Achieving Mutual Understanding for Effective Intercultural Management

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Abstract

Purpose – To introduce an approach to managing intercultural communication that is effective for achieving mutual understanding among people in culturally complex situations.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper takes a 'meaning negotiation' approach to the intercultural communication process. It argues against a generalised 'differences/adaptation' approach, and maintains that people need to interact in contextually sensitive ways.

Findings – The paper outlines a set of strategies that can help people in intercultural interaction contexts negotiate and agree the messages they are trying to convey. It draws them together into a conceptual framework of intercultural communication competencies.

Research limitations/implications – The paper only focuses on the communication of messages, not the use of language to manage relationships. It also does not attempt to suggest practical techniques for helping managers and their staff develop competence in using the strategies.

Practical implications – Since mutual understanding is achieved through meaning negotiation, it is important for managers and their staff to know how this takes place and to develop a communication strategy for implementing it.

Social implications – Without adequate mutual understanding, people may easily become frustrated with each other and tasks may not be achieved efficiently.

Originality/Value – The paper introduces current understanding in applied linguistics on the communication process which is little known in the management field and yet is important for it.

Keywords – Communication, Intercultural competence, Language, Communication strategies

Paper type: Conceptual paper.

Introduction

In a (relatively) recent article in the journal, *Cross-Cultural Management,* Harzing and Feely (2008) called for increased understanding of the ways in which language impacts on HQ-subsidiary relationships. They argued that the field of language and business is "largely devoid of both theory and data" and expressed the hope that their conceptual paper would provide a good starting point. This paper aims to follow their call by considering another key aspect of communication: the ways in which people achieve mutual understanding and the relevance of this to international management practices.

Numerous studies have identified the importance of communication in international management.   For example, Joshi and Lazarova (2005) in a study of leadership competencies in multinational teams, found that 97% of leaders and 98% of team members identified communication as an important competency for leaders. Chang and Tharenou (2004) explored the competencies needed for managing multicultural workgroups, and communication emerged as one of five key competencies. Hanges et al. (2005) describe the challenges that arose in their project due to its virtual nature and point out that "Communication problems are some of the most common complaints from virtual teams" (p.350).

Recently, a number of researchers (e.g. Charles, 2006; Charles and Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Harzing and Feely, 2008; Henderson, 2005; Welch, Welch and Piekkari, 2005) have addressed the issue of communication by focusing on foreign language proficiency and the impact for managers of their staff having, or not having, a common language. This area of research rightly draws attention to the importance of ensuring that sufficient employees of an MNC or organisation have a shared language that they can communicate in. However, not all communication problems in international contexts are due to the lack of a shared language. For example, Miller (2008) reports on the difficulties that an American copywriter experienced in interpreting meaning when working in a Japanese company, even though his line manager was fluent in English. Similarly, Marriott (1991) explains the range of misunderstandings that occurred when an Australian business person conducted a sales pitch to a Japanese importer who spoke very fluent English. In cases such as these, subtle differences across cultures in communicative conventions led people to make significantly different interpretations of the messages that were conveyed or intended. And of course, such different interpretations are not restricted to speakers of different languages; they can equally well occur between native speakers of the same language who are from different cultures (e.g. see Birkner and Kern 2008).

So the effective management of communication entails not only paying attention to the issue of shared languages, but more broadly to maximising the mutual understanding that people achieve when they interact with each other. This is particularly challenging in intercultural management contexts, and yet many textbooks on intercultural business communication (e.g. Chaney and Martin, 2011; Gibson, 2000; Schmidt et al., 2007) deal with this issue very superficially and display little understanding of current theorising and research in applied linguistics on this issue. So the aim of this paper is to introduce applied linguistic insights, to identify and expound a set of strategies for helping achieve mutual understanding in intercultural contexts, and to explain their relevance for international management. I start by considering how the communication process works.

The Process of Achieving Understanding

An early model of communication, the 'message-model', assumed that when people want to convey a message to someone else, language allows them to use signals (i.e. sounds or written symbols) that can pair exactly the meanings they want to convey

with what is physically transmitted. In this model, communication is regarded as successful to the extent that senders and receivers can each encode and decode signals in exactly the same way. Any mismatch between the message sent and the message received is explained in terms of either different degrees of familiarity with the language code or interferences in the encoding/decoding process for other reasons. Gibson (2000, p.9), for example, defines communication as "the exchange of meaning" and refers to cultural differences as 'noise' that can interfere with successful transmission. Similarly, Chaney and Martin (2011, p.13) refer to barriers to communication, and list nine different barriers, including cultural differences, perceptual bias and physical/environmental factors.

Most linguists, however, would regard this message model as inaccurate (e.g. Akmajian et al., 2001; Knapp, 2004; Zegarac, 2008). Instead of 'exchange of meaning', they would define communication as a process of 'meaning negotiation and construction'. Although human communication to a large extent exploits a language code (such as English, Chinese or German), it is not feasible for everything to be conveyed explicitly in the code. Much has to be left for the interlocutors to work out, drawing on their background knowledge and knowledge of the context. For this reason, inferencing rather than just decoding always needs to take place. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009) explain it as follows:

> … people use two main sources of knowledge to construct meaning in interaction: linguistic knowledge (i.e. knowledge of the language code) and 'world' knowledge (i.e. experiential and theoretical knowledge of social processes, facts, concepts, etc.). Both types of knowledge are always involved in the making of meaning, although their relative impact on the achievement of understanding can vary. Sometimes linguistic factors can be paramount, such as when the proficiency level of one of the speakers is low, or when someone is using an unfamiliar regional variety of the language. At other times, knowledge factors can be paramount; for instance, lack of knowledge of computing can hamper people's understanding of a presentation on e-learning. Lack of familiarity with the terminology may be part of the problem (i.e. a linguistic knowledge problem), but the lack of background conceptual knowledge is often even more significant.
>
> Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009, p.95

In intercultural interaction such 'meaning construction' can be particularly problematic because it needs to take place dynamically, and people may focus on different clues when inferring meanings, and/or they may arrive at different meanings from the same clues. As a result, mismatches may occur in the messages that people think have been communicated. In actual fact, understanding is not an either-or phenomenon. There are degrees of understanding, and these different degrees are gradually built up through the process of meaning negotiation. As Weigand (1999, p.769) points out: "The key notion is not *understanding*, but *coming to an understanding* on an interactive level."

Building mutual understanding in international management is thus a challenging process and requires a set of intercultural competencies, with associated strategies, in order for it to be achieved effectively. So the next section presents a number of key intercultural communication strategies. It draws on the communication experiences of members of a major international collaborative programme known as the eChina-UK Programme (http://www.echinauk.org/) as well as on conceptual work in applied linguistics (e.g. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009; Spencer-Oatey and Stadler, 2009). The strategies are illustrated with a range of authentic examples from a variety of studies in different disciplines. The section that follows after that considers how the strategies link with intercultural communication competencies.

Strategies for Achieving Mutual Understanding in Intercultural Communication

Negotiating a Common Understanding of Terms

Superficially, it might seem as though knowledge of terms is a language proficiency issue – does the person know the vocabulary or not. However, as Jankowicz and Dobosz-Bourne (2003, p.123) explain, "To the extent that people in different cultures understand the world differently, they must expend deliberate effort in trying to come to terms with each other's meanings, over and above their translated vocabularies, if they are to collaborate successfully." Nunamaker et al. (2009), for instance, report the following example:

> We once worked with a distributed group of 32 stakeholders who were negotiating the requirements for a large online bookstore. Progress broke down over the term, "affiliate." Stakeholders could not agree on what rights and privileges affiliates should have. It turned out that among the 32 stakeholders there were five different meanings for the term, "affiliate". The team agreed to use a different term for each of those five meanings, and agreed that nobody would use the term, "affiliate" for the rest of the project, to minimize confusion.
>
> Nunamaker et al., 2009, p.115

They then explain how a very large contract was lost because of inconsistent use of terms and standards, and emphasise the ongoing need for managing this issue.

