

INSIGHTS INTO LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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***Abstract:** The paper focuses on language variety in cross-cultural business contexts. It analyzes different speech patterns which reveal disparities between linguistic styles and shape divergent profiles. The first part discusses language features of high- and low-context communication, as well as the biased attitudes arising in cross-cultural exchanges. The second part concentrates on language as a vehicle for expressing gender distinctions, providing a useful radiography of men's and women's modes of discourse.*

***Keywords:** business exchanges, gender/register distinctions, high- and low-context communication, language variation, linguistic styles*

1. Introduction

Numerous research studies show that communicators with excellent verbal skills know how to give their words added impact and turn verbal communication into persuasive communication. Their talk consists of positive elements (affirmative and assertive language, the language of integrity, etc.) which make them credible and competent persuaders, capable of presenting their ideas through an infinite choice of word combinations. For them communication is not simply talking, but talking emphatically, decisively, and always focusing on the listener's perspective.

Linguistically, words like *profit, money, benefit, easy, new* display different meanings according to the interest that one takes in something. Semantically, the injection of such attention-grabbing words into one's speech, especially in a proposal or a presentation, is likely to suggest power and potency, confidence and comfort.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, words spark off emotional meanings and reactions, affecting our minds, and changing our moods and feelings. Research psychologists confirm that the conscious choice of certain emotionally suggestive words, whose meanings are left to the listeners' imagination, affects the moods and attitudes of the latter. The emotional (vivid) message they carry behind their dictionary definitions influences quicker behaviour change than logic can do:

As rational human beings, we like to think that logic drives most of our decisions. But the fact is, in most persuasive situations, people buy on emotion and justify with fact. People may be persuaded by reason, but they are moved by emotion. (Mills 2000: 106)

Specific social factors like class and gender play an essential role in language variation and social interaction. They trigger differences in vocabulary, pronunciation and the use of grammar. For the lower and working class, 'Liverpool English' is the most frequently used accent, people pronouncing *bewk* (for *book*), or *tuck* (for *took*) and *luck* (for *look*); similarly, the *Cockney* accent is easily recognized by the change of the interdentalals [ð], [θ] sounds into the labio-dentals [v] or [f], as in [brʌvə] for brother, [fi:f] for *thief*, or [fɪŋk] instead of *think*:

I'm *thinking* about how the *thief* was caught with his hands in the till.
becomes

I'm *finkin'* about how the *fief* was caught with his hands in the till.

For the upper-classes, words or phrases such as *reckon*, *afeared*, *booze*, (*I'm done*, *Hey*, *Can I get*, *Eatery*, *Lounge*, *Deliveroo*, *Uber*, (*Do you get (me)?*), *Uni* (Hanson 2017a, b) are considered incorrect (no-no words), colloquial slang and a reflection of low class status. Instead, in virtue of their etiquette standards, 'uppers' prefer the terms *suppose*, *afraid*, *alcohol*, (*I'm finished*, *Hello*, *May I have*, *Restaurant*, *Sitting Room*, *Takeaway*, *Taxi*, (*Do you understand (me)?*), *University*.

2. Language between high- and low-context communication

Language variety is easily noticed in speech patterns within the same speech community. Variations in vocabulary for men and women are best reflected in doublets (word pairs) with similar meanings, but different forms, one female word and one male word. Being articulated or tongue-tied, rambling or coherent, responsive or inhibited, eloquent or hesitant coupled with fluency in the language, an extensive vocabulary, grammar accuracy, listening abilities, or an awareness of body language - all highly depend on the level of formality/informality and direct/indirect forms of communication between speakers. This is reflected in Edward Hall's (1976) classification of cultural dimensions as *high-context* and *low-context*.

For high-context cultures like those in China, Japan, Arabia, Korea, Greece, Mexico or Vietnam, the communication channel, with all its variables, i.e. setting, body language, group harmony, ranks as a primary value, while words rank second. A person who enjoys a high official status and reputation may have the final say in a decision-making process, adding considerable weight to his/her arguments.

By way of contrast, North America and European countries, such as Spain, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Great Britain, reflect a different linguistic style, more direct and informal, characterizing a low-context culture, based on the power of spoken and written words to convey meaning, while aspects such as body language and official titles come second. Influenced by Edward Hall's work, Dulek et al. (1991) also agree on the existence of a bipolar cultural context, with high group consensus and conciliation rankings, based on trust, cooperative behaviour, and relationship-oriented styles (with China and Japan topping the list) on the one hand, and of cultures relying on direct information exchange and a highly individualistic style, based on adversarial, argumentative, task-oriented approach (with England, Germany, Switzerland ending the list), on the other.

This cross-cultural representation, whose in-depth knowledge crashes the barriers of communication, seems to be supported by Robbins (2005), who remarks that:

Oral agreements imply strong commitments in high-context cultures [...] But in low-context cultures, enforceable contracts will tend to be in writing, precisely worded, and highly legalistic. Similarly, low-context cultures value directness. Managers are expected to be explicit and precise in conveying intended meaning. It's quite different in high-context cultures, where managers tend to make suggestions rather than give orders. (Robbins 2005:151)

In the triarchic theory launched by O'Hara-Devereaux and Johansen (1994) and Harris and Moran (1991), cross-cultural differences fall into three groups: "high", "low", and an intermediate category, which they call "middle", encompassing cultures like the Spanish, Italian, French, French Canadian ones. However, the advantages of a bipolar cultural dimension (*high-to-low*) over a triarchic categorization (*high-middle-low*) result in a better evaluation of the masculine / feminine, individualist / collectivist, short-term / long-term constructs (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005; House et al. 2004). For example, the language of *masculine* business cultures (German, Dutch, Australian, British, Canadian, US American) abounds in self-assertive / self-reliant phrases with individualistic tendencies like:

The ball is in your court. You know what to do from now on.
Do your own thing. Call a spade a spade. (speak plainly and directly)
Look out for yourself; no one else will.
Keep an eagle-eye on things.

The *masculinity / individualist index* includes expressions which refer to earnings, social and professional status, recognition, or career advancement.

Thus, individualism proponents value self-interest as their only goal and are familiarized with *calling the shots* (be in a position of authority, give orders and make decisions), *gaining ground* (get an advantage and become more successful), *being a leading light* (a very respected person who leads an organization, is an important member of a group, or is important in a particular area of knowledge or activity), or *making a killing* (making a lot of money in a short time, with little effort).

This index measures the extent to which language mirrors a culture's value ("individualism") reflected in the number of words compounded with "self-", including *self-centered*, *self-esteem*, *self-confident*, *self-appointed*, *self-supporting*, *self-maximization*.

However, it has been shown that high-context cultures (Japanese, mainly) do not see with good eyes the excessive care for one's happiness and independence in the cultures where the individual is more predominant than the group and the "I" always comes before the "we":

In the United States, individual happiness is the highest good; in such group-oriented cultures as Japan, people strive for the good of the larger group such as the family, the community, or the whole society. Rather than stressing individual happiness, the Japanese are more concerned with justice (for group members) and righteousness (by group members). (Ferraro 2006: 58-59)

The *femininity index* is typically concerned with the emphasis on group consciousness, conciliatory language, cooperation, conformity, and employment security. Collectivistic countries (China, Japan, Iran, Irak, African nations) place the welfare of the group as a top priority: people value ambition, modesty, and work *all and sundry* (every person without exception). The higher levels of

management are male dominated. Some key differences between the various cultural mindsets are clearly noticed in the contrasts of the cultural values priorities (Foster 1992; Elashmawi and Harris 1998; Harris et al. 2004; Hofstede and Hofstede 2005). The Japanese culture has always placed importance on indirectness and the 'go-between' style, whereas people in the United States "put their cards on the table", giving importance to directness and informality: "What's the bottom line?" or "What's in it for me?" As Chaney and Martin (2007: 52) remark, "They are less concerned than people in Asia with saving face". By opposing group and individual orientations, we can take under the lens comparative negotiation and protocol styles and characteristics whose elements point out opposing cultural traits and role behaviour (Ruch 1989; Leaptrott 1996; Elashmawi and Harris 1998; Simintiras and Thomas 1998).

