British Communication Behavior

Author: Kathrine Markussen (401254)

Supervisor: Hanne Tange

May 2011

Number of characters excl. blanks: 47,868

Bachelor thesis: BA English – Spanish
Department of Language and Business Communication
Aarhus School of Business, Aarhus University
1 Indhold
2 Abstract .................................................................................................................. 3
3 Introduction ............................................................................................................ 4
   3.1 Problem statement ............................................................................................ 5
   3.2 Theory and method .......................................................................................... 6
   3.3 Structure of the thesis ...................................................................................... 7
4 Intercultural communication barriers .................................................................. 7
   4.1 Barna’s Six Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication ...................... 8
       4.1.1 Assumption of similarities ....................................................................... 8
       4.1.2 Language differences .............................................................................. 9
       4.1.3 Nonverbal misinterpretations ................................................................... 9
       4.1.4 Preconceptions and stereotypes .............................................................. 9
       4.1.5 Tendency to evaluate .............................................................................. 10
       4.1.6 High anxiety ............................................................................................ 10
5 Theories .................................................................................................................. 10
   5.1 The need for “face” .......................................................................................... 10
   5.2 Goffman’s Face Theory .................................................................................. 11
   5.3 Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory ....................................................... 12
   5.4 Spencer-Oatey’s Rapport Management ........................................................... 12
       5.4.1 Rapport Management vs. Politeness Theory ............................................ 13
   5.5 Hall’s High/Low Context Culture ................................................................... 14
6 Analysis ................................................................................................................... 16
   6.1 Watching the English – A social anthropological observation
       By Kate Fox ....................................................................................................... 16
   6.2 Similarities and differences in perceptions and evaluations of the communication styles of American and British managers
       By Kathleen Dunkerley and W. Peter Robinson .............................................. 17
   6.3 Getting to No. A Matter of English Ethics or Culture? and
       Northern European Business Cultures: Britain vs. Denmark and Germany
       By Malene Djursaa ............................................................................................. 18
   6.4 Analysis ............................................................................................................ 18
       6.4.1 Summing up ............................................................................................. 26
7 Discussion and criticism ......................................................................................... 27
8 Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 28
9 Bibliography .......................................................................................................... 30
10 Appendix .............................................................................................................. 32
2 Abstract

When the world becomes more globalized, businesses across the world engage more and more in cross-cultural interaction. Different theories on culture suggest that one should be aware of the linguistic and cultural differences which can cause misunderstandings and miscommunication between two cultures.

The aim of this thesis is to unveil some if the characteristics that are special for the British communication behavior as there seems to be several examples of miscommunication happening when engaging in cross-cultural interaction with the British. The problem statement in all its simplicity states: Why are the British so difficult to communicate with? Sub-questions have been made to substantiate the findings and the thesis will therefore also try to determine whether or not the British should be characterized as high- or low-context. To answer these questions the use of different theories will be explained and put into practice in trying to decipher what aspect have an influence on the difficulties in communication with the British.

Barna’s Six Stumbling Blocks present the difficulties which can hinder an efficient cross-cultural interaction. The stumbling blocks include assumption of similarities, language barriers, nonverbal misinterpretations, preconceptions and stereotypes, tendency to evaluate and high anxiety. Goffman’s Face Theory helps determine why and how people construct their public image as well as which strategies to use when wanting to maintain one’s face. Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory refers to negative and positive face wants which we strive for in any interaction and our reasons for not choosing the most efficient way of communicating a message relates to our desire to maintain face. Spencer-Oatey’s Rapport Management Theory is an expansion of the Politeness Theory but with an added social component named sociality rights. Hall’s concept of High/Low Context Culture can be divided into categories which can be compared to Hofstede’s notion of individualism/collectivism as the two cultures place emphasis on different values and behaviors.

The analysis will be based on a hermeneutic perspective in which three case studies will be analyzed using the theories mentioned above. Two articles are written by Malene Djursaa on Anglo-Danish business relations and one article is written by Kathleen Dunkerley on Anglo-American business relations. The findings will be supported by the observations made by the anthropologist Kate Fox and written in her book “Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour”.
Analyzing the case studies and applying the theories, makes it evident that the British almost fall into their own category. They are defined by Hall as a low-context culture but the case studies show evidence that they share many commonalities with high-context cultures such as Japan and Arab countries like for instance their emphasis on politeness and the precedence of personal relationships and social cues over tasks.

The British are therefore a unique instance of an almost non-categorical culture which, although presumably belonging to the same cultural group as Denmark and America, still posses enough differences to cause misunderstandings and miscommunication when interacting cross-culturally with people from another culture.

Number of characters excl. blanks: 2,832

3 Introduction

In a world that continually becomes more and more globalized people engaging in cross-cultural interaction, either in personal or business relations, discover that culture has not become globalized too. There can be barriers which prevent people from different cultures to communicate in an efficient manner and misunderstandings and miscommunication can make reaching a mutual agreement impossible. People from different cultures have different understandings of the interaction process as well as having different communication styles and so, culture and communication are therefore closely related and one way of avoiding cross-cultural communication problems is having a better understanding of cross-cultural differences because one will only be able to deal with new situations on the basis of the competences learned from the reflection of personal experience (Kakabadse et. al. p. 12).

It is important to establish what we are referring to, when talking about culture. The definition which suits the topic of this thesis best is given by Helen Spencer-Oatey who provides the following definition:
“Culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioral conventions, and basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member’s behavior and each member's interpretations of the “meaning” of other people’s behavior”¹.

By definition, communication is an activity in which meaningful information is conveyed between two or more people and will be recognized by them by their shared interpretations (ibid. p. 6). Consider the following statement by philosopher Paul Grice: “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice p. 26). One can speculