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Miscommunication across cultures: topical issues

Анотація. Стаття торкається актуальних проблем, пов'язаних із різними видами неправильного спілкування, яке за певних умов виникає в процесі або як результат неуспішної міжмовної та міжкультурної комунікації. Значна увага приділяється теоретичним питанням розуміння сутності міжкультурного спілкування, його специфіці, основним факторам виникнення непорозумінь, в основі яких лежать як лінгвальні, так і екстралінгвальні чинники. Предметом розгляду виступають вербальна та невербальна комунікація, де часто виникають неправильні тлумачення слів, їхніх значень, стійких словосполучень, жестів, вимови, міміки, поведінки тощо. Усе це в кінцевому рахунку призводить до неправильного спілкування, яке негативно позначається на повсякденному житті та діяльності людей, їхньому сприйнятті об'єктивної дійсності, вмінні співпрацювати й налагоджувати різного роду контакти як у своєму соціумі, так і в межах інших суспільних об'єднань, середовищ, суспільства в цілому. Наслідками неправильної міжкультурної та міжмовної комунікації можуть бути різного роду суперечки, конфлікти, протистояння, непорозуміння, насильство, воєнні дії, злочини і т.п.

Ключові слова: неправильне спілкування, міжмовна комунікація, міжкультурна комунікація, непорозуміння, лінгвальні та екстралінгвальні чинники, вербальна і невербальна комунікація.

Abstract. The present paper touches upon topical issues connected with miscommunication of different types, which appears due to certain reasons in the process or as a result of unsuccessful cross-language and cross-cultural communication. Much attention is paid to theoretical considerations about the essence of cross-cultural communication, its specificity, main factors of misunderstandings based on lingual and extralingual reasons. The paper also deals with verbal and nonverbal communication where often incorrect word meaning usages as well as improper gesture, mimics and behaviour interpretations occur. Even in languages and cultures which share many features, there are connotations and nuances which may be easily missed or misunderstood. Moreover, we see cultures based on much different foundations and we see languages that differ in all

elements of language design. As a result, there is constant possibility of major miscommunications which negatively influences everyday lives and activities of people, their objective reality perception, ability to co-operate and establish various contacts within social settings, environments and societies. Cultural norms, values and patterns of behaviour may be interpreted very differently among groups of people. Nonverbal communication can be even more difficult to interpret. Furthermore, what is funny to one culture, may be offensive to another one. Something that is funny to both cultures may still cause difficulties if delivered in a formal environment, especially if one culture considers it to be an inappropriate setting. What may be perfectly fine with one group of people, may not be so fine with others who belong to the same group and may have a different opinion due to diversity issues. Not everyone who belongs to a particular group necessarily shares all the attitudes as well as behaviours of that group. Miscommunication across languages and cultures may result in disputes, conflicts, oppositions, misunderstandings, violence, military operations, crimes, etc. Language and culture study in general are the basic methods for overcoming cross-cultural miscommunications and misunderstandings.

Keywords: miscommunication, cross-language communication, cross-cultural communication, misunderstanding, lingual and extralingual factors, verbal and nonverbal communication.

Introduction. As a field of study, communication spans a broad, rich array of subjects, including sociology, psychology, philosophy, political science, linguistics, history, literature, criticism and rhetoric. Although much of the field's subject matter is theoretical in nature, communication studies have proven applicable to business, film, theatre, composition, advertising, education, foreign policy and computer science.

In today's globalized, media-driven world, communication studies have become more relevant and exciting than ever. Web developers seek new, inventive ways to draw Internet users to their websites. Public policy writers debate society's most pressing issues. Through linguistics, computer scientists are developing programming languages that may some day allow humans to interact directly with computers. Students who earn degrees in communication often hold highly influential positions as journalists, editors, university professors, public relations officers, marketing consultants, speech writers, filmmakers, motivational speakers and political campaign managers. To communicate is to shape the world.

Much has been written on communication studies, but less attention has been paid to theoretical issues on miscommunication across cultures though they are relevant and their importance is increasing especially nowadays. Have you ever talked to the friend about a problem only to realize that he/she just doesn't seem to grasp why the issue is so important to you? Have you ever presented an idea to a group and it's met with utter confusion? Or maybe you've been in argument when the other person suddenly accuses you of not listening of what they're saying at all.