To my mind, there should be clear-cut distinctions between the different types and styles of collective, tribal, and pluralist cultures:

1. Establish rapport → short period (US Americans) / long period (Japanese);
2. Persuasion tools → time pressure (US) / intergroup connections and go-between + hospitality (Japanese);
3. Use of language → open and direct (US) / indirect, appreciative and cooperative (Japanese);
4. Traits respected → personal achievement, status (United States, Great Britain, France) / strength with humility, cunning, cleverness (Japanese, Chinese, African, Indian, Greek, Spanish, Indonesian);
5. Business environment → layered hierarchy, best spaces for top managers (United States, Great Britain, France) / strong vertical hierarchy, open offices for lower levels, shared power (Japanese, Chinese, African, Indian, Greek, Spanish, Indonesian);
6. Conduct business → direct, formal relationships with strangers, multiple correspondence (United States, Great Britain, France) / must control, divided responsibilities, ritual is important, open, shared correspondence (Japanese, Chinese, African, Indian, Greek, Spanish, Indonesian).

It goes without saying that business affairs (negotiating strategies, signing/agreeing contracts) are looked on favourably in group-oriented cultures which believe in win-win negotiations and see contracts as flexible, whereas individualistic societies tend to view them as rigid, stringent legal documents.

3. Power, linguistic, gender and register differences

Differences in linguistic styles (Black and Gregersen 1999) make communication plagued with misinterpretations. The different mindsets of business people magnify miscommunication, resulting in different grammatical, vocabulary and syntactic structures. It has often been argued that communication plagues, as well as the negative verbal messages, are rooted in the inability to accept and adapt to differences. Ferraro (2006) believes in the power of a 'cautious approach' to the different communication patterns, and recommends that a closer attention be paid to relations of power, depending on the social context and the linguistic background:

In the US effective verbal communication is expected to be explicit, direct, and unambiguous. A great emphasis is placed on using words powerfully and

accurately. Communication patterns in some other cultures are considerably more ambiguous, inexact, and implicit. In some Eastern cultures, such as Japan and China, where there is less emphasis on words, people tend to derive more meanings from nonverbal cues and the general social context. It is not that words are unimportant in Eastern cultures, but rather that the words are inseparably interrelated to social relationships, politics, and morality. (Ferraro 2006: 60)

Cultures which choose to have a tough image in business life sustain the explicit articulation of words (ideas) rather than give people 'the benefit of the doubt'. In the 'in your face' territory, they play outright hostility and use explicit communication styles which enhance the speaker's individuality; their words are associated with idiomatic phrases such as *play your cards right*, *put your cards on the table*, *play hardball*, *drive a hard bargain*, *get to the point*, *get down to brass tacks*, and avoid *taking you for a ride*, *beating around the bush*, or *getting bogged down in details*.

This precise and straightforward style, commonly considered aggressive, rude and insensitive, opposes the 'benefit of the doubt' language, which responds with modesty, courtesy and politeness.

Linguistically, the Japanese are reported to use more passive or indirect constructions ("It is said that...", "Some people think that...") with the intention of avoiding controversial issues and promoting harmony, unlike their American / European counterparts, for whom pitching high voice at the slightest provocation is a sign of asserting one's eloquence:

How language is used in Japan and the United States reflects and reinforces the value of group consciousness in Japan and individualism in the United States [...]. If Japanese must disagree, it is usually done gently and very indirectly by using passive expressions. This type of linguistic construction enables one to express an opinion without having to be responsible for it in the event that others in the group might disagree. (Ferraro 2006: 59)