The need for negotiation of terms and concepts, and its impact on project progress if not adequately addressed, is also referred to by others (e.g. Spencer-Oatey and Tang, 2007, p.116; Hanges et al., 2004, p.350). Needless to say, the carrying out of such negotiation is very time consuming; in fact, it can often seem never-ending in collaborative projects, when achievement of the project is dependent on team members' agreement on fundamental elements, and term after term needs to be negotiated. Yet this process cannot be by-passed if problems are not to emerge later on. This applies equally to situations when members are fluent/native speakers of the same language, because people rarely use the same terms exactly (or even

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somewhat!) similarly, and so it is always important to discuss and agree the interpretations that will be used in a given project or context.

Checking Understanding and Asking for Clarification

The need to check understanding and ask for clarification does not only apply to people's use of concepts and terms; it also applies to the discourse itself. Three common strategies for achieving this are asking for repetition, asking for clarification and asking for confirmation. The following two examples from Spencer-Oatey and Stadler (2009) illustrate the latter two strategies. They are taken from video recordings of two different Chinese-British negotiation meetings.

Example 1: Confirmation check

Chinese 20: [Summing up what he has just said] *So these are the 4 things that the Ministry would like to have.*

British 17: *So these are platform, educational management, IPR and admin.*

Chorus: *Yes.*

Example 2: Clarification check

Chinese 21: *I direct a group team for making the standards for the courses on the internet.*

British 18: *Sorry, do you mean standards for interoperability or do you mean standards for quality?*

Chinese 21: *Quality.*

Spencer-Oatey and Stadler, 2009, p.23

The amount of effort constantly required to ensure shared understanding can be very hard work, as well as frustrating and/or embarrassing, and so it often seems easier to ignore potential misunderstandings. However, such a 'let-it-pass' (Firth 1996) attitude can lead to serious misunderstandings, which can sometimes take weeks, months or even years to resolve. Delayed and unresolved misunderstandings can leave both parties feeling dissatisfied with the collaboration and, in the long term, they can have a serious impact on relationships and on the success of a partnership. So detecting and addressing (potential) misunderstandings at an early stage can prevent more severe problems and misunderstandings arising at a later stage of the project.

Attuning to Indirect Signals

As explained above, not all elements of a message can be encoded in the words and phrases of a language. Moreover, there can be differences across cultures, contexts and individuals regarding the preferred level of explicitness with which a message is conveyed. Sometimes meaning is conveyed very indirectly, and in these cases it is extremely important that people pay close attention to the subtle verbal and non-verbal signals, such as intonation, eye-contact and body language, which are used to convey meaning. If people are attuning, they are able to accurately pick up meaning from such signals. Even a slight hesitation, a slightly prolonged pause, or an absence of signals that are normally present can convey some crucial information. So it is extremely important for participants working in international contexts to learn to 'read' their interactional partners and to infer meaning from both the presence and/or absence of such subtle signals.

Sriussadaporn (2006), who researched communication problems in foreign companies in Thailand, thus gave the following advice to expatriates:

> … expatriates should learn to accurately read the true meaning of such nonverbal actions as smiling, nodding the head, and being silent. For example, when an expatriate supervisor assigned a task to a Thai local employee, the Thai employee smiled, nodded his head, and said nothing. The expatriate supervisor thought that his assignment would be accomplished by his Thai subordinate without any problem while his Thai subordinate had made no commitment. In fact, he only acknowledged that he would try his best and keep working with no deadline unless he was clearly notified. Hence, when assigning tasks to Thai employees, expatriates should not depend only on the words when Thai employees say ''yes'' or say nothing. That does not mean for sure that they can do it or will do it. Expatriates should be sure to check for the employee's willingness, ability, and availability to do the tasks.
>
> Sriussadaporn 2006, p.339

Adjusting to the Language Proficiency Level of Others

A complex yet essential skill in intercultural interaction is the ability to adjust one's language to the proficiency level of the other participant(s). This enables them to follow a conversation more easily and to participate in a more meaningful way. This competency is especially important for native speakers because they have a tendency to either over- or under-adjust. As the follow example from Spencer-Oatey and Stadler (2009) illustrates, it can be difficult to implement, even with the best of intentions. The extract is taken from a video recording of the start of a Chinese-British negotiation meeting.