What's going on here? The answer is miscommunication. In its some form or another we've all experienced it. The present paper focuses on some topical issues which help understand the essence of communication and miscommunication as well as reveal their specificity, find out factors causing miscommunication and some possible ways of preventing it.

Material and methods. Humans convey information through a variety of methods: speaking, telephones, email, blogs, TV, art, gestures, facial expressions, body language and even social contexts. Communication is the act of giving information for the purpose of creating a shared understanding. It is something that people do every day. Cross-cultural communication involves an understanding of how people from different cultures speak and perceive the world around them. In an organization it deals with understanding of different business customs, beliefs and communication strategies. Language differences, high-context vs. low-context cultures, nonverbal differences, and power distance are major factors that can affect cross-cultural communication. It often happens that even between people of one nationality and speaking the same language, miscommunication may take place. The fact is, even when face to face with another person in a very same room and speaking the same language human communication is incredibly complex.

For decades, researchers have asked what happens when you communicate. One interpretation, called the transmition model, views communication as a message that moves directly from one person to another, similar to someone tossing the ball and walking away. But in reality this simplistic model doesn't account for communication's complexity. The transactional model acknowledges the communication between people as a game of catch:as we communicate our message, we receive feedback from the other party, through the transaction we create meaning together. But from this exchange further complications arise. Fully sharing thoughts and feelings as humans we can't help but send and receive messages through our own subjective lenses. Our perceptional filters continually shift meanings and interpretations. Every person interprets the message he/she receives based on the relationship with the other person and his/her unique understanding of the semantics and connotations of the exact words being used.

Communication is the process by which information is conveyed from one party to another. Language is an essential part of human communication and it is the most widely utilized means of conveying information. However, language can also be a source of communication across culture. Culture can be defined as set of beliefs, values and practices that bind a group of people together. The many elements of culture and language are one of them. Different culture often exhibit different language of communication. For example, people living in America use English to communicate while people in China use Chinese to communicate. When people from this different cultural group meet, language becomes a barrier to effective communication.

Results and discussion. Communicating across cultures is challenging. Each culture has set rules that its members take for granted. Few of us are aware of our

own cultural biases because cultural imprinting is begun at a very early age. And while some of a culture's knowledge, rules, beliefs, values, phobias, and anxieties are taught explicitly, most of the information is absorbed subconsciously. We are all individuals, and no two people belonging to the same culture are guaranteed to respond in exactly the same way. However, generalizations are valid to the extent that they provide clues on what you will most likely encounter when dealing with members of a particular culture.

All international communication is influenced by cultural differences. International managers have to ensure that individual from different cultural backgrounds are able to come together and work as team. However, this goal cannot be realized if these individuals cannot communicate effectively. The first step to minimizing communication problems that are brought about by language is to encourage individual to learn each other language. This will help to break the language barrier and ensure that employees can understand each other whenever they communicate. Learning language only solves the encoding beat of communication. In order to promote effective communication there is a need to ensure that the receiver of information can interpret the information in the way that the sender intended. This cannot be possible if the communicating parties have different ways of interpreting information. International managers can promote effective communication by encouraging intercultural understanding. Individuals with the organization should understand the cultural differences that exist among them. They should learn the value and practices held by other cultures. This would promote cultural tolerance within the group.

Intercultural understanding will also promote considerate way of communication. Before saying something an individual will consider how the receiver will interpret the information. International managers can also promote cross- cultural communication by eliminating stereotypes. Stereotypes are generalized assumptions concerning a certain culture. In most cases these assumptions are usually not accurate or do not apply to all members of cultural group in question. However, these stereotypes usually affect people's perception and cloud their judgment of individuals from other culture. Stereotypes can become a major source of miscommunication across culture. It can also lead to conflicts among members from different cultures.

Even the choice of communication medium can have cultural overtones. The determining factor may not be the degree of industrialization, but rather whether the country falls into a high-context or low-context culture. High-context cultures (Mediterranean, Slav, Central European, Latin American, African, Arab, Asian, American-Indian) leave much of the message unspecified, to be understood through context, nonverbal cues, and between-the-lines interpretation of what is actually said. By contrast, low-context cultures (most Germanic and English-speaking countries) expect messages to be explicit and specific. When it comes to communication, what is proper and correct in one culture, may be ineffective or even offensive in another. In reality, no culture is right or wrong, better or worse - just

different. In today's global business community, there is no single best approach to communicating with one another. The key to cross-cultural success is to develop understanding of, and a deep respect for, the differences.

All communication is cultural. We do not always communicate the same way from day to day, since factors like context, individual personality, and mood interact with the variety of cultural influences which predetermine our choices. Communication is interactive, so an important influence on its effectiveness is our relationship with others. Do they hear and understand what we are trying to say? Are they listening well? Are we listening well in response? Do their responses show that they understand the words and the meanings behind the words we have chosen? Is the mood positive and receptive? Is there trust between them and us? Are there differences that relate to ineffective communication, divergent goals or interests, or fundamentally different ways of seeing the world? The answers to these questions will give us some clues about the effectiveness of our communication and the ease with which we may be able to move through conflict.

The challenge is that even with all the good will in the world, miscommunication is likely to happen, especially when there are significant cultural differences between communicators. Miscommunication may lead to conflict, or aggravate conflict that already exists. We make - whether it is clear to us or not - quite different meaning of the world, our places in it, and our relationships with others.

Time is one of the most central differences that separate cultures and cultural ways of doing things. In the West, time tends to be seen as quantitative, measured in units that reflect the march of progress. It is logical, sequential, and present-focused, moving with incremental certainty toward a future. T.Novinger calls the United States a "chronocracy," in which there is such reverence for efficiency and the success of economic endeavors that the expression "time is money" is frequently heard [1, p.84]. This monochronic approach to time favors linear structure and focuses on one event or interaction at a time. In the East, time feels like it has unlimited continuity, an unraveling rather than a strict boundary. Birth and death are not such absolute ends since the universe continues and humans, though changing form, continue as part of it.

People may attend to many things happening at once in polychronous approach to time. This may mean many conversations in a moment (such as a meeting in which people speak simultaneously, "talking over" each other as they discuss their subjects), or many times and people during one process (such as a ceremony in which those family members who have died are felt to be present as well as those yet to be bom into the family).

Another important variable affecting communication across cultures is fate and personal responsibility. This refers to the degree to which we feel ourselves the masters of our lives, versus the degree to which we see ourselves as subject to things outside our control. Another way to look at this is to ask how much we see ourselves able to change and maneuver, to choose the course of our lives and relationships.

Face includes ideas of status, power, courtesy, insider and outsider relations, humor, and respect. In many cultures, maintaining face is of great importance, though ideas of how to do this vary. The starting points of individualism and communitarianism are closely related to face. If I see myself as a self-determining individual, then face has to do with preserving my image with others and myself. I can and should exert control in situations to achieve this goal. I may be comfortable in a mediation where the other party and I meet face to face and frankly discuss our differences.

If I see my primary identification as a group member, then considerations about face involve my group. Direct confrontation or problem-solving with others may reflect poorly on my group, or disturb overall community harmony. I may prefer to avoid criticism of others, even when the disappointment I have concealed may come out in other, more damaging ways later. When there is conflict that cannot be avoided, I may prefer a third party who acts as a shuttle between me and the other people involved in the conflict. Since no direct confrontation takes place, face is preserved and potential damage to the relationships or networks of relationships is minimized.

Nonverbal communication is hugely important in any interaction with others; its importance is multiplied across cultures. This is because we tend to look for nonverbal cues when verbal messages are unclear or ambiguous, as they are more likely to be across cultures (especially when different languages are used). Since nonverbal behavior arises from our cultural common sense — our ideas about what is appropriate, normal, and effective as communication in relationships - we use different systems of understanding gestures, posture, silence, spacial relations, emotional expression, touch, physical appearance, and other nonverbal cues. Cultures also attribute different degrees of importance to verbal and nonverbal behaviour. For instance, in the U.S. eye contact is a good thing and is seen as a reflection of honesty and straightforwardness. However, in some Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, prolonged eye contact can be seen as rude or aggressive in many situations. Women may need to avoid it altogether because lingering eye contact can be viewed as a sign of sexual interest.