Another linguistic difference is caused by gender, to the extent to which men and women use different modes of discourse. Women's discourse strives for 'rapport talk', one commonplace occurrence being verbal hedges (*I feel*, *I guess*, *I think*) smoothing over disagreements, intensifying adverbs (boosters) like *slightly*, *somewhat*, *pretty*, *rather* or content disjuncts (of possibility - *perhaps*, *possibly*, of certainty - *quite rightly*), with the role of softening and tempering the directness of statements:

These disjuncts comment on the truth value of what is said, firmly endorsing it, expressing doubt, or posing contingencies such as conditions or reasons. (Greenbaum, Quirk 1990: 183)

Following the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen's (1922) research on the vocabulary choices used by men and women, I am of the opinion that certain categories of words appear more frequently in women's speech. Women resort to modifiers (adjectives, adverbs) → *well*, *a bit*, *perhaps*, and intensifiers → *so*, *very*, *quite*, *extremely* to make their claims more polite, put out fires and respond to challenges in a more tentative way. For example,

- *Perhaps* we *could* try asking for the price of the product back and claim compensation.
- I've been *sort of wondering whether* / *I wondered whether perhaps* you should solve the matter amicably with your partner and abandon the project for now.
- *Well*, I guess it's *approximately* / *roughly* one quarter of the annual consumption.

Emotive emphasis in women's speech spawns a number of degree adverbs with great emotive force: *very* + *adj./+ adv.*; *terrific*, *tremendous*, *terribly*, *awfully*:

Many degree adverbs and other degree expressions intensify the meaning of the word they modify. In familiar speech, some adjectives and adverbs have little meaning apart from their emotive force. (Leech, Svartvik 2002: 161)

Women prefer using emphatic equivalents of *good* and *nice*:

That's a *great* idea. All those in favour raise your hands.
It's a *fantastic* team. We *very much* enjoy working together.

Other sentence adverbials in the female register are part of the conveyance of meaning: *definitely*, *fortunately*, *luckily*, *naturally*, *preferably*, *really*, *truly* (with emphatic effect):

The key *really* lies in the achievements of their performance.
It was *truly* a memorable teambuilding event.
We *definitely* promise to restore the company to its former glory.
Fortunately, it's good knowing what effect a favorable balance of trade will have on the strength of the economy.
The shipping documents should be signed, *hopefully* by the end of the week.

Women's tendencies towards waffling fill their speech with non-assertiveness, timidity, uncertainty and a lack of confidence. Thus, instead of saying:

Well, it's only an opinion, of course, I could be wrong...; I would say...(non-assertive).

They should say:

I believe...; I consider...; I think... (assertive).

Instead of saying:

I guess the company will *probably* plan to establish a network of warehouses.
Hopefully, this will extend its operations in new directions. (waffle)

They should say:

The company is going to establish the network of warehouses soon. I know this will extend its operations in new directions. (straight / decisive talk, confidence, credibility)

Very is used as a degree word with an intensifying effect when it precedes the superlative *best* (e.g. We recommend our *very best* salesperson for this promotion.), as a modifier with the adverbial *much* in mid-position (e.g. I *very much* believe that profits will double), or end-position (e.g. I admired his work in the campaign *very much*), as well as with scale / limit words (e.g., *very bad / annoyed / exhausted / infuriated / tired*). Fillers (*umm, mhm, well, yes, yhuh, I see*), tag questions (e.g., *don't you think?*), hedges and qualifiers (e.g., *sort of, kind of, bit of*), discourse markers (*I mean, you see, as you see, I suppose, I'm afraid, ...I believe, ..., To be frank, so to say, so to speak, what's more likely, to be honest, you know, you bet*), intensifiers (e.g., *so, extremely, absolutely, rather*), expressive ("empty") adjectives (e.g., *fantastic, wonderful, cute, nice, weird*), and politeness formulas (e.g., *please, thank you very much, that's very kind of you, excuse me, Can I...?, Shall I...?*) further complicate women's talk. Their excitement as they keep the conversation going is also characterized by expressions like *you know, erm you know, I mean*, which try to gain understanding and sympathy, and verbal feedback through *yes, yes I felt that..., yes* (laughs), *mm* which show interest, and support the interlocutor. Women don't necessarily plead for power talking, but rather for smooth conversation in which turn-talking means sharing, cooperation and harmony. (Leech and Svartvik 2002; Bonvillain 2003)