Language Adjustment at the start of a meeting
Chair: *I'm going to ask everybody to speak very clearly and uh without heavy accents if possible*
Everyone: *Laughter [as the Chair speaks with a Scottish accent]*
Chair: *and we may take some pauses just to make sure everybody uhm uh is keeping up with the conversation cause we can sometimes each of us speak very quickly when we get excited. Uh this afternoon is a chance for us really to explore the research issues ## tell each other what we're doing ## tell each other what we hope to achieve what we're aspiring to ### and it would be wonderful if we could perhaps focus on the use of technology in learning ## if that was of interest to you ##### so what I I'd like to do is I think it would be very helpful for one of our colleagues to volunteer to <as we say in Scotland: start the ball rolling cause we really love football>. Uh I think I think it would be fair to ask one of our colleagues to start the ball rolling and [name of British colleague] if you would like to kick off for us.*

This excerpt demonstrates a number of adjustment practices. The Chair clearly showed a high level of awareness of the importance of this process, by asking participants to speak clearly, to avoid accents, to avoid fast speech and to pause regularly in order to ensure that all participants have the chance to follow the conversation. The Chair then went on to put her insights into practice, speaking slowly and clearly, by pausing regularly (signalled by #) and trying to avoid the use of a heavy Scottish accent. However, only seconds later she sped up (signalled by < >), fell into a more pronounced Scottish accent, used an idiomatic expression ('to start the ball rolling') which left all but one of the Chinese participants with blank faces, and then went on to repeat the idiom and to use complex vocabulary ('kick off'), which was unlikely to be understood and could easily have been replaced by a simpler word, such as 'start' or 'begin'.

Structuring and Highlighting Information

The speaker turn just quoted was also long, and so another way in which speakers can improve their comprehensibility is to structure their ideas clearly and to use words or phrases (known as discourse markers in linguistics) to make that structure explicit. This is particularly important when trying to convey complex ideas or when one's language proficiency is not very proficient. The following example from Žegarac, Spencer-Oatey and Ushioda (2014, p.86) illustrates the way in which a Chinese professor, who was explaining his research interests to his project partners, used such strategies very effectively.

Explaining Research Interests
1   I first get the masters degree in mathematics and also I get a PhD in
2   educational technology, so for me uh my <u>research areas are of two kinds</u>.
3   <u>one</u> is for higher education and <u>the second</u> is for K12 schools. <u>in higher</u>
4   <u>education area my research focuses on three points</u>. <u>one</u> is the course
5   curriculum standards for for how use ICT in the classroom in courses. so the
6   China have a plan (...) maybe they in five years they will put 1500 courses in
7   the internet for resources selling, so I direct a group team for making the
8   standards for the the courses on the internet. and <u>the second</u>=

The professor used advance organisers and he numbered each of his points as he explained them (i.e. two different types of discourse markers). Even in this short extract, he used two advance organisers (single underlined, line 2 and line 4), and numbered four of his points (wavy underlined, line 3 (twice), line 4 and line 8). This helped significantly in achieving understanding.

Establishing Shared Knowledge

Establishing shared knowledge is one of the most challenging requirements for achieving mutual understanding because it is often very difficult to ascertain accurately what the other person does or does not know. Cramton (2001) found that this was particularly problematic for geographically dispersed project teams and

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identified five types of communication-related problems that were associated with failures of mutual knowledge:

1. *Failure to communicate and retain contextual information*. Team members had difficulty gathering and remembering information about the contexts within which their partners worked. They also failed to communicate important information about their own context and constraints to their remote partners.
2. *Unevenly distributed information*. Unevenly distributed information interfered with team-level collaboration and caused problems in relationships. Two causes were errors in email addresses and failure to send copies of email to all team members. Team members also may have thought they sent email that in fact never went out or was undelivered.
3. *Differences in the salience of information.* Dispersed team members were not successful in communicating to their partners what parts of their messages, or which messages, they considered most important. When an email message addressed several topics, partners sometimes differed on which topics they found salient.
4. *Relative differences in speed of access to information.* Team members may have differing amount of access to communication technology – e.g. only when at university, or 24 hour. Also, different qualities of connections may influence the speed with which members of synchronous chats can contribute.
5. *Interpreting the meaning of silence.* One of the biggest challenges team members faced was interpreting the meaning of their partners' silence. Over the course of the project, it became clear that silence had meant all of the following at one time or other: I agree. I strongly disagree. I'm indifferent. I am out of town. I am having technical problems. I don't know how to address this sensitive issue. I am busy with other things. I did not notice your question. I did not realise you wanted a response.

<div align="right">Cramton 2002: extracts from pp.355–359</div>

Friedman and Berthoin Antal (2005) recommend 'negotiating reality' to try and reduce such problems. This entails surfacing tacit knowledge and assumptions by stating clearly one's own position, and at the same time inviting others to do the same. They label this strategy 'high advocacy/high inquiry'. However, they acknowledge that unfortunately "People find it especially difficult to engage in high advocacy/high inquiry in the very situations when they need to learn the most from each other" (2005, p.81).

Towards an Intercultural Competency Framework

The strategies described above are not exhaustive; rather, they are illustrative of some different ways in which intercultural competencies can be put into practice. How then can intercultural competencies and strategies be linked?

There have been numerous attempts to map out the competencies needed for effective intercultural interaction (e.g. Byram, 1997; Chen and Starosta, 2005; Glaser

et al., 2007; Gudykunst, 2003; Prechtl and Davidson-Lund, 2007; Spencer-Oatey and Stadler, 2009; Ting-Toomey, 1999; WorldWork, n.d.; see Spencer-Oatey, 2010, and Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009, for reviews). All of them identify communication as a major component of intercultural competence, and yet only a few of them unpack the communication element in any detail. Building on these frameworks and the examples and findings discussed above, I suggest that the competencies and strategies needed for effective intercultural communication can be outlined as shown in Table 1.

Intercultural Competency	Intercultural Communication Strategy
Communication management	• Attends to the choice of working language(s) • Chooses modes of communication that suit the particular communicative purpose • Establishes suitable communication networks • Establishes and agrees communication protocols • Takes steps to deal with communication problems • Allows adequate time for achieving satisfactory mutual understanding
Building of shared knowledge	• Discloses and elicits background information that is needed for mutual understanding and meaningful negotiation • Exposes own intentions by explaining not only 'what' s/he wants, but also 'why' s/he wants it
Active listening and Attuning	• Listens attentively • Signals that listening is taking place • Regularly checks and clarifies the meaning of important words and phrases, to ensure that all participants attach the same meaning to them, even when they are well known • Notices potential misunderstandings and seeks clarification/negotiates meaning until common understanding is reached • Adept at observing indirect signals of meaning, such as intonation, eye contact and body language, and at picking up meaning from them • Pro-actively studies indirect signals of meaning, asking about them in order to deepen their knowledge at a conscious level • Learns to interpret indirect signals appropriately in different cultural and communicative contexts

Language Adjustment and Stylistic flexibility	• Adapts use of language to the proficiency level of the recipient(s) so as to maximise comprehensibility
	• Pays attention to, and adapts where necessary, aspects such as:
	  ➢ Speed
	  ➢ Frequency and length of pausing
	  ➢ Complexity of sentence structure
	  ➢ Complexity of vocabulary
	  ➢ Use of idioms and colloquialisms
	  ➢ Use of local accents and dialects
	• Structures and highlights information by using discourse markers to 'label' language, by using visual or written aids, and by paying attention to the sequencing of information
	• Pays attention to the different styles of communication (e.g. formal/informal; expressive/restrained) that people may use
	• Builds a repertoire of styles to suit different purposes, contexts and audiences
	• Uses different language styles flexibly to suit different purposes, contexts and audiences

Language learning	• Motivated to learn and use other languages, and willing to invest time and effort in this

	• Confident in ability to pick up and use foreign languages • Tries out words and expressions in unfamiliar languages

Table 1: Communication Competencies for Intercultural Interaction
(based on Spencer-Oatey and Stadler, 2009)

Implications for Intercultural Management

What, then, are the implications of this for intercultural management? I suggest that there are four main ones.

