

Cross Cultural Negotiation

How culture can affect communication.

Negotiators in an international setting often find that the process is frustrated because for some reason the two sides are speaking two different languages in more ways than one. Sometimes this takes the form of the way that issues are conceptualized. Other times it is in the way evidence and new information is used. And still other times it is the way one point leads (or doesn't segue) into the next.

This problem with different processes of reasoning and comprehension is extremely interesting but rarely studied in the field of negotiation. A fundamental question is does culture, and maybe even language, have such an effect on how people put ideas together – associating cause and effect – that they come up with a different conclusion than their counterparts, using the same facts and reasoning? In other words, could a line of reasoning that would be effective and persuasive in the US, be totally *ineffective* when negotiating with members of another culture? How does this effect modern global communication?

If this were indeed a potential problem for a negotiator, he/she would be well served to take a close look at the culture and language of his/her counterparts in an upcoming negotiation. For more than simply academic purposes, perhaps the US negotiator should consider keeping detailed notes of the circumstances when they think they are not being understood, or their ideas are simply flying over the heads of their counterparts without any effect.

Let's take a look at the stereotypical European, Latino, and Asian negotiators. Historically, Americans ran into problems with French negotiators due to the logical thought process ingrained in the Europeans known as Cartesian Logic. An extremely loose explanation of this process is that you reason from a starting point of something that is known, and then pay careful attention to the logical way that one point leads to another, and finally to a conclusion to the matter at hand. The French also give higher priority than Americans to establishing the principles on which the reasoning should be based. Once the reasoning process is underway, it becomes quite difficult to introduce new evidence or facts, because the French would feel that this new information, although potentially valuable, could derail

everything that had been accomplished so far. This gave rise to a perception that the French were inflexible, and the concomitant requirement that any new information be introduced very early in the game before it was too late. This process of logic was learned by the French government and business leaders in their education system. Historically, the French gained a reputation for preferring clarity to truth, words to things, and rhetoric to science. Thankfully this has evolved, although many say that vestiges of this form of logic remain, especially in the African Francophone countries.

Let's consider the American vs. Mexican scenario. While the American is impressed and persuaded by expert opinion and supporting hard evidence (and uses such in his/her negotiation), the Mexican is much less likely to be impressed. If anything, the Mexican logic follows the French example more closely than the American. That is because the Mexicans prefer to employ a *deductive* approach versus the American tendency to employ inductive reasoning. Like other Latin Americans and some other nationalities as well, the emphasis is placed on starting with the most general aspects by defining issues, categorizing them, and deciding on the main principle. Once this is done, then logic follows along to the conclusion with less attention to supporting evidence. If new evidence is introduced, it is most likely to be interpreted in light of the main principle already established.

Tentatively, Mexican reasoning may also be more complex by incorporating some of the Spanish traditions that involve placing more emphasis on contemplation and intuition. In this particular regard, Mexican thought processes is more similar to the Japanese. This is because emotion, drama, and feeling play a larger part as contrasted to considerations of efficiency, scientific method, and practical application on the part of the US negotiator. It has been observed that Japanese negotiators tend not to be as impressed or convinced by hypothetical reasoning or justification of principles. What they do appreciate are objective descriptions and information from which conclusions are obvious.

While you can't build your entire negotiation strategy around a study of the reasoning process of your counterparts, the subject deserves at least some reflection. One should also look at religious attitudes and political attitudes that are being held at the time of your negotiation for clues on the local thought process. Read the local newspapers and then read them again, but this time, try reading between the lines. See if you can draw any conclusions about the way the local people think. Are you having the same

emotional or intellectual reaction to current local events as the locals themselves do?

Coping with cross-cultural “noise”

While this certainly isn't any kind of scientific term, the concept of “noise” has long held the interest of communication analysts. Using this concept of noise, they call attention to the fact that background distractions that have nothing to do with the substance of a “message” nevertheless have to be taken into account to understand complications of the communication process between two sides to a negotiation. The more different the cultures, political orientation, and socioeconomic status of the participants, the greater the potential for distracting noise. At the very best, this noise can delay and distract an effective negotiation for both sides. At the very worst, it can threaten or derail an entire negotiation over a completely extraneous issue. Sometimes this distraction really is noise. An example of this occurred during a bilateral negotiation in Baku, Azerbaijan. During a crucial discussion of reciprocal property rights, an air conditioner window unit produced so much noise that it made translation difficult. The frequent requests coming from the translators for both teams significantly added to the stress of the discussion.

Sometimes it is the presence of other people. At a recent negotiation in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, the US team was composed of only five officials, while the Bosnians had over 30 people on their side of the table. To make matters worse, they represented three distinct groups – all at odds with one another. Students and faculty from the University of Sarajevo, the Mayor and several City Council members, and officials from the MFA could not refrain from arguing with each other. I finally had to politely inform them that we would remove ourselves from the negotiations if they couldn't speak with one voice; and that one voice would be the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Sometimes it is telephone calls interrupting a negotiation. In Yerevan, Armenia, a red telephone on the desk of the Mayor kept ringing, each time the American side of the negotiations made a convincing point. Obviously, the Mayor was being “coached” by third parties in another location.

Sometimes it's just the weird habits of the other negotiators. In a North African country, the lead negotiator would incessantly interrupt negotiations

to order food and unwanted refreshments, talk on his cell phone to personal friends, look out the window, and exhibit numerous other symptoms of terminal ADD.

The ability to recognize and abate such noise is particularly useful in cross-cultural communication. An entirely new set of noisy factors reflecting cultural differences may be introduced to add to the stress of transmitting an intended meaning. Such factors unquestionably affect negotiation, especially in less cosmopolitan cities. The noise can range from culturally specific gestures, to behavior, which seems overly – or insufficiently – courteous, or to clothing or offices that do not seem appropriate for the occasion. This confusion arises because such surprises conflict with our expectations and lead to misinterpretation of the situation or the intent of one's counterpart, or of the meaning of the message itself. Sometimes noise makes it more difficult to pay attention to the main subject. You must be sensitive to whether the noise is intentional – and for the purpose of distracting you from a major deal point where your counterpart is weak – or simply a cultural anomaly. An example of physical noise that we are all familiar with is the distance people from different cultures maintain when speaking to one another.

Mexicans stand closer, Japanese stand further away. The emotional alarm that is set off when one's physical space is invaded is an excellent reminder of the unnerving potential of such behavioral mismatches, and also of the degree to which an individual can be entirely unaware of culturally acquired practices until they arise in such a cross-cultural occasion. When emotional issues are involved, such as anxiety over intentions, disgust, modesty, and propriety over the use of obscene language, the challenge to maintain a culturally even keel is even greater.

Americans, especially with regard to our natural tendency towards informality, have the potential to make lots of noise. Examples are chewing gum, slouching, putting one's feet up (especially when directed at another's face), using first names too soon, forgetting titles, starting with inappropriate jokes, overly friendly behavior towards members of the opposite sex, speaking too loudly, acting too egalitarian to those of inferior rank...there are many other examples you can think of.

Often reaction to behavior which "loses something in translation" is amusement, as in the case of the hand gesture that means peace to

Americans and something quite different to other cultures. These are all examples of noise. Since parties to an important negotiation are a little anxious to begin with, a little delicacy is well advised. Otherwise, the introduction of psychological distortion can result in a stressful and not particularly successful negotiation, despite the fact that the two parties may be highly aligned on the core issue of the negotiation.

For Americans, perhaps the most unnerving noise is.....Silence. The Japanese consider long pauses quite normal, while Americans and Europeans get uncomfortable in such a situation. We abhor the “communication vacuum” and often say exactly the wrong thing at such times. We all need to practice getting comfortable with silence. Japanese often are uncomfortable giving too much feedback to their counterparts in a negotiation. Whether this is shyness or politeness is often difficult to perceive. The Japanese actually use smiles and giggles to signal shyness or embarrassment, and this has the effect of confusing the Westerner. The Japanese hate to actually come out with an emphatic “no.”