As we recall, it was Otto Jespersen (1922) who first analyzed women's tendency to exaggerate, followed by Bonvillain (2003), 80 years later, who shared Jespersen's opinion, commenting on the underlying cultural biases that interpret women's behaviour in negative terms:

Women are free to use intensifiers and modifiers because society allows them to display emotion. Men are expected to control their feelings and, therefore, to refrain from using words that have marked emotional expressiveness". (Bonvillain 2003: 194)

Be they hedges or intensifiers, expressive adjectives or modifiers, these constructions are considered devoid of meaning, a sign of linguistic superficiality, and function

to signal a speaker's uncertainty about the validity of her statement, an impression of indecisiveness and lack of clarity. Use of hedge words reflects social inhibitions. Because females are socialized to defer to others and avoid conflict, they choose to state opinions interspersed with hedges to minimize confrontation with an addressee who may hold a different view. (Bonvillain 2003: 194-195)

Men's discourse is centred more on "report talk", concentrated on the topics under discussion rather than on active listening (Tannen 2001).

I also consider that women use more polite stylistic devices in comparison with men, their conversations are question oriented and seek for positive responses, and their interaction strategies are conciliatory, allowing interruptions. The modes of men's speech are incongruent with the communication patterns of women linguistic behaviour. Men are more reluctant to encourage another's speaking turn, do not shrink from making criticism, make direct assertions and like to dominate. Men's behaviour reflects a powerful identity, whereas women's behaviour is trivialized as being emotional, and deferential (Maltz and Borker 1982; Tannen 1986, 1991; Uchida 1992; Kiesling 1997).

In terms of linguistic variation and class-based codes, the upper-class, middle-class and lower-class features reinforce class differences. Central to the focus of many class-based oriented studies are the linguistic codes provided by Bernstein (1971). As the researcher explains, middle-class speech is characterized by the use of an 'elaborated' code ('universalistic' meanings), the use of nouns, adjectives, and verbs having explicit referents, whereas working-class style develops a 'restricted' code ('particularistic' meanings) by use of context-related words (Bernstein 1971: 175 qtd. in Bonvillain 2003: 157).

4. Conclusion

Even under the best of conditions, learning to communicate effectively in a second culture takes a purposeful effort. This is mostly evident in encounters between unequals like high-context culture members and low-context culture members, where a selection of various linguistic devices are made and different patterns of thought are developed.

The various business cultural orientations discussed in this article are neither good nor bad. Rather, they should be viewed as a way of better understanding the cultural-based and gender-based traits of others, as well as our own.

Firstly, we cannot afford to ignore the influence of cultural differences on the negotiation process, for instance. By combining the cultural and gender differences explored in the paper, one can easily develop negotiating strategies, and avoid biased attitudes that arise in cross-cultural exchanges. Interpreting low or high context nuances in speech provides a useful radiography of the communication patterns of different cultures. An awareness of the differences in thought patterns is also essential for face-to-face business encounters, otherwise one may risk paying an expensive "bill" for cross cultural business blunders.

Secondly, language is a vehicle for expressing gender distinctions. Differences between male and female registers show up in conversational style and linguistic structure. Studies have shown that men's tendency is to assert positions of dominance, to be in control of conversation, think and behave rationally, whereas women's linguistic style is characterized by unassertive, emotional, mitigated speech, in deference to the addressee. This linguistic "insecurity" stems from careful speech, the use of softening devices, such as hedges, boosters, or tag questions to temper the directness of statements.

To sum up, linguistic similarities are likely to reflect social solidarity, whereas linguistic divergence and the different mindsets of business people are often problematic, reinforcing segmentation and magnifying miscommunication. Viewed as such, these dichotomies should be seen in the dynamics of communicative interactions based on the speakers' goals and the relationships between interlocutors.

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