1. Develop a strategy for managing communication
Several researchers (e.g. Charles, 2006; Charles and Marschan-Piekkari, 2002; Harzing and Feely, 2008; Henderson, 2005; Welch, Welch and Piekkari, 2005) have demonstrated the major impact that language factors can have on the effective functioning of multinational management processes. In line with this, Welch et al. (2005, pp.24, 25) argue that "A major task for managers in the international arena is to recognize and respond to the critical place language assumes in effective global performance. […] language should not be viewed as an outpost but as an integral element of the effective management of global operations." They propose that language audits should be a basic requirement for a sound language management strategy and that translation should be dealt with professionally. However, they also argue (Welch et al. 2005, p.25) that "To be effective, these activities should be part of a broader organizational approach and be connected to areas such as staff selection, training, and placement."

I would argue that in fact the strategy needs to be even broader than this and focus not just on language but on communication as a whole. As Table 1 (under Communication Management) indicates, this entails a number of different elements. Since this paper focuses on the achievement of mutual understanding, I only deal here with the aspects that are particularly pertinent to that and I discuss them below.

2. Become familiar with the key competencies associated with effective communication
If managers are to implement an effective communication strategy, one of the first steps is to familiarise themselves with the key competencies that enable staff to achieve a high level of mutual understanding. They need to understand the nature of the different competencies required, and to help with this, it will be vital for them to learn from authentic examples. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of such examples, especially presented in a systematic way. Spencer-Oatey and Stadler (2009) provide one of the largest number of project-based examples, but they are all from the Chinese-British collaborations, and it would be much better if a wider range of examples could be made available.

3. Arrange training opportunities for as many staff as possible
As a follow on to the last point, it will be equally important to ensure that the staff who are involved in intercultural interactions receive appropriate training in the practicalities of communicating effectively in such contexts. This is important because on the one hand, staff may not be aware of the most effective strategies for handling

intercultural communication, and on the other, they may have difficult implementing them even if they do. For example, Sweeney and Zhu (2010) investigated the extent to which native speakers would adjust their language use during business negotiations when talking with non-native speakers compared with talking with native speakers. They found that all their respondents indicated a general awareness of the need to adjust their language use for non-native speakers and a relatively accurate awareness of the aspects of language use that would most likely cause others difficulty. However, they also found that "some of the participants either did not follow their own advice or did not understand how to effectively put communication accommodation into practice." (Sweeney and Zhu, 2010, p.498) This indicates that people were less proficient in strategy use, which meant that either they were unaware of the strategies they <u>could</u> use, or else they were unable to put them satisfactorily into practice, even if they knew about them.

4. *In project planning, allow plenty of extra time for the negotiation and clarification of meaning to take place*

Achieving mutual understanding can be a very time-consuming process, especially in contexts where there are significant differences between the participants in terms of language proficiency and/or culture. Spencer-Oatey and Tang (2007), for example, report that one of the lessons they learned from a major collaborative project between Britain and China was as follows:

> <u>International collaboration is extremely time-consuming</u>. If true collaboration (rather than superficial co-operation) is to take place, staff need to have the time to 'start slowly' rather than immediately focus on the task. They need to build mutual trust and understanding (so that there is 'glue' to hold them together when pressures later arise) and they need to learn about each other's contexts, professional viewpoints, ways of working, and so on, so that they can complete the task more effectively. Reducing or severely limiting the timescale of projects in order to save money is thus highly counterproductive; it may well shipwreck the partnership completely.
>
> Spencer-Oatey and Tang, 2007, p.172

Where is Culture in the framework?

Throughout this article I have referred to intercultural communication (rather than just communication) and yet I have not explicitly indicated how culture can affect communication. How, then, does culture impact on this process of achieving mutual understanding?

Many theorists working in the communication studies tradition (e.g. Gudykunst, 2003; Ting-Toomey, 1999) categorise countries according to their predominant values (e.g. individualism-collectivism) and then predict the style of communication that people will generally use because of these generalised values. For example, Gudykunst (2003) argues that an indirect, ambiguous style of communication is more common in collectivist societies than individualistic societies. While there may be important elements of truth in such claims, there are a number of problems with such an approach.

Firstly, it can lead to some atrocious stereotyping and misleading representations. For example, Chaney and Martin make the following sweeping statements in relation to verbal styles in different countries:

Japanese: They converse without responding to what the other person says. Emphasis is on nonverbal communication, so they do not listen. […]
German: Germans usually do not use first names unless they are close friends (of which they have few).

Chaney and Martin, 2011, pp.102,103

Secondly, it pays little attention to the impact of contextual factors and of individual variation, and so it does not offer sufficiently nuanced guidance for people to apply to the concrete communicative situations they find themselves in. Moreover, this approach tends to focus on nationality differences, whereas in fact any kind of social group (e.g. professional group, religious group) or any community of practice (e.g. company's sales force or human resources unit) will tend to have its own 'small culture' (Holliday, 1999) that needs to be taken into account. As a result, the "cultural differences" approach is of minimal help at an operational level, because it offers little or no strategic help for handling the dynamics of meaning negotiation in concrete situations.

In the approach described here (which is an applied linguistic approach), intercultural communication needs to be viewed first and foremost as communication (Verschueren, 2008); in other words, the emphasis should first be on the processes by which any communication (both intercultural and intracultural) takes place, and the impact of culture should be secondary to this. Culture plays a role in that it affects the amount of shared background and/or 'world' knowledge that people will have in common, which in turn influences the ease with which people can anticipate how much needs to be made explicit and how easily people can negotiate shared meanings. This approach does not try to predict exactly what will or will not be shared by the participants of any particular communicative interaction, simply on the basis of their nationality. Rather, it draws attention to some key considerations that will always need to be managed dynamically, and that are especially important in potentially more problematic intercultural contexts.

This approach is fully compatible with that of Friedman and Berthoin Antal (2005) who propose a 'negotiating reality' approach. They point out the limitations of the adaptation approach, and argue as follows:

In an increasingly global business environment, managers must interact effectively with culturally complex people in culturally complex situations. […] Negotiating reality offers an alternative to the adaptation approach to intercultural competency based on broad generalizations about national cultures. General models play an important role in characterizing differences and providing background information, but they are severely limited as guides to action. Negotiating reality treats individuals as culturally complex beings with repertoires encompassing national, regional, organizational, professional and gender

influences. It aims at creating interactions that not only facilitate understanding and cooperating but also testing and enriching cultural repertoires.

<div align="right">Friedman and Berthoin Antal, 2005: pp.69,82</div>

Concluding Comments

In this paper, I have focused on one key function of communication: the achievement of mutual understanding of a 'message'. I have not attempted to cover the other main function of language use: the management of relations/rapport (Watzlabick et al., 1967; Brown and Yule, 1983) which is another very important issue for international management. That would have been beyond the scope of a single journal article.

Meanwhile, I hope that this conceptual paper, limited though it is, will stimulate a significant programme of research. I hope that both researchers and practitioner managers will delve deeper into the effectiveness of different communication strategies in a variety of intercultural contexts, and that this will result in a greater number of examples of 'good practice' from a wider range of settings. Moreover, I hope that this will lead to effective ways of helping people not only gain a clearer understanding of what 'good practice' entails, but also learn how to put such behaviour into practice themselves and thereby become more effective communicators. So I urge international managers, intercultural trainers and the research community to work collaboratively to help achieve this vision. Only in this way can we make significant progress in improving mutual understanding in our globalised world.

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