COMMUNICATING ACROSS CULTURES (PART 1)
by Norhayati Ismail

"She's so cold and uncommunicative. She never shows any emotion."

"Why does he talk like that? I wish he would get straight to the point instead of beating around the bush that way."

"He's so direct and brash."

"Doesn't he know that it's rude to keep people waiting like this? He's an hour late!"

"She talks so much. I get tired just listening to her talk."

We often hear remarks like the above made by people around us. In fact, we may even have made some of these remarks ourselves. Sometimes these remarks are justifiable; at other times they may not be so. But what actually triggers such remarks? Usually we make such remarks about other people when they display behaviors that we consider inappropriate or unacceptable in our culture. But what is deemed acceptable in our culture may be considered strange or totally inappropriate in other cultures. So when the target of the above remarks are people who come from cultures different from ours, there may actually be no justification at all for making such remarks because the behaviors displayed may be perfectly acceptable in their cultures.

With more and more companies going global in today's changing business environment, it is not at all uncommon to walk into an office and to find ourselves looking at a multinational multicultural workforce. In fact, this is becoming more and more the norm these days. Gone are the days when developing intercultural communication skills was relevant only to business executives who had to cross national borders for overseas assignments. Today, you don't even have to leave your own country to find yourself in face-to-face contact with people whose cultures are markedly different from yours. So, in order to succeed at the workplace today, it is important for you to develop effective intercultural communication skills.

Culture defined

Before we delve further into the subject of intercultural communication, let us first take a look at what we mean by culture. Iris Varner and Linda Beamer, in *Intercultural communication in the global workplace,* define culture as "the coherent, learned, shared view a group of people has about life's concerns that ranks what is important, instills attitudes about what things are appropriate, and prescribes behavior, given that some things have more significance than others."

There are a couple of things about this definition the writers feel we should take note of. First, "culture is not something we are born with, but rather it is learned", imparted to us through our upbringing and exposure to the practices and rules of conduct of the culture of which we are a part. Next, "culture is shared by a society. Members of the society agree about the meanings of things, and why." They agree about what's important and what's not. Next, "cultures rank what is important. In other words, cultures teach values

or priorities." And these in turn shape attitudes. We usually behave in ways that we think are appropriate or acceptable in our culture. Any deviation from what is thought of as appropriate may in fact invite scorn from members of that culture. Having mentioned that, it is important for us to remember that what may be deemed as appropriate in one culture may be unacceptable in another culture.

To make the above point clearer, let me bring in an example from the movie *Seven Years in Tibet*. At one point in the movie, Heinrich Harrer, the main character in the film was asked by the Dalai Lama to build a kind of movie theatre in Lhasa, the holy city of Tibet. And there's this one scene when he and a group of Tibetans were digging this piece of land where the theatre was going to be built. For readers who have seen the film, could you remember the Tibetans' reaction when their shovels and spades uncovered earthworms in the ground? They made such a fuss about the whole thing because the Tibetans who were largely Buddhists believed that these worms could be reincarnations of their ancestors and so must be treated with great care. They couldn't just let the worms die.

Going back to the definition of culture we have seen earlier, we can see here that the Tibetans, as a community shared the view that the worms must not be allowed to die because they believed in reincarnation. This influenced their behavior in treating the worms with care and making sure that no harm was inflicted on them.

For Heinrich Harrer, who was originally from Austria, the belief in reincarnation was something he was not familiar with and as such could not relate to very well, so the Tibetans' insistence on treating the worms with care was quite incomprehensible to him. In his view, if the worms had to die in the process of their digging the ground, then that's just too bad; it was not their intention to kill the worms. So, what you see here is people operating and interpreting situations differently using different mental representations shaped by different experiences, different belief systems, different cultures. What is viewed as appropriate in one culture may be viewed as inappropriate or even strange by people coming from a different culture.

Because people of different cultures differ in the way they do things, in the way they view things, and in the way they communicate, it is important for us to develop an awareness of what it means to come from our own culture and make the effort to achieve a better understanding of how things may operate differently in other cultures. This I feel is the first important step to help us achieve effective interpersonal communication across cultures.

