how to listen and understand. Sensitivity to interpretations of their own words and behaviours, as well as those of other participants, will require setting aside regular or spontaneous occasions for jointly checking understandings of conference discourse.**

Politeness and face: When competent speakers converse, adherence to norms of politeness supersedes even the need for clarity, since maintaining positive social relationships is essential to fruitful communication of information (Lakoff 1973:297-298). For example, knowledge of polite greetings provides us with correct forms of address to engage family, friend, lover, stranger and colleague, and with productive strategies for engaging in conversation, discussion and debate (Duranti 2001:208). To foster positive communicative interchange, interlocutors must know how to negotiate appropriate responses to each other's feelings, attitudes and intentions, so as to maintain face.

Although Westerners tend to attribute notions of "face-saving" only to members of Asian cultures, "face" is a universal concept defined as self-esteem -- the public self-image

that every person wants to claim for him or herself (Foley 1977:270). Maintaining and saving face may be accomplished by a range of strategies appropriate to cultural differences in communicative style, such as prefacing interactions with either compliments or apologies for intruding, displaying informal camaraderie or more formal distance, expressing information in a straightforward manner or indirectly so as to avoid potential insult or conflict (Lakoff 1973; Matsumoto 1988).

These strategies express one or both of two basic requirements among all humans: (1) that their actions be unimpeded by others (sometimes called "negative face"); and (2) that their positive feelings of self-esteem be reciprocated and approved of by others (termed "positive face") (Foley 1977:270). Again, it is important to keep in mind that there may be considerable overlap of face-saving strategies among cultures in response to an array of social situations.

- **Mindfulness among all participants to cultural variation in how issues of self-esteem and respect are expressed is an important component of effective information exchange, goal-setting, and decision-making.**

Speech Communities

Although people within a given culture share many assumptions about the world, they are never a completely homogeneous group. Universally, people are differentiated on the basis of such factors as age and gender. In addition, distinctions based on such factors as class, ethnicity segment populations in most modern nations (Bonvillain 2000:2). All of these factors contribute to diversity in communicative behaviour.

Talk, silence, gesture, personal space and other forms of communication take place most frequently within a "speech community" (Hymes 1995) which is defined as "the product of the communicative activities engaged in by a given group of people" (Duranti 1997:82) who are unified not only by speaking the same language, but also by sharing a set of norms and social attitudes towards how, when, and where to use and interpret language. These norms and attitudes go far beyond rules of pronunciation and grammar. They encompass a vast array of conventions ranging from non-verbal

features such as modulating voice levels and making seating arrangements to using appropriate language for greetings and leave-takings, making plans and getting things accomplished, taking turns during informal conversations, setting agenda for formal discussions, framing requests or responses to questions, recognizing and dealing with disagreement, and knowing when to be silent.

As well, speech communities share a range of narrative styles, where human experience is woven into stories recounting events relevant to both speaker and listener. Among other functions, narratives enable us to interpret the past and to speculate about the future. Narrative discourse about the significance of past, present, and future is culturally dependent and is likely to be problematic in intercultural situations. While the modern industrial world may give little attention to history's bearing on the present, in some cultures, historical narrative may be a vital communicative strategy for conveying ideas about elements of the past that are thought to continue into and affect both the living present and the future (Derrida 1994). Moreover, narrative traditions may incorporate accounts of a mythical past in order to make meaningful connections between humans and modern problems (Baquedaño-Lopez 2001; Cruikshank 2000; Sarris 1993).

- **Conference participants must be attentive and responsive to cultural differences in speakers' use of traditional communicative styles that employ narratives of the past as a way to illuminate current issues.**

Obviously, participants will not be conversant with all cultures or languages represented at the conference, nor with specific narrative styles, but almost everyone already belongs to more than one speech community, since the concept includes smaller communities, or networks, of speakers linked by such factors as age, gender, regional affiliation, educational background, occupation, or membership in community groups. Members of these smaller networks share specialized vocabulary and conventions for discourse that set them somewhat apart from others in the broader speech community. Consequently, the concept of participating in a conference-based speech community may enhance communicative affinity among members of the group. What would this

mean? How can participants develop a sense of jointly held notions about communication for the successful intercultural conduct of proceedings in this gathering?

Strategies that facilitate approximation of a speech community include, first, developing a shared vocabulary, second, establishing "collaborative dialogue" (Ting-Toomey 1999:11-12), and third, managing conflict.

1. A shared vocabulary: A group of people can build a speech community using the communicative exchanges that emerge from their daily dealings with one another. For the purposes of this conference, many of these "building materials" will be words -- key terms and concepts that matter to all participants and that must be crafted in such a way that their meanings are acceptable across the group. Keeping in mind that words are never entirely culture free nor unambiguous, individual participants and/or small groups might end their sessions by listing these key concepts, briefly noting understandings of their meanings and/or asking questions about interpretation. Initially, and depending upon participants' level of comfort with this practice, these notes could be compiled, duplicated, and distributed for further comment and eventual re-visiting. Over time, problematic vocabulary might require additional crafting. Building a shared vocabulary should be an on-going, open process of feedback and of checking our own and others' understandings.

2. Collaborative dialogue: Creating a collaborative dialogue (Ting-Toomey 1999: 11-12) entails adopting behaviours that take into account and are responsive to the dimensions of cultural and linguistic diversity listed above. Depending upon participants' cultural background, these behaviours might include:

- keeping generalizations about cultural differences in mind, but resisting any tendency to stereotype other participants;

- listening actively and empathetically, using cues such as head nods or quiet murmurs to signal attentiveness and respect;

- accepting longer pauses and reflective silences between speakers' turns;

- giving time before responding for thoughtful and open consideration of others' communicative styles;

- addressing concerns about problems and conflicting views to the whole group or sub-group rather than singling out one person;
- paraphrasing in participants' own words what others are thought to have said in order to check understanding and get clarification;

- modulating degrees of directness in asking for clarification and giving feedback;

- paying attention to both the verbal and non-verbal content of communication.

- **Thoughtful attention to their own subjective reactions to the speech and behaviours of other participants and being mindful of how others may interpret their communicative efforts should be on-going considerations for all participants at this conference.**

Managing conflict: Societal institutions are rarely neutral contexts for talk. Rather, they are organized to define, demonstrate, and enforce the legitimacy and authority of language used by one class, or ethnic group, or gender while denying the power of others. Communicative forms that diverge may be devalued by those who subscribe to the dominant institutional ideology. Consequently, some verbal formulations serve one group's interests better than those of others (Gal 1991:188).

Generally, people in individualistic cultures tend to prefer direct, straightforward styles of dealing with conflict that result in one group being able to dominate or control how conflict is dealt with and that lead to an imposed solution, whether through a "democratic" decision by majority vote or a more hierarchical method. In contrast, people in collectivist cultures may prefer conflict avoidance, employing silence or indirect, non-verbal and veiled styles of referring to the issue so that all participants may preserve face (Ting-Toomey 1999).

Conflict is likely to occur in any relationship, particularly in intercultural settings, and there is a tendency in most cultures to view conflict negatively. However, conflict itself is neither positive or negative. Rather, how we manage the conflicts we encounter can lead to positive or negative consequences for human relationships

and for achieving goals. Intercultural conflict-management requires a supportive environment based on the following conditions (*e.g.*, DuPraw & Axner 1997; Gibb 1961):

- We cannot understand others if we evaluate them before we truly understand their positions. A more productive strategy is to use descriptive rather than evaluative speech that allows participants to discover how contested issues are being interpreted by everyone in the group. Descriptive speech is prefaced with phrases such as "Do you mean that . . . ?" or "I think you are saying that . . . ".

- Attempting to "out-argue" or to convince others of the rightness of one position inevitably leads to resistance. Defining a common problem and collaborating to find a common solution that is not predicated on predetermined outcomes is a more fruitful approach.

- Participants must communicate in a manner that underscores their equal status. Managing conflicts means avoiding expressions or attitudes of contempt or indifference and dismissive or disparaging remarks that may be face-threatening.

- Rather than taking a neutral stance towards other points of view, it is important to be genuinely interested in and receptive to those points of view. When interlocutors communicate that they are open to new information, that they don't have "all the answers" and that they are willing to take steps to change their behaviours if necessary, the focus will be on a process rather than a single outcome.

- **Be mindful that changing our reactions to others will change the way others react to us. The objective of change is to develop a relationship that can deal with differences. A single participant can begin this on-going transformative process (Fisher & Brown 1988 as cited in Gudykunst 1991:134).**

In conclusion, it is important to remember throughout this conference that

> what is unconscious is not within a person's control, but what is made conscious is available for human beings to understand, to change, or to reinforce (Fisher & Brown 1988:16 as cited in Gudykunst 1991:134.

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