On the other extreme, as far as Japanese are concerned, the American’s directness, displays of emotion, and often-overbearing manner in selling a point may signal a lack of self-control and therefore untrustworthiness. We are not afraid to say, “no way!” At the very least, it sends a message of insincerity, a threat to the Japanese measure of confidence.

The Mexican also avoids saying “no.” The challenge is to read the expressions and qualifications which mean no, even though the words say or imply “yes.”

Other than a raised eyebrow or two at the typical American’s directness, the American-European differences are less apparent. They are subtle, but exist nonetheless. When to start using a first name, or the informal vs. formal conjugation when speaking in one of the Romance languages, are nuances that are not easy to get a handle on. The meaning of picking up a check, what can be criticized by an outsider, the significance (or lack thereof) of family members being involved in a business negotiation...these matters all have some degree of significance in a cross cultural negotiation; even between members of similar societies.

Can one be too careful in trying to cope with this dimension of cross-cultural communication? Too sensitive to these nuances? In the context of

international negotiation, one must be careful of not overdoing it. After all, the other side knows that you are an American. They will have certain preconceived notions and expectations of you and your team. Your complete and studied avoidance of acting like a “typical American” may actually have the opposite of the desired effect. You may end up coming across as disingenuous. Or your behavioral attempts at trying to be exactly in tune with them might actually create its own variety of noise.

On the other hand, you may want to employ this as a tactic to disarm your counterparts. But only attempt this if you really know what you are doing. Otherwise it could backfire and make it appear as if you are mocking your counterparts, and this form of disrespect could have disastrous consequences.

How much faith to place in translators and interpreters.

Unless you are in an English-speaking country where English is the first language of your counterparts, or unless you or other members of your team are perfectly fluent, you will probably have to engage the services of a translator (documents) and/or interpreter (speaking). Even though English is fast becoming the international language of business, many foreign nationals still prefer contracts to be in both languages with the local language controlling the interpretation of a contract, and jurisdiction in the event of a dispute residing in the local courts.

The effective use of a translator is a learned skill. You must force yourself to speak in “sound bites” – short sentences of words that are readily translated and spoken. Do not give monologues, this invites paraphrasing and creative editing by your translator. Always use the translator to your advantage. Some American negotiators actually prefer to employ translators because they give them the time to think between “sound bites.” It helps to have someone on the team whose only role is that of translator. Depending on your local attorney for the translating during a negotiation distracts him or her from their real job. It’s enough to let them listen to the translator and provide a more appropriate or accurate word or phrase when necessary.

When translation is in fact used, negotiators often make the mistake of treating the process as mechanical – one language goes in here...and pops out there in another language. Not so. Often, technical terms have no equivalent in the foreign language. Often the meaning of rather standard

English business or legal terms have a completely different meaning when used in another context in a foreign language.

For this reason it is critical to have a pre-negotiation meeting with your interpreter. Take all documents, arguments, strategies, and talking points and review them with the interpreter to make sure you and he/she have the meaning of all key words straight. But this is the (relatively) easy part of preparing the interpreter for the upcoming negotiation. The fundamental problem is that culture and language are so inextricably tied together that the negotiator has to ask, “What are the limits in translating ideas, concepts, meaning and nuance? In international negotiation it is often the latent meaning – the way things are understood the next day or week – that determines the effectiveness of the translation, and the agreement that was reached. The more novel (to the counterpart’s business and culture) that a concept is and the greater the contrasts in culture and national experience, the more likely that overconfidence in the interpretation can prove deadly.

Even in French, countless differences of linguistics exist. For example, the French term “avoir raison” would literally be translated as to have the right, but actually means to the French “to be correct”. In the legal sense, *to have the right* to do something is “J’ai le droit”. When the same distinctions are encountered in an English-Japanese context, the opportunity for confusion can be huge. If you saw the movie *Lost in Translation*, you may remember the scene early in the movie when Bill Murray is being photographed for the bourbon advertisement. The Japanese photographer is going on and on for several minutes in Japanese about how he wants the actor to look, and then the translator looks at him and simply says, “He wants you to look more animated.”