Low-context cultures like the United States and Canada tend to give relatively less emphasis to nonverbal communication. This does not mean that nonverbal communication does not happen, or that it is unimportant, but that people in these settings tend to place less importance on it than on the literal meanings of words themselves. In high-context settings such as Japan or Colombia, understanding the nonverbal components of communication is relatively more important to receiving the intended meaning of the communication as a whole.

Some elements of nonverbal communication are consistent across cultures. For example, research has shown that the emotions of enjoyment, anger, fear, sadness, disgust, and surprise are expressed in similar ways by people around the world [2, p. 59-60]. Differences surface with respect to which emotions are acceptable to display in various cultural settings, and by whom. For instance, it may be more social acceptable in some settings in the United States for women to show

fear, but not anger, and for men to display anger, but not fear [3]. At the same time, interpretation of facial expressions across cultures is difficult. In China and Japan, for example, a facial expression that would be recognized around the world as conveying happiness may actually express anger or mask sadness, both of which are unacceptable to show overtly [4].

These differences of interpretation may lead to conflict, tension, misunderstandings and the like. Even though some facial expressions may be similar across cultures, their interpretations remain culture - specific. It is important to understand something about cultural starting-points and values in order to interpret emotions expressed in cross-cultural interactions. For example, line-waiting behaviour and behaviour in group settings like grocery stores or government offices is culturally-influenced. The English and U.S. Americans are serious about standing in lines, in accordance with their beliefs in democracy and the principle of "first come, first served". For the people of other nationalities it is difficult to adjust to a system of waiting in line, when their home context permitted one member of a family to save spots for several others. These examples of differences related to nonverbal communication are only the tip of the iceberg.

Conclusions. Careful observation, ongoing study from a variety of sources, and cultivating relationships across cultures will all help develop the cultural fluency to work effectively with verbal and nonverbal communication differences. Luckily, there are some simple practices that can help us all navigate our daily interactions for better communication:

1) First of all, we should recognize that passive hearing and active listening are not the same. Engage actively with verbal and non-verbal feedback of others.
2) Listen with your eyes and ears, because communication is more than just words.
3) Take time to understand as you try to be understood. In a rush to express ourselves it's easy to forget that a communication is a two way path. Be open to what the other person might say.
4) Be aware of your personal perceptual filters. Elements of your experience, including your cultural community and family influence how you see the world. Say this is how I see the problem, but how do you see it. Don't assume that your perception is the objective truth. That will help you toward sharing a dialogue with others, to reach a common understanding together.
5) An effective communication strategy begins with the understanding that both sender and the receiver of the message are from different cultures and backgrounds. Of course, this introduces a certain amount of uncertainty, making communications even more complex.
6) Without getting into cultures and sub-cultures, it is perhaps most essential for people to realize that a basic understanding of cultural diversity is the key to successful cross-language and cross-cultural communication.

Without necessarily studying individual cultures and languages in detail, we need to learn how to better communicate and avoid miscommunication with individuals and groups whose first language, or language of choice, as well as corresponding culture do not match our own.

7) All-round complex studies and training are needed not only to maximize accurate communication but also to minimize the miscommunication that inevitably occurs in new situations.

8) Different countries or cultures have different lifestyle practices, due to their levels of development. This may cause confusion and misunderstanding, or even conflict.

9) People will not automatically discuss their differences in cultural practice, but they might become visible due to misunderstandings or conflicts regarding particular matters such as not accepting food, due to a cultural dietary practice. Therefore, it is important for you not just to focus on the issue itself but to investigate the root cause of these misunderstandings or conflicts.

10) Though cross-cultural misunderstandings and conflicts frequently happen because of differences existing between people in nearly all spheres of their everyday lives, recognition, acknowledgement and respect for these differences are important when you are working cross-culturally.

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