

# Workplace Discourse between People with Different Cultural Backgrounds

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## Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to investigate everyday communication features between people with different cultural backgrounds working together for the same multinational company. At the root of the argument is the hypothesis that there is an altering in communication rules and norms. Research is based on a survey conducted at several multinational companies situated in Hungary. Data were gathered by a questionnaire entitled *Incorporate communication within multinational companies between people with different cultural background*. It has been confirmed that the individuals working for a multinational company need language, communication and intercultural skills to build up relationships and achieve goals.

Jelen tanulmány célja, hogy megvizsgálja a multinacionális vállalatoknál alkalmazott, különböző kulturális háttérrel rendelkező munkavállalók kommunikációjának jellemzőit. Hipotézisünk szerint a kommunikációs szabályokban és normákban változások figyelhetők meg. A kutatás alapja több magyarországi multinacionális vállalatnál végzett kérdőíves felmérés: *Vállalati kommunikáció különböző kulturájú munkavállalók között*. Bebizonyosodott, hogy a multinacionális vállalatok alkalmazottainak mind nyelvi, kommunikációs és interkulturális készségekre is szükségük van ahhoz, hogy kommunikációs kapcsolatot alakítsanak ki és elérjék céljaikat.

**Keywords:** incorporate communication, misunderstandings, multinational companies

## 1 Introduction

Globalisation, internationalization, trans-border trade and cross cultural business are all terms that have been coined over the past decade(s) to reflect the reality of the world economy. Growth and success in today's global economy depend on being able to work internationally.

In recent years many researchers in applied linguistics and professionals working for an international company have emphasised the importance of knowledge of different cultures and they agree that globalisation has brought about the growing trend to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds (Borgulya 2007, Bakacsi and Takács 2002).

The intercultural communication taken by research over the past decades in no doubt related partly to the increasing globalisation of our world and the consequent need for better language use. It is important to work out what words mean in a particular and cultural context (Katan 1999). Different cultures have differing values, perceptions and philosophies. As a result, certain ideas may have very different connotations for people working for the same multinational company. Different cultures may have different rules and norms and favour different means of everyday communication. Cultural differences cause communication problems during the work.

The purpose of the present paper is to investigate communication features at multinational companies situated in Győr-Moson-Sopron County (Hungary). At the root of the argument is the hypothesis that there is an altering in communication rules and norms between people with different cultural backgrounds. We communicate the way we do because we are raised in a particular culture and learn its language, rules, and norms.

## 2 Research question

Globalisation is a term that provokes strong reactions, positive or negative but globalisation is praised for the new opportunities it brings (Cseh 2005, Ellwood 2001, Robertson 1992). Globalisation has created more and

Table 1: Participants' nationalities

Nationality	Participant
Hungarian	64
German	13
English	6
French	4
Austrian	3
Italian	3
Other (Slovakian, Romanian, Dutch, American, Slovenian)	5

more multinational companies all over the world, including Hungary. The phenomena have been considered a promising means to link individuals with different backgrounds and experiences and have attracted the interests of researchers (Glaser - Kaar 2007: 60) Consequently, globalisation has produced workforce with the diverse cultural backgrounds at the same workplace.

Does globalisation bring into line cultures? To a certain extent, it does: more and more people around the world relate to a small set of cultural icons - brands, symbols, objects, etc. - that commercial and media machines are disseminating. But does this process amount to a real shift, an equalization of more deeply held belief and concepts? We hope, it does not. Globalisation tendencies reinforced preservation of national cultural values. Language as an embodiment of several fields of culture is appropriate to fulfil the function of cultural values. Almost every researcher agrees that the phenomenon has to be studied and analysed from different points of view. A major difficulty in any study of (intercultural) communication is the fact that so many disciplines are involved in the area (FitzGerald 2003: 9).

According to Samovar and Porter (1991: 10) intercultural communication occurs whenever a message is produced by a member of one culture for consumption by a member of another culture, a message must be understood. Because of cultural differences in these kinds of contacts, the potential for misunderstanding and disagreement is great. To reduce this risk, it is important to study intercultural communication.

The aim of our research is to examine everyday communication patterns between people with different cultural backgrounds working together for the same multinational company. Contact alone does not lead to understanding. In multicultural context you have to be able to make informed choices, to decide to what extent to adopt a new communication style.

Research is based on a survey conducted in 2007 at several multinational companies. Data were gathered by a questionnaire entitled '*Incorporate communication within multinational companies between people with different cultural background*' (questionnaires have been supposed to be rather efficient for gathering data in the first part of research but in the second section of the research interviews will be conducted with individuals to be able to explore which questions, views or issues are worthy of later follow-up study).

It was taken into consideration that communicative predictions are based on data from three levels. First is the cultural level (the present paper examines the findings relating to this level). The second level of information is socio-cultural. Finally there are psycho-cultural data. The sample was random and taken from the company as a whole, across all levels of positions.

### 3 Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this research consisted of 10 questions. The first part of the questionnaire measured assess to cultural differences and its effect on everyday communication. The second part of the questionnaire asked for information on cross-cultural understanding and on sufficient cultural awareness. Last questions allowed respondents to freely express their views and experiences to the intercultural understanding (*comments*).

#### *The participants*

150 questionnaires have been sent to employees working at multinational companies and 98 questionnaires have been sent back. As for the nationality the majority of them is Hungarian, the rest is foreigner. Potentially respondents were sought from the researcher's own network and 'snowballed' by participants passing on the questionnaires to colleagues.

83% of these participants were aged between 31 and 40. 8% were aged between 41 and 50. Most of them had all high level of education (university or college degree, doctorates). 7% were aged between 20 and 30. They

Table 2: Participants' position

Position	Participant
Key staff (senior management)	11%
Middle management	33%
Office staff	48%
Other (trainee, technician, skilled worker)	89%

had all at least secondary school diplomas plus had been involved in several training courses. Only 2% of the participants were older than 51.

The outline of the position can be seen in Table 2.

It is supposed by the researcher that there are no language problems during the everyday communication at work. Every participant speaks more than one language apart from their mother tongue. At the companies observed the working language is English and/or German. Their spoken English and/or German proficiency is high and they think that difficulties in communication are not caused by the language. It can be accepted because fluency in English and/or in German have been required before applying for the job in question.

The participants were also asked to comment the questions if they feel to do. In particular, the researcher was interested in obtaining insight into how the concepts of cultural differences were embedded within the everyday informal communication in a multicultural environment.

## 4 Findings

One of the most heatedly debated issues in the literature on interactions involving participants from various cultural backgrounds is undoubtedly that of Intercultural Dialogue. It is known that The European Commission proposes that 2008 be 'European Year of Intercultural Dialogue' and a lot of researchers have been dealing with this topic but most of them have been analysing intercultural patterns of international negotiations.

The purpose of the present research was to examine the topic on a different stage because the researcher is sure that there are a lot of communicative difficulties due to different cultures. The present research has established that we communicate the way we do because we are raised in a particular culture and learn its language, rules, and norms. The multicultural makeup of organisations is one of the main causes of the communication breakdowns that today's organisations are experiencing.

The analysis of the survey revealed several misunderstandings regarding the notion of culture. However, even though we all know to which culture belong, definition of the word has been difficult (Katan 1999:16). '*Definition of the culture usually turn on postulations of structures of contents and values of groups, generally nation-sized*' (Menezes de Souza 2006: 107). As the research proved (most of the respondents involved were holding a university degree) the traditional teaching of intercultural communication at universities has not focused on culture as a system for interpreting reality and organising experience.

Culture is understood, in this context, as collectively held set of attributes, which is dynamic and changing over time. Cultural awareness or cultural intelligence is increasingly being viewed as a critical skill in securing success in multicultural environment. With more people from culturally diverse backgrounds meeting within the business environment, clear and effective communication is necessary between them. Although in many cases a common language may exist, usually English, culture can and does still cause problems.

As for the questions 1 - *Cultural differences cause problems in the internal communication at a multi-culture workplace* - 79% of both Hungarian and foreigner respondents chose the answer partially agree. Only some of them (9%) think that conflicts in a multicultural environment arise because of the difference in values and norms of behaviour of people from different culture.

Answering the question 2 - *Cultural adaptability is important in the internal communication at a multi-cultural workplace* - 96% of respondents agree that people can prevent cross-cultural conflicts by learning about cultures that they come in contact with and so they can behave in a more flexible way in the interactions.

81% of the respondents *partially agree* that *People with different cultural backgrounds can communicate with difficulties*. It is thought that different cultures may have different expectations as to what should occur during the communication. However 9% think that the world today is characterised by an ever growing number of contacts resulting in communication between people with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds in several fields, in consequence there are no difficulties in communication in a multicultural workplace any more.

Table 3: Attitudes toward cultural diversity

Notion	Point (max. 490)
new thinking	476
susceptibility to the new	442
adaptability	439
ability of cooperation	401
will-power	362
flexibility	319
creativity	228
curiosity	195

(1 point - not important; 5 - very important)

Most of the respondents (94%) *totally agree* that *Different cultures favour different means of everyday communication*. In question 5 - *Cultural differences have a negative effect on the performance of jobs* - 79% of respondents *neither agree or disagree*. They seem to misunderstand the words *culture* or *cultural differences*, misinterpreting them as language or *language problems*. It is easy to see how culture and language have been connected, because language is of course part of culture. But our research have not focused on the connection between *culture* and *language*. It focuses on culture as a set of values and attributes of a given group, and the relation of the individual to the culture.

