

THE NOTION OF HIGH-CONTEXT AND LOW-CONTEXT CULTURES
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Abstract: the article deals with the notion of high and low context cultures in which the context is implicitly mentioned in the message, the messages themselves can be elliptical, indirect and allusive. This is referred to high-context cultures. In cultures in which context is not assumed to be understood, messages are explicit, direct and completely encoded in words (verbal; direct). This describes low-context cultures, in which the meaning is trusted almost entirely to words.

Keywords: culture, context, message, elliptical, allusive, indirect, low context.

ПОНЯТИЕ КУЛЬТУР С ВЫСОКИМ И НИЗКИМ КОНТЕКСТОМ
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Аннотация: в статье рассматривается понятие культур с высоким и низким контекстом, в которых контекст неявно упоминается в сообщении, сами сообщения могут быть эллиптическими, косвенными и аллюзивными. Это относится к культурам с высоким контекстом. В культурах, в которых контекст не предполагается понятным, сообщения являются явными, прямыми и полностью закодированными словами (вербальными, прямыми). Это описывает низкоконтекстные культуры, в которых смысл почти полностью доверяет словам.

Ключевые слова: культура, контекст, сообщение, эллиптический, аллюзивный, косвенный, низкий контекст.

Communication is fundamental in business, because business is a collaborative activity. Communication styles vary enormously around the world, and these contribute to a staggering variety of business styles.

Edward Hill initiated the approach to cultures, distinguishing among them cultures on the basis of the role of context in communication. High context cultures rely on context, either the actual physical environment or an internalized social context or both.

High-context cultures, in which the context of the message is well understood by both sender and receiver, one should use the context to communicate the message.

Probably the single most useful concept for understanding cultural differences in business communication is Edward T. Hall's distinction of low-context and high-context cultures. It explains much about how negotiation proceeds, how agreements are specified, and how workers are managed. It is best understood as reflecting a more fundamental distinction between *rule-based* and *relationship-based* cultures, which is in turn grounded in different conceptions of human nature. It is important to show how business practices reflect low-context and high-context characteristics, but it subsequently moves to the deeper levels to explore how communication styles are integrally related to other characteristics of the culture [1].

In high-context communication, the message cannot be understood without a great deal of background information. Low-context communication spells out more of the information explicitly in the message.

In his book *Beyond culture*, Hall divided all cultures into high-context or low-context cultures. He maintained that all behaviour, including verbal and non-verbal communication, was either affected by the cultural context (high-context) or minimally affected by such context (low-context). Americans, Australians, the British, Scandinavians, Swiss and Germans all come from low-context cultures; they react directly to verbal and non-verbal messages. However, for people from Mediterranean, Korean, Vietnamese, Japanese, Chinese, Middle Eastern and Latin American cultures, the context of the message is just as important as, and in some cases more important than, the message itself. Some researchers have said that Hall's two categories are really a continuum of context and there are middle-of-the-road cultures that seem to fit both high- and low-context definitions. High- and low-context cultures differ in their approaches to power hierarchies, social relationships, work ethics, business practices and time management. The dominant values of high- and low-context cultures are significantly diverse and may be the source of many intercultural problems and conflict [2].

Knowledge of high- and low-context cultures is important to our understanding of how culture can influence one's own and other people's style of communication. For example, the dominant style of communication in the low-context culture has the following characteristics:

The vast majority of information is explicitly stated; for example, an apology needs to be clearly articulated. In a high-context culture the same message can be communicated through a variety of non-verbal gestures, such as a smile, a sigh, a shrug or a frown.

Directness and openness, with some degree of freedom of emotional expression. Spontaneity and casualness characterize informal relationships. Within this context, successful communication mainly requires an understanding of the explicit norms of behavior. In such low-context cultures, success also requires knowledge of implicit norms and expectations.

Polite questioning of the boss or authority figures suggests one is perceptive, has personal power and may help bring about change. Independence, self-determination, and personal confidence are highly prized whatever the level of employment.