The negotiator must be very judicious with the use of American colloquialisms, of which there are many that defy translation. Examples would be: go for broke; if it ain’t broke don’t fix it; let’s cut to the chase; the bottom line; and others. These are the kinds of things that you can control. It just takes self-discipline and self-awareness. You must become adept at understanding what is the effective meaning on both sides of a translation. For example, anyone with a passable knowledge of Spanish would think that the meaning of the word, “discutir” is to discuss. That’s true, but it actually has a more confrontational meaning than you would think. A more appropriate use of language would be “hablar sobre...” or let’s talk about. The Japanese equivalent of the word “individualistic” has a negative nuance,

while in English, it is usually considered a positive personal attribute. When meaning is further afflicted with physical gestures, tone of voice, and sarcasm, which are not subject to translation, the problem of a miscommunication can be magnified.

It is interesting to note that psychologists have reported that when English is spoken as a second language, the tendency of the speaker is to use the English word but retain their primary language's meaning for that word. This manifestation illustrates that until you are able to actually *think* in that language, you are not truly fluent. And if one is not truly fluent, you have to worry about whether the parties are actually *speaking* the same language even if it *sounds* like the same language. So you have to constantly question your interpreter about how your meaning is being passed along to your counterparts. Always be prepared to say something several different ways, just to make sure that an important point is understood correctly.

So what do you do when an idea or concept that you want to propose doesn't exist in the other language? This is obviously very difficult and often involves a level of creativity that is worth stepping back from the actual negotiation to achieve. For example, the word "democracy" didn't exist in Japanese, which is written in characters, not letters, when Japan was first exposed to the West. Something had to be created out of three written characters to produce something like "peopleness" or populism. Everyday usage has reduced this problem somewhat, but a lot depends on the subject of your negotiation. If you are exploring a cutting edge technology, or development idea, this is tricky. You want to sell your idea, not shock or amuse your audience with a malapropism.

Another example is that the English term "fair play" didn't have any equivalent in any other language. In French, word and concept were blended together to form, "le fer ple". In Spanish, "juego limpio" (clean play) has been tried for application in sports, but it fails to convey most of the full meaning in a business or political context. Sometimes you just have to be prepared to fully explain a concept.

Americans may even encounter more confusion when the translation is flowing the other way; i.e. inbound. Often, you won't even know when you are receiving an inexact or incomplete translation for a word or term. Often the interpreter assigns something his/her best meaning and you simply assume you know what they are talking about. A Japanese idea like *giri* (a

special kind of obligation) or *haragei* (consensus-oriented talking around a bargaining point) require more study than the brief meaning an interpreter may give it. There isn't much you can do at these times, since there will be no warning. Just keep questioning anything you don't fully understand and don't worry about appearing stupid. A little underestimation (of you) is a powerful weapon to have in your arsenal.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that the ability to speak English may have significance in other cultures and cities. Despite what you may have heard about nationalistic pride in using the local language, people with whom you are most likely to do business may feel that they are at a distinct disadvantage (both business-wise and socially) if they are unable to speak English. This is because the ability to speak English carries some degree of prestige in most places. Occasionally, your well-meaning but inept attempt to speak in the local language may be taken as condescension.

Consequently, communication difficulties can be introduced when people try to speak English as a second language attempt to use it beyond their ability. Your listener may appear to be agreeing with something being said, but in reality they are just being polite, having no clue what you are saying. When complicated ideas and intentions are at stake, the problem is magnified. The American, whose ability to fluently employ the local language is even more suspect, easily acquiesces to the other party and in the process assumes that more has been understood than is actually the case. Furthermore, the American version of the King's English is not the only *flavor* of English. Although English has become virtually the native language in countries such as India, Malaysia, and the Philippines; local usage over time has produced some significant differences in meaning of words and phrases. The instances of inexact or incorrect meaning increases to give rise to communications problems within the same language.

The foregoing is intended to raise your level of awareness of the numerous factors that you must consider when approaching an international negotiation. You must develop a personal negotiation style and strategy that is flexible enough to accommodate to a variety of cultures and personalities. Before sitting down at the conference table, spend a little time acquainting yourself with the differences and similarities between you and the people on the other side. A little sensitivity and discretion will go a long way.