

'When in Rome.....'
Aspects of Cross-Cultural Communication

David J. A. Walton

The term 'cross-cultural communication' seems simple enough. Common sense might define it as communication between people from two different countries. This is fine so far as it goes but it implies a simplicity that misses the complexity of the situation.

Initially we may want to distinguish between international communication and cross-cultural communication (also called inter-cultural communication). The former implies communication across frontiers and is very often related to political matters with individuals seen as representatives of their particular countries, e.g., the Salt 2 Treaty negotiations. Cross-cultural communication implies communication between individuals from two or more different cultures, usually on matters more sociological than political (though not necessarily so). While it may, and usually does, involve differences of nationality, this is not always the case. The struggle of the Australian aboriginal community for land rights, while it takes place within the national boundaries of one country, certainly involves cross-cultural communication.

Culture itself is one of those abstractions that we all feel we understand but find it difficult to put into words. Definitions abound, from the short "a distinctive way of life of a group of people, their designs for living,"¹ to the lengthy "the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, meanings, beliefs, values, attitudes, religions, concepts of self, the universe, and self-universe relationships, hierarchies of status, role expectations, spatial relations, and time-concepts acquired by a large group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving."²

Another view of culture is Herskovists' notion of it as "the man-made part of the environment."³ Goodenough makes the important point that "It does not consist of things, people, behaviour or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the form of things that people have in mind, their models for perceiving, relating and otherwise interpreting them."⁴ It is what people have to know to function acceptably in society.

The degree to which cultures understand, do not understand or misunderstand each other will depend on the various organizations they give to the world and the way they structure their world view.

Naturally the extent or degree of differences between different cultures will vary. Australians and New Zealanders exhibit a degree of cultural difference less than that, say, between Australians and Qataris or that between white Australians and Australian aborigines. There will exist in fact a **continuum** from cultural pluralism, where practically no one can communicate with anyone else due to distinctions of language, tradition, custom, etc., to cultural homogeneity where there is no cultural diversity.

Hopes of a universal culture remain merely dreams. The 'global village' of mass communications has not come about nor does it seem likely that it will within the next century or so. Universal languages like **Esperanto** and **Interlingua** remain fringe phenomena.

Maletzke adds another dimension in proposing the notion of 'intercultures.'⁵ These are formed horizontally across cultures through common interest, such as holding the same profession. The implication is that an Egyptian doctor say, will be more at home with an English doctor than with an Egyptian farmer. The common interests build up a communication field that is more effective than those vertical, between-strata fields within the culture itself.

Cross-cultural communication takes place then within a framework of cultural variance — a variance based on differences in social perception. As Stewart notes, "It is on the issue of differences either naturally or by acquisition that cross-cultural communication rests its claim for identity."⁶ That is to say that differences are significant for communication, which tends to become inefficient and leads to cultural distortions and aggravates tensions. Much of the tension that exists within and between nations would not exist if attempts at communication had not taken place. Communication requires contact but contact does not necessarily lead to communication. I use 'communication' here to refer not simply to the exchange of messages, but what Martin refers to as an 'isomorphism in construct'⁷ with individuals successfully sharing meaning. In so far as meaning is determined by referents in the environment and the formulation of these into an 'average referent' or 'construct' it is culturally determined. Semantic differential and word-association tests clearly demonstrate this cultural influence. There is an implication here that cross-cultural communication can never be one hundred-per-cent effective. What we do have, however, is a tolerance for deviance from our constructs, since they represent central tendencies of

our referent experiences. It is this tolerance that makes effective communication possible.

Martin, in discussing what he terms the contradiction of cross-cultural communication, puts forward the view that to the extent that one can comfortably communicate with another individual, despite perceived differences, one only communicates within variants of a single culture. Thus no cross-cultural communication takes place. Communication can only take place when the constructs of the individual communicators have approximated towards one another to the extent that the tolerances of construct of each overlap. It is a moot point as to whether this joins them in a single culture or leaves them as representatives of two different cultures.

There are some cultural universals, usually biological needs. These seem to be inherited or instinctive, e.g., hunger is an instinctive drive and is a universal. The way one satisfies that hunger is cultural — what sort of foods will be consumed and how they will be prepared; by whom prepared, at what times they will be eaten, etc. Some writers have attempted to expand the range of universals to include such acts as the domestication of animals, worship of gods, use of stone tools, etc.

What Martin is saying is that communication is intra-cultural rather than cross-cultural, although there will be communication between people, most of whose cultural characteristics may seem totally different. In general, he argues that what is needed for effective communication is empathy — that ability to put oneself in another's place. Empathy leads to that tolerance of variance in constructs which makes communication possible. While it may be that this reduction in cultural variance and the resultant communication is better termed intra-cultural rather than cross-cultural communication, I feel that we would do better to keep the term 'cross-cultural' since that better describes what we intuitively feel we are engaged in. Nevertheless, Martin's term is useful in helping to remind us of our common humanity.

Most writers on cross-cultural communication have attempted to isolate the variables that impinge on that process. A typical list is that given by Porter:⁸ attitudes (including ethnocentrism, world view, stereotypes and prejudices), social organization, patterns of thought, roles and role prescriptions, language, use of space, conceptualization of time, non-verbal expression. Condon and Yousef⁹ include the above and some additional variables but classify them under four general factors: (1) language, (2) non-verbal behaviour, (3) values, and (4) reasoning and rhetoric. This ordering is intended to show increasing complexity and difficulty.

In discussing these four areas I want to direct the discussion towards an individual preparing to work in a foreign culture. In so doing a number of questions will be posed to give a practical slant to the discussion.

1. **Language:** The central role of language in culture is obvious. It is used to mediate all our social relationships and to store and transmit the culture's traditions, history, beliefs, etc. For those who accept the Whorfian position, language shapes our perception and thought. We are in a sense prisoners of our language in this Whorfian view of language determinism. While accepting the view that language influences our perception and that some languages may make it easier to talk about certain ideas, I think the Whorfian view overstates the case. Although English, say, may not have a one-to-one correspondence with a particular word from a given language we are quite capable of having the notion expressed in that word and of using the creative resources of English to encode the idea. The English expression 'fair play' is often used as an example of a phrase not found in other languages. I think it would be wrong to say that non-native speakers of English are unable to comprehend the abstract notion contained in the phrase.

Are we expected to know the language of the host culture? As a general rule facility in the language of the host culture is desirable — not only in terms of the instrumental use of the language but for other reasons too.

Knowledge, or otherwise, of the language will influence how the visitor is perceived and by implication how he feels about the host society. If he can demonstrate some facility in the language he will be regarded as more thoughtful and appreciative. This establishes an immediate rapport. In the Arab world it is believed that Arabic is a very difficult language for foreigners and any foreigner speaking Arabic will be considered as having had to expend a good deal of time and effort. Therefore one must have felt that the result was worth the effort — and it is this effort which particularly impresses the hosts.

This leads to the problem of acquiring the language. There are likely to be time constraints or tuition in the particular language may not be available. The best way to learn the language is to be put in a situation where you have to use it. In other words, living in the host culture will probably be the best method. On arrival then one may be limited to a few phrases — but even this will normally be appreciated. Different standards of fluency will be expected as between say, tourists and ambassadors. Ambassadors with a high degree of fluency may still elect to use interpreters to avoid the danger of diplomatic blunders or to give themselves more time to consider answers. Between zero and total fluency there will be a wide degree of facility. Listeners will often

assume that the speaker is better equipped than he is and develop subtle or serious discussions which are beyond the capability of the speaker. 'Social fluency' and adequate pronunciation are taken as indicators of a much higher degree of fluency.

'Knowing' a language implies at least two levels. A knowledge of the vocabulary and syntax will give one an instrumental knowledge. One can use the host language to do what one would do in one's own culture. A fuller knowledge comes when one is using the language for things that are culturally distinctive. The most difficult areas will be slang, idiom, jokes, and songs. It is no coincidence that these are things most closely tied to culture and ways to thinking and reasoning.

If one accepts the Whorfian position then a knowledge of the language becomes essential for understanding the culture. If one takes the views of Chomsky, that language variation is expressed in the surface structure but that language universals occur in the deep structure, then the need for a knowledge of the host language is not as critical for an understanding of that culture.

How can one approach the culture without a knowledge of the language? Translation is the obvious medium, but, in addition to the fact that something is always lost in translation, the volume of translations available may be very limited. In the case of Arabic for example, very little modern literature is available in translation, although a series of translations of modern short stories is now being produced. Practically no poetry is available in English translation. There is a greater availability of classical Arabic works such as the **Koran**, the **Mu'allaqät**, the **Muqaddimah** of Ibn Khaldun, etc.

Book, films and television productions about the culture may also be helpful although many may be biased, of out date, too general or too specific. However, any knowledge of local history or geography can be very helpful, especially in developing countries where the local population is struggling to assert itself on the world stage, in many cases after periods of colonial domination. Your knowledge of their history or other aspects of their culture, e.g., religion, is evidence that such knowledge is of value, i.e., it implies respect for their culture.

Other ways of getting at the culture without a knowledge of the language include direct experience of such features as fine art, including dance and music, national foods, dress, architecture and discussions with informants — visitors, students, immigrants, etc. For example, in Europe at the present time there is considerable interest in Japanese culture with a number of cultural exhibitions being staged.

While the above are useful substitutes, the person who does not have a knowledge of the host language is still at an obvious disadvantage in that he may miss insights reflected in the language, is cut off from direct access to information from and about the culture and, most important, can never feel the full impact of the cultural patterns in his own behaviour and, through that impact see the complex nature of cross-cultural communication.

2. **Non-Verbal Behaviour:** The above discussion has focussed on verbal language but we have become increasingly aware of the scope and role of non-verbal behaviour in communication. Birdwhistle¹⁰ has suggested that only thirty per cent of what is communicated in a conversation is verbal. The range of non-verbal behaviour is extremely wide, as the following partial list makes plain: hand gestures, facial expressions, posture and stance, clothing, hair styles, walk, interpersonal distance (proxemics), touching, eye contact, direction of gaze, architecture and interior design, artifacts — jewellery, walking sticks — graphic symbols, art, smell — body odour, perfume, incense — cosmetics, tattoos, sound signals — drums, sirens — timing and pauses, silence.¹¹

In other words all behaviour is potentially communication. Research is showing us that these patterns of behaviour are not random but are as systematic as our use of language. We have a long way to go in describing fully the systems that underlie each of these behaviours. We do not have dictionaries for them so far.

It seems that this is an area where a good deal could be done to prepare the visitor for the host culture. Yet most courses in a foreign language do not include aspects of non-verbal behaviour. In some senses an understanding of the non-verbal area is the more crucial. It is harder to control than verbal communication and one cannot ask for clarification of points made.

We much more readily expect, excuse and correct errors in linguistic behaviour than in non-verbal behaviour. Since much of it is below the level of consciousness we perhaps tend to regard it as universal, i.e., not culturally specific. We expect people who are fluent verbally to know the conventions of non-verbal behaviour but we do not expect the opposite, i.e., people who show the correct non-verbal behaviour are not necessarily expected to be fluent verbally.

Because of its complexity and range it is unlikely that we can ever adapt to all the aspects of non-verbal behaviour. And one must avoid exaggeration, avoid becoming, say, 'more Arab than the Arabs,' or 'going native.' Too much concern about errors in non-verbal behaviour may lead to anxiety — which itself may be communicated. A relaxed self is always better than a tense imitator.

However, a few aspects of non-verbal behaviour should be included in briefing programmes as they can help to overcome some aspects of the frustration one often feels in the early period of experience in a new culture. One example from the Arab world will suffice. Most non-Arab first-time visitors to Qatar go through the embarrassing situation of being offered small cups of Arab coffee in homes or offices. Most dislike the coffee, since it is an acquired taste. They drink the first cup in an effort to be courteous and hand it back with much relief only to find that the cup is refilled and returned to them. As the server may not know English, a verbal protestation will not stem the flow of coffee. Eventually by some form of gesture the visitor will manage to indicate that he has had enough. How much simpler if the visitor had known the non-verbal rule of shaking the cup to indicate that one has had enough — a very simple thing that could be included in briefing programmes. A more subtle thing, for those who do acquire a taste for this coffee, is to know, for any given situation, how many cups one should drink — one, two or three are the usual quantities, but they vary from situation to situation.

Often, of course, the host may attempt to adapt in the direction of the visitor — a compromise will be attempted, sometimes with amusing results. Visitors at a Qatari home say, may want to take their shoes off, as the local custom requires, on entering the sitting-room. However, lace-up shoes are more difficult to remove than the sandals favoured by the locals. The host may tell the visitor that it is not necessary for him to remove his shoes. Quite a lot of fumbling, stumbling, 'one shoe on — one shoe off' situations occur on the threshold. Visitors should be told either to wear sandals or slip-on shoes if they are invited to a home in the host culture.

What about taboos? Condon and Yousef¹² believe that taboos are often overrated as major problems in cross-cultural communication. One can usually learn to avoid them without experiencing them directly. Often they are well known outside the host culture. Many people who have never been to the Middle East are familiar with the Muslim prohibition on the eating of pork and some are aware of not using the left hand in communal dishes. If one is in congenial company he will usually be told when he has violated strongly-held taboos. The writer, when staying in a small mountain village in the Hejaz area of Saudi Arabia, made a serious error in wearing, out of doors, a *futah* (wrap-around skirt worn inside the home). When informed by other villagers, the host told the writer directly that this should not be done.

Problems arise more in the area of more subtle taboos, for example, failure to offer a drink to a guest, failure to see a guest off the premises, opening or not

opening a gift in the presence of the giver. Over a period of time these may be more damaging to cross-cultural communication than a single severe blunder. They are likely to be interpreted on a personal rather than a cultural level and blamed on a lack of respect rather than ignorance.

In all societies verbal taboos exist. In addition to obscene language there may be other topics that are not discussed with particular people. In England for example, it is 'not done' to enquire about someone's religion. Similarly in Qatar, one does not enquire, unless one is a very close friend of the family, about a man's wife.

3. **Values:** Taboos very often relate to the value orientations of the particular culture. How can one recognize the value orientations of a person from another culture? Values will of course vary from person to person within a culture but we do seek to recognize cultural values. The value system is, according to Albert³ "what is expected or hoped for, required or forbidden." It is not so much the actual conduct but the system of criteria by which conduct is judged and sanctions applied. These criteria are rarely explicit and are probably best found in such areas as childrearing patterns, folk tales, linguistic data, the tacit codes of social interaction and the law. All societies evolve a world view and a view of their relationship with the environment. Different cultures may see themselves as the masters of that environment, at the mercy of it or working in communion with it.

Value orientations are abstractions even for people within the culture. A starting point for some understanding of these values is a knowledge of one's own values — which may best be seen when one is in another culture. The important point is not to set up one's own values as a standard against which the host culture will be judged. Europeans in Qatar are often critical of local attitudes to punctuality, queuing, and turn-taking and find exasperating the local administrative technique of dealing with several people at the one time.

We shall probably always regard some values as 'preferable' although we should always resist the temptation to see them as 'superior.' As long as the visitor realizes that he is being subjective in his approach to the host culture's values then this is not likely to cause great problems. The real problem arises when he thinks he is being objective. In fact there are no **absolute** standards for values — in that sense objectivity is impossible. Values will always be judged against other values.

Those of us who work within foreign cultures, to the extent that we are encouraging change, are making judgements even if we believe that the techniques we are giving the host culture are separate from the goals they have established.

If objectivity is not possible, how do we proceed? We should avoid jumping to conclusions by with-holding judgement and not drawing inferences. We all like to be able to make immediate sense out of our perceptions. But we must avoid fixing quickly on an explanation and then gathering confirming evidence.

Some people find a foreign culture more enjoyable and stimulating than their own, probably because some specific value-orientations of that culture accord with aspects of their own personalities. Some may find it difficult to return to their own culture. It is often said that those who work or live abroad for lengthy periods cannot successfully return to their own culture. Many migrant workers in Australia cherish the hope of returning to England, Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy or where ever, and many do in fact make that return. A high proportion of them however find that they or their home-land, or both, have changed to an extent which makes it difficult for them to settle, and they re-emigrate to Australia.

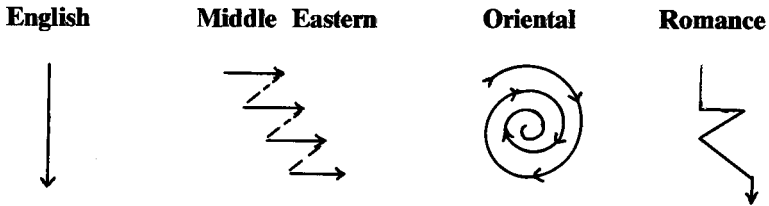
Generally, cross-cultural communication leads to a more critical awareness of one's own culture and a more realistic understanding of other cultures. No studies have yet been conducted to assess which if any value orientations are more central, more at the core, of a given society and which ones are easy or difficult to adapt to.

4. Reasoning and Rhetoric: Value orientations are related to thinking and reasoning and these too will vary from culture to culture. Both in the area of argument — how one gets proofs, and rhetoric — the selection and presentation of the proofs in order to secure acceptance, there must inevitably be cultural variance. A basic division often referred to is the difference between Oriental practice and the Aristotelian methods which are prevalent in the Western world. What relative importance is given to considerations of natural law, basic truth, moral order, physical evidence, the role of witnesses?

Even within Western culture differences may be seen between the Anglo-American emphasis on induction and empiricism and the universalistic deductive reasoning typical of French and other Romance language societies. Condon and Yousef¹⁴ exemplify this in discussing the response of Americans and English Canadians on the one hand and French Canadians on the other, to the classification and semantic components of a banana. The former saw it as merchandise,

a dessert, a subject for painting, etc. The French Canadians, however, viewed these classifications as trivial and urged a consideration of the essence of a banana, getting to the heart of 'bananeness', which transcends all structural classifications.

In an attempt to describe variant thinking in patterns as revealed by strategies for expository prose writing, Kaplan¹⁵ suggests the following schematic models.



Students learning to write English prose need to know not only the correct syntax but also the logic of an English paragraph with its basically linear structure.

Generally, we regard as reasonable what sounds like what we would have said. In other words familiarity comprises a large part of reasonableness. We tend to assume that what can be argued in one language can be argued in another, allowing for some distortion. What is needed by the visitor is a sympathetic appreciation of the fact that what appears unreasonable to him may appear reasonable to his hosts. If one is to understand such reasoning then one has to see it from the other person's point of view. That is, an empathic ability is required.

While there may be little moral or intellectual hesitation about trying to alter our language or non-verbal behaviour when we enter a foreign culture, as an aid to cross-cultural communication, we are more hesitant about value changes and extremely hesitant about changes in thinking and reasoning — since we often consider these as culture-free.

The extent to which we are prepared to meet the above dimensions of the host culture, i.e., language, non-verbal behaviour, value orientations and reasoning and thinking patterns will determine the nature of our 'culture shock' — the frustration, anger, alienation or depression, that we feel when first confronted with the host culture. Some cultural shock is inevitable and, some would argue, necessary. What is important is to be able to recognize these feelings and know how to respond to them. Each case is personal and more psychological than cultural. The symptoms may be withdrawing, excessive sleeping, a great desire for news from home (home sickness) or day-dreaming. In Qatar, for example,

many foreigners who come to work, retreat into the expatriate community and live out their stay with little or no contact with the host culture.

If the symptoms of culture shock persist for say, over six months, the person would be well advised to leave. Culture shock may occur, not immediately, but after a person feels he has adapted. It may be triggered by physical, structural, sensual, or psychic devices or just being sick of all 'this.' In Qatar, the heat, the barrenness of the landscape, the frustration of dealing with a system not comprehended and for which they feel little sympathy, just becomes too much for people who initially appeared well adjusted.

This then is the setting for cross-cultural communication. There are difficulties but we must not assume that the difficulties are insurmountable. We must seek to find ways of operating as effectively as possible in whatever setting we find ourselves. We are each of us "like all other men, like some other men and like no other man."¹⁶

We are members, as 'multiple selves' of several cultures. We need 'an environment in which we can flow back and forth among our various selves without feeling stuck... (We need)... to free ourselves from our deep-rooted addiction to sensing and coding reality in rigid and narrow patterns.'¹⁷ Only then can we experience fully the rich variety of which we are part.

NOTES

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3. Herskovits, M., reported in Martin, L., "Contradiction of Cross Cultural Communication," in Fischer, H. and Merrill, J., **International and Inter-Cultural Communication**, Hastings House, 1976, p. 429.
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5. Malezke, **op. cit.**, p. 415.
6. Stewart, E., reported in Prosser, M., "The Cultural Communicator," in Fischer and Merrill, **op. cit.**, p. 418.
7. Martin, **op. cit.**, p. 425.
8. Porter, **op. cit.**, pp. 6-17.
9. Condon, J. and Yousef, F., **An Introduction to Inter-cultural Communication**, Bobbs-Merrill, 1975.
10. **Ibid.**, p. 125.
11. **Ibid.**, p. 123.
12. **Ibid.**, p. 261.
13. **Ibid.**, p. 50.
14. **Ibid.**, p. 228.
15. Kaplan, R., "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education," **Language Learning**, 16, 1970.
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17. Saral, T., "The Consciousness Theory of Intercultural Communication," in Asante, M., **et al.**, **Handbook of Inter-Cultural Communication**, Sage, 1979.