Non-verbal communication cues such as posture, gestures and facial expressions are very useful communication tools and are encouraged. For example, eye contact is perceived to be important in validating recognition and communicating interest. It is also seen as assertive and shows that one has nothing to hide. The exact opposite is true of high-context cultures where expressions of emotion are often hidden from view.

The theory of high and low-context is also applicable to online communication; this may explain why information technologies are problematic for some cultures. Low-context cultures do not usually use social contexts as a way of determining the most appropriate way of replying to messages. But in high-context cultures the context conveys as much information as, or even more than, the exact meaning of the message being discussed. When we receive an email message, we are not usually looking for context. The identities of other participants are almost unimportant, compared to their words— argument, ideas and prose style are more important than who they are. This is exactly the opposite approach to that of someone from a high-context culture, whose whole upbringing requires a clear, clear-cut social structure in order for any communication to occur. Without the context, the high-context person is lost for words [3].

The use of language has other problems. Given that language informative or a relationship function, what happens when CMC is used with a foreign colleague who is attuned to the social functions of the language, not the information provided. Westerners do not normally ask about family and health in business meetings or professional online communication. They tend to get to the point very quickly, express our individual viewpoints, and expect a prompt reply that affirms or contradicts our conclusions. Westerners do not expect their local colleagues to talk about the weather, their health or their fathers' or mothers' well-being.

The development of a high level of linguistic competence, though fundamental for intercultural communication, cannot be believed sufficient. In fact, it has been observed that, when non-native speakers are able to display a near-native level of competence in the target language, there is also an implicit expectation that they will behave according to the sociocultural norms observed by the native speakers of that language. If this does not happen, native speakers will tend to consider the resulting failure in communication as a deliberate act of the non-native speaker, rather than as an honest mistake [4].

Business communication styles can differ markedly even among rule-based cultures, and similarly among relationship-based cultures. Consider, for example, a typical business presentation in which the speaker is trying to attract funding for a business venture. The presentation would have a very different character in the United States than in Germany, even though both countries have strongly rule-based cultures. The American speaker begins with a small joke to "break the ice," while this is inappropriate in Germany. Germans wish to be reassured by the professionalism and seriousness of the speaker. Humor suggests casualness that might translate into an irresponsible undertaking. The American's slides contain flashy visuals with such phrases as "fantastic opportunity," which strikes the Germans as childish [5]. They prefer graphs and charts to reassure them that proper market research has been conducted. The desire for security and predictability go far beyond the business meeting. Germans pay a premium for high-quality products that are less likely to break down, and they invest heavily in a highly-engineering physical and social infrastructure on which they can rely. Western Europeans

make much of their different styles, but one should see them as variations on low-context, logic-based communication. It is true that the British are normally reserved and understated, while the French gave us the very word *frank* (which refers to the Franks, an old word for the French). Yet British can deliver a devastating comment with scarcely an inflection of the voice. The situation changes somewhat as one moves east. Russian society, for example, is essentially rule-based, but business partners may find it more important to feel comfortable with each other than to get the financials right. Business people from abroad should be particularly cognizant of this, due to the uncertainty-avoiding culture and the tendency of Russians to feel apprehensive about foreigners. Arabic-speaking countries today, particularly in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region. Warm personal greetings and ceaseless courtesy are a must in business dealings. It is a never a bad idea to preface one's remarks with some such nicety as, "*Thank you for your comments,*" or, "*I learned much from your report.*" An impractical proposal or a questionable statement should be ignored or smoothed over, so that no one appears foolish. The goal is to protect the male ego. Flattery that strikes Westerners as obsequious is perfectly appropriate, particularly where superiors are concerned. Power distance is very much part of the picture, and honorific terms and titles are expected. Such phrases as "*Your Excellency*" may be obligatory for government officials or members of a royal family. Courtesy is integral to business relations throughout the Middle East. Arabic, Turkish, Farsi, and other Middle Eastern languages contain many resources for polite speech, and when speaking the languages one should take advantage of this. Above all, it is important to convey a message that one enjoys the company of one's business partners [6]. The United States and Japan are perhaps the world's most extreme cases of low-context and high-context cultures, respectively. International travel and migration likewise fail to explain low-context and high-context behavior, even if they are factors. It is true that international airports are now well signed in most of the world.

Every cross-cultural business manual cautions Western negotiators that, in much of the world, "yes" does not necessarily mean yes, and "maybe" can mean no. "Yes" can be a way of indicating that one understands or acknowledges a proposal. If the proposal is unsatisfactory, the response is likely to be indirect, perhaps consisting of such statements as, "*we will think about it*". This kind of indirect speech relies on high-context communication to get the message across, but there is more involved than simply a tendency to engage in high-context communication. There is a desire to save face or otherwise avoid giving offense. Indirect speech occurs generally in situations where parties may disagree, not only in negotiation, but also when a decision is being discussed or conflicts must be resolved. Westerners tend to be frank in such settings. Parties who disagree state their views openly, because their differences are resolved by what are regarded as objective standards [7]. The winning view is the one backed by the stronger argument, spreadsheet calculations, or the logic of market forces. The losers may find their predicament unpleasant, but they are expected to subjugate their personal feelings to objective criteria. However, there is no such faith in objectivity. Life revolves around human relationships rather than what are seen as universal rules of logic. Because there is no independent standard by which to resolve conflicts, it is important not to give offense in the first place.

Low- and high-context communication styles are, at root, contrasting approaches to regulating behavior. One way to identify a low-context culture is that behavior norms are often communicated by putting them in writing rather than through personal enforcement. If one is not supposed to enter a particular area or smoke there, posted signs will let him know. In a high-context culture, there may be no signs, but a guard or employee may accost me if one breaks any of the rules. One may take offense at this, because in a Western country, being called down for bad behavior implies that I should have known better, and I normally cannot know better unless someone writes down the rules. But in high-context cultures, being corrected by other persons is a normal procedure for regulating behavior [8].

Whereas Westerners live in a world of rules and instructions and are lost without them, many others live in a social context. A Western or international airport is full of signs and display screens that direct passengers to the correct check-in counter and gate, update departure times, and so forth. However, if I enter a crowded departure lounge in a regional, non-Western airport, one may find no signs or displays to indicate which gate corresponds to which destination, or if the displays exist, they may be blank or incorrect [9].

There are clear implications for business communication. The role of bureaucracy in high-context cultures is an interesting issue and will be taken up later. Because company norms in a high-context culture must be communicated personally, close personal supervision is essential. Perhaps the most elaborate verbal cues for power distance are the grammatical inflections found in such languages as Japanese and Korean. Japanese has special word forms that show respect or reflect greater formality and politeness. Usage can also depend on whether one is addressing members of an in-group or an out-group. It is vital to observe these niceties in business, and companies may even train employees how to use proper language to show respect to customers or superiors. Korean culture is strongly age sensitive, and an age difference of a year or less may require deferential language from the younger party. Two classes of inflections are used: honorific inflections to show respect to the persons mentioned, and no fewer than seven "speech levels" to show different degrees of respect to the listener. Nearly every language has resources for showing deference, if not to the extent of Japanese or Korean, and these tend to be important in business settings [10].

Deference is also shown in body language. Well-known examples include low bows or lowered eyes in some Asian countries. While Westerners see direct eye contact as indicating honesty, it may be unconsciously interpreted as threatening in East Asia. Guide books for travelers in the Middle East frequently warn against crossing one's legs, because pointing one's foot toward another is presumably offensive. A more general principle is that a slouch or relaxed posture reflects the confidence of a highly-ranked person, while an upright seated posture with feet on the floor are seen as showing deference. In Turkey, subordinates may be expected to keep their coat jackets buttoned in the presence of a superior. People in rule-based cultures seek security and predictability by structuring their environment, and in particular by structuring their time. They tend to set aside a time slot for each activity, resulting in appointments and strict schedules. This kind of structuring can succeed only if people are reasonably punctual. Punctuality is not required as a stress-management tool in relationship-based cultures, but it can nevertheless mark rank.

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