Answers and comments to question 6 - *Stereotypes in culture influence everyday communication at work* - by the majority of participants in this study confirm us that everybody is interested in stereotypes and they are influenced by them. This question was the only one where a big difference is seen between the answers done by Hungarian and foreigner employees. Most of the Hungarian respondents are influenced by stereotypes (i.e. *'The Americans are sociable, open and friendly'*, *'The British are cold and reserved'*, *'The Germans are prepared for all eventualities'*) and it is true even for them who have been working in a multicultural environment for more than two years. Consequently, in a way, old stereotypes still are alive even though there are a lot of new symbols, the changing reality (including contacts and working together with representatives of diverse culture).

In answer to statement 7 - *What do you actually mean? 'You have to take into consideration cultural differences'* - the following trend has been identified (responses were given on a five-point scale ranging from *not important to very important*):

At this point I would like to emphasise that all the participants accept that diversity is increasing within Europe, and it is a new phenomenon in Hungary as well. Therefore workforce has to be prepared in this new multicultural working environment. Changing attitudes is difficult because they fulfil important cognitive and sociological functions.

Our hypothesis was that the participants involved in the research would show evidence of more positive multicultural knowledge on intercultural relations, tolerance and self-esteem. But most of respondents seemed not to know or not to be sure that communication at a multicultural workplace includes not only linguistic elements (grammar, syntax, pronunciation) but also interactional competence (turn taking, opening or closing a conversation etc.), as well as the sociocultural aspects of speakers. The only way to overcome the problems is by recognising the differences and similarities in communication between people with the different cultural background. Success in working with colleagues from different culture is not easy goal. In order to connect, the colleagues at a multicultural company have to communicate effectively and they can do this in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

The survey proved that cross-cultural trainings are necessary to held. 100% of respondents said that cross-cultural trainings had not been organised at their companies and they added that they miss it very much. Trainings should help them understand the underlying cultural values that drive behaviour - first they can understand their own cultural background and then other people's. Every respondent has not understood that intercultural approach to communication seeks to interpret the way that members of a group represent themselves during the communication process. Intercultural communication trainings should help them to accept that there are external (behaviours: language, gestures, habits; products: literature, folklore, art, music, artefacts) and internal (ideas: beliefs, values, institutions) levels (Robinson 1998: 7-13) relating to culture.

As for the question 7 - *Cultural differences can be seen in...* - the results are not surprising. It has been supposed that cultural difference could be seen in socialising. More than 80% of respondents agree that cultural differences can be seen in *greetings, being formal or informal* during the communication with colleagues, *demon-*

*strating or not feelings or eating habits.* The social message of behavioural differences is easily misunderstood and results in lack of trust. 'Why do the Hungarians have a big lunch every day instead of having sandwiches' - the foreigners asked. 'Why do not the Hungarians use gestures and why are not they sensitive of time?' The causes are a complex mix of historical and symbolic reasons. Due to the answers I absolutely agree with Geertz (1974: 89) who defines cultures as 'historically transmitted pattern of meanings' and we have to add to the philosophy of life, the values and norms, the rules and actual behaviour.

With regard to culture and behaviour we also have to remember the fact that every culture allows for a certain deviation or eccentricity (i.e. answers about shaking *hands*, *rubbing noses* etc.).

Last question refers to several notions that are expected important or not by diverse culture at a multicultural workplace. *Ability of collaboration* is important both for the Hungarians and the foreigners. *Acceptance, reflected awareness* and *empathy* are believed important by every culture because with a greater awareness of different cultures a person immediately becomes more effective in working. Having an insight into how another culture thinks and behaves allows one to tailor their approach and hence maximise their potential. *Style of communication* was highlighted by more than 70% of respondents. Some cultures prefer direct styles to indirect ones or neutral style to emotional one. 'Flexibility do not characterise Hungarian colleagues and they do not like working in teams' - the foreigners said.

## 5 Conclusion

The present paper which is only the first step of an ongoing research comprising linguists, economists and experts in communication who would like to study several aspects of the recent phenomenon known as 'intercultural communication' from a multi-disciplinary point of view.

It is true that the rich heritage of diverse languages and cultures is a valuable resource to be protected and developed, and that a major educational effort is needed to convert the diversity from a barrier to communication into a source of mutual enrichment and understanding (Clyne 1992). In order to communicate in a foreign language, to obtain knowledge of practice of the strategies, it is not enough to learn the words and the grammar; it also involves being able to handle the language as the vehicle or the medium of a culture. Intercultural and linguacultural competencies (FitzGerald 2003: 170-203) should be developed and taught at courses in order to communicate very effectively in multicultural environment.

Communicative behaviour is believed to be strongly influenced by cultural value systems (FitzGerald 2003: 21). Samovar and Porter (1991:108) claim that 'in the study of human interaction, it is important to look at cultural values, but in the study of intercultural communication it is crucial.

In their comments the respondents highlighted that in the 21st century globally employable graduates are needed who do possess intercultural empathy. This is already an urgent need in the business world where multicultural encounters have become a common practice.

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