Factors affecting communication across cultures

The subject of intercultural communication is however one that is very broad and fairly complex so in this short article, I will just provide you with a very brief introduction to some easily identifiable aspects of culture that may have an impact on intercultural communication and often discussed in various books on the subjects. Specifically, we will look at five key aspects of culture: (1) Level of formality; (2) Level of directness and explicitness; (3) Perception of time; (4) Perception of the individual versus that of the group; and (5) Show of emotion.

Before we look at each of these aspects more closely, I would like to stress that statements made in subsequent sections about particular groups of people are just broad generalizations. The intention is not to invite readers to form stereotypical images of different groups. On the contrary, it would be wise to acknowledge the uniqueness of the individual in all our interpersonal communication.

Level of formality

Let us begin by looking at the first key aspect – the level of formality.

In some companies, employees address their bosses by their first names, for example, "Hi Tom!". In some other companies, this would be totally inappropriate. Bosses have to be addressed as Mr X, Mrs Y, or Ms Z. Very often, the latter scenario is one that we would encounter in a culture in which the workplace is characterized by a greater degree of formality. If the level of formality is seen as a continuum, then most Asian cultures will be on the high end of this continuum. In contrast, the North American culture will be one of those on the low end of this continuum.

At this point, I'm reminded of an incident that a friend of mine encountered while he was working abroad. He's a German who was sent to the United States for a six-month posting. In the first month of his stay there, he was asked to give a presentation at a meeting with his North American colleagues so he got himself all prepared for the presentation which for him was very important as it was his first one in the US office. But while giving his presentation, he got himself quite flustered because he noticed some of his American colleagues were chewing gum. To a German, chewing gum while one is giving a presentation may indicate that you are not paying attention, translating into lack of respect and appreciation for the speaker. In fact, there are times when such a behavior may even be construed as rude. That of course may not be true as the Americans can sometimes be quite casual at work and the display of such behaviors in the above context does not in any way indicate any lack of attention or good manners on the part of the audience. However, even though my friend's colleagues were behaving in a way that may be acceptable in the North American culture, that behavior was unacceptable to a German as the Germans are usually more formal and serious in their approach to work. This is in fact reflected in how the Germans usually address their bosses and colleagues. It is always *Herr X or Frau Y* and the formal pronoun Sie is used instead of the informal Du. (Note: In the German language, a distinction is made between informal and formal pronouns. The former is used usually with friends and family members and the latter is used with bosses, colleagues, and new acquaintances.) In this particular example, my German friend was interpreting the Americans' behavior using his mental filter, shaped by his own culture, and this of course was different from that of the Americans.

Clearly then, to avoid such misunderstandings and feelings of animosities, it is important for us to develop an understanding of how things may operate differently in other cultures.

Level of directness and explicitness

Next, depending on the culture we come from, some people may appear very direct and explicit in their communication or very indirect and vague. Again the level of directness

and explicitness we display in our communication is determined to a large extent by culture.

Most people from the Asian and Middle Eastern cultures place a high reliance on shared experience, non-verbal cues, and the context in which the communication takes place in their communication with others. Consequently, they can appear as rather indirect and vague in their verbal communication. However in some countries, like the United States, Switzerland and Germany, people are very direct, precise and explicit in their communication because they rely heavily on the spoken word for meaning. Reliance on context here is low; so is reliance on non-verbal cues. Because of their style of communication, they may appear as too direct and overly talkative.

Allow me at this point to relate to you another story related by Iris Varner and Linda Beamer in Intercultural communication in the global workplace. The story is about a very distinguished 75-year old Chinese scholar and statesman who was being honored by a university in the United States. He had just made a 21-hour flight from Beijing and was met at the airport by some friends, who exclaimed, "You must be very tired!". His response was, "It's possible ..." with the implication it was not really so. Of course he was tired! He was an old man who had sat on airplanes or in airports for 24 hours straight. But the context - the meeting in an airport at night, the fact of his long journey, his age, his slightly glazed eyes - communicated the obvious - that he was tired. It was unnecessary to put into words. Now let's imagine the situation in reverse - an American traveling to Beijing and getting off the plane after 24 hours of flight. In response to the comment, "You must be tired!", it isn't hard to imagine the response to be something like this, "Tired! I've never been so tired in my whole entire life! I've been sitting on planes or in waiting rooms for 24 hours and wondered if my legs would ever work again! My eyes are so gritty with sleep they feel like the Gobi desert was in that plane!" and so forth. Notice, how everything was explicitly stated in words. Reliance on context here is very low.

Under certain circumstances, the indirectness that characterizes the communication in some cultures is to a large extent a strategy to avoid causing another person to lose face. It can be viewed as consideration for another person's sense of dignity. However, in cultures that are direct and explicit in their communication, this indirectness may be seen as dishonesty, suggesting that the speaker may have something to hide.

How would awareness of the above help you with your communication across cultures? Here's how. If you are communicating with people who come from a culture that is on the low end of the directness and explicitness scale, you need to exercise extra care in what you say and how you say something so as not to unintentionally offend them by being too direct. You also need to pay very careful attention to non-verbal cues, shared experience, and the circumstances within which the communication takes place as the true or more accurate meanings of messages may actually reside in some of those factors rather than in the words uttered. On the other hand, if you are communicating with people who come from a culture that is on the high end of the directness and explicitness scale, say exactly what you mean. Also, do not be easily offended when your ideas or opinions are attacked with a degree of directness you are not used to. Bear in mind that in some cultures, this directness is a technique members use to achieve clarity in what they mean. So, just be objective in hearing what they have to say and remember that attacks on ideas are not

personal and are not voiced to deliberately embarrass you. Also, remember that in such cultures, reliance on context is low, so be especially attentive to the spoken word as this would usually serve as your main source of information in your communication with them.

Perception of time

Next, cultures also differ in their perception of time. Edward Hall, a prominent researcher in the field of intercultural communication, made a useful distinction between monochronic-time and polychronic-time cultures. Although the terms may sound very technical to you, let me assure you that the explanation is fairly simple and easy to understand. In monochronic-time cultures, members place a high emphasis on schedules, a precise reckoning of time and promptness. In such cultures, schedules take precedence over interpersonal relations. Also, because of this urgency to keep to schedules, members try to get to the point quickly when communicating and as such may appear rather rude or brash. In polychronic-time cultures, time is viewed as more fluid and members do not observe strict schedules. In such cultures, preset schedules are subordinate to interpersonal relations. Most Western countries and quite a number of European countries are monochronic-time cultures whereas most Asian countries, and some Latin American and Middle Eastern countries are polychronic-time cultures.

Knowing how cultures view time will also help you to adapt better to the global business environment. If you are someone from a monochronic-time culture, you must learn patience when communicating with people from a polychronic-time culture. If they fail to turn up for an appointment at a scheduled time, this should not be immediately interpreted as rudeness or callousness on their part. Conversely, if you are someone from a polychronic-time culture and are dealing with people from a monochronic-time culture, try to stick to schedules as much as you possibly can.

Perception of the individual versus that of the group

Let us now move on to another aspect of culture where we look at how the individual and the group are viewed. Cultures can be characterized as either more individualist or collectivist in orientation. Geert Hofstede, another prominent researcher in the field, defines the individualist culture as one in which "the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. In a collectivist culture, people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive groups, which throughout their lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty."

In an individualist culture, the individual takes center stage and independence is highly valued. In a collectivist culture, an individual is regarded as a part of the group and a high degree of interdependence among individuals prevails in the same group.

Iris Varner and Linda Beamer point out that in an individualist culture, "a single person can earn credit or blame for the success or failure of an organizational project". In a collectivist culture, however, "credit or blame goes to the group". In such a culture, "individuals do not seek recognition and are uncomfortable if it is given".

I once had a conversation with a North American guy who at that time was working in Indonesia as a consultant to banks on disaster recovery. He related to me an incident that happened to him while he was there which struck him as rather odd. This was how he told the story to me: "At one of my presentations to a client - a bank, I made one suggestion that individual employees who did a good job ought to be given greater recognition by which I meant giving them face in front of their colleagues, not monetary reward. Everyone at the presentation was horrified. I'm not sure but I think it's probably just not the Indonesian way to seek recognition or stand out from the crowd. This is very different from the situation in the States." The difference here is a difference between a more collectivist orientation (the Indonesian culture) and a more individualist orientation (the North American culture).

Show of emotion

Finally, cultures also differ in their expression of emotion. In another interesting book on intercultural communication, Fons Trompenaars, in *Riding the waves of culture,* notes that members of some cultures tend to be more expressive with their emotions and "show their feelings plainly by laughing, grimacing and scowling". However, in some cultures, members tend to be more repressive and do not show their feelings openly but rather keep them "carefully controlled and subdued".

Obviously, in work environments where people from these two cultures are in contact, misunderstandings can occur. People from the more expressive culture may view people from the repressive culture as cold or unfeeling. On the other hand, people from the repressive culture may view their more expressive colleagues as immature and eccentric.

Tips for effective interpersonal communication across cultures

As you can see, interpersonal communication across cultures can be rather complex because of cultural differences. So in order to help you become a more effective communicator at the global workplace, here is a list of things that you should do:

- *Develop a sense of cultural awareness.* First of all, be aware of what it is to be from your own culture. Then, learn all you possibly can about the culture of the people with whom you need to communicate.
- *Do away with ethnocentrism.* When communicating with people across cultures, you need to give up any sentiments of ethnocentrism, that is the tendency to judge all other groups according to your own group's standards, behaviors and customs and to see other groups as inferior by comparison. This is because different cultures have different ways of behaving and interpreting behaviors so you must learn to:
    - *Recognize differences.* Just because people do things differently from you, that does not mean that they are inefficient or stupid. Being different should not always be seen as negative.
    - *Show respect* for your counterparts.
- *Learn to adapt.* Be flexible and ready to adapt and adjust your behavior, but do not overdo your adjustment as then you risk being perceived as insincere. Just try to act in a way appropriate to the target culture, be yourself and show sincerity.

Communicating across cultures (Part 2)
by Norhayati Ismail

When we discuss the subject of communication across cultures, language is something that we cannot ignore because language is so much a part of culture and for most of us is the main medium we use to transmit messages. However, because of its central importance, factors pertaining to language can also be the source of many misunderstandings in intercultural communication.

In this short article, we will look at some of the problems that could arise when we communicate with one another cross culturally that are caused by language-related factors. More specifically, we will look at the problems with translation, the problems with pronunciation, the problems with word choice and meaning, and the problems with slang and idiomatic expressions. Hopefully, with a greater awareness of these potential problems, we could take some steps to use language more effectively for improved communication across cultures.

Problems with translation

When we communicate with people of a different culture, it is always good to be able to utter a few words or phrases in their language to establish affinity. However, when we are not proficient in the target language, there is a strong tendency for us to translate messages from our native language to the target language. Sometimes this technique works very well. Unfortunately, at other times, we may land ourselves in some very embarrassing situations.

To illustrate the above point, let me just cite two examples taken from Richard Lederer's very entertaining book *Anguished English*. The first involves President John F. Kennedy who made a blunder while making a speech at the Berlin Wall, Germany, in 1963. The President had wanted to say "I am a Berliner" in German and came up with the translation *"Ich bin ein Berliner"*. However, in the German language, words for nationalities are not preceded by articles so he should have said *"Ich bin Berliner"*. *"Ich bin ein Berliner"* actually means "I am a jelly doughnut". The second example involves Pepsi-Cola at the time when it invaded the huge Chinese market. Its product's slogan "Come Alive with Pepsi" was translated into Chinese and the equivalent meaning of that translated slogan in English was "Pepsi brings back your dead ancestors". I don't know about you but I certainly wouldn't want to drink something that's going to bring back my dead ancestors!

So, as you can see, translation of messages from one language to another is something not to be taken lightly. You have to be careful that the resulting meanings are what you intended. All right then, if you think that misunderstandings in intercultural communication can only arise when two cultures are using different languages, then I hate to tell you that you are wrong. Even when two cultures are using the same language for communication, problems may still be encountered when communicating with one another cross culturally. "How is that?" you may ask. Well, let us just take the English language as an example.

Problems with pronunciation

Even though English is used widely throughout the world, regional differences exist in pronunciation thus making it difficult sometimes for speakers of English from two different countries to understand one another. I have just got back from a holiday in England during which time I had the good fortune of taking the much talked about Thames River Cruise. It was a very pleasant cruise down the river except that, for the life of me, I could not understand what the guide was saying in his commentary because of his heavy Cockney accent. He was speaking English but the difference in pronunciation just made it impossible for any communication to take place.

In Singapore, my home country, many of us use the English language for communicating with one another and usually we have no serious problems understanding each other. But when we communicate with a foreigner, it is not unusual for the foreigner to have difficulty understanding us. One of the reasons is again the difference in pronunciation. Most Singaporeans do not make a distinction between the words "airport" and "airpot", for example. Neither is there a clear distinction made between words like "tree" and "three" and "pen" and "pan". It is easy to imagine how these pronunciation differences can lead to misunderstandings when communicating across cultures.

So, when we are communicating with people cross culturally, we ought to be especially careful with our pronunciation in order to achieve mutual understanding.

Problems with word choice and meaning

In discussing this, we will look at the potential problems that could arise with the use of ambiguous words and unfamiliar words.

Ambiguous words

Next, the same word may have different interpretations in different cultures. Let's take the word "family" as an example. "Family" in most parts of Asia refers to parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and so on. But "family" to an American or European refers to the immediate family that essentially includes husbands and wives or parents and siblings. So, if two colleagues, an Asian and an American, were to carry on a conversation about their families, they may think that they are talking about the same thing but actually they are not.

Unfamiliar words

In business, the use of unfamiliar words could sometimes lead to an expensive loss of business. Let me illustrate this with a story related by Roger Axtell in *Do's and taboos of using English around the world.* The story involves a business discussion between an American businessman and a Japanese customer. The American concluded his business discussions with his Japanese customer with, "Well, our thinking is in parallel." They bid goodbye, but weeks and then months passed with no further word from the customer. Finally, frustrated, the American phoned and inquired what had happened. "Well," the Japanese replied, "you used a word I didn't understand. Parallel. I looked it up in my

dictionary and it said parallel means 'two lines that never touch'". The Japanese had concluded that the American thought their thinking was apart.

In order to avoid miscommunications like the above from taking place, there are simple measures you could take to achieve greater clarity in what you mean. For a start, choose your words carefully, making sure that they are not ambiguous in meaning and are quite commonly used so they are easily understood. Next, provide qualifications and definitions to terms that are likely to cause misunderstandings. Finally, ask for feedback to ensure that the message has been clearly understood.

Problems with slang, idiomatic expressions

Next, cultures may develop their own slang and idiomatic expressions that may be foreign to other cultures using the same language. Let me illustrate this with an oft-cited ad by Electrolux that worked very well in Europe but was unusable in America. The slogan in the ad reads, "Nothing sucks like the Electrolux." For the American reader, I am sure you could see immediately why the ad will not go down well with the American audience. When an American says, "something sucks", it means that that something is bad. The slang expression "it sucks" has very negative connotations in the States. However, in Europe and perhaps in many other parts of the world, the word "sucks" has a literal interpretation so the slogan is perfectly all right.

Let's now move on to idiomatic expressions. Suppose you were having a conversation with a colleague who isn't a native speaker of English and who isn't very proficient with the language. Then, he said something to you that you couldn't quite believe. So, in response to this, you said, "You're pulling my leg, right?" ("You're pulling my leg" is of course just an idiomatic expression for "you're bluffing".) However, if your colleague is not familiar with this idiomatic expression, he would really be puzzled by what you meant because obviously he had not touched you, let alone pulled your leg!!

So there you go. Problems that could arise when communicating with people across cultures brought about by differences along the language dimension. Working in today's global business environment, what could you do to ensure effective communication with people whose cultures differ from yours? Here are some tips you may find useful:

1. Speak slowly and clearly, ensuring accurate pronunciation.
2. Use simple, frequently used words.
3. Be very careful with translation.
4. Avoid slang, colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions.
5. Make one point at a time.
6. Adapt tone of voice, style and behavior to what is culturally acceptable to your audience.
7. Watch the other person for misunderstanding and be ready to provide feedback.

References: Axtell, R.E. 1995. *Do's and Taboos of using English around the World.* New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

1. Lederer, R. 1989. *Anguished English.* New York: Dell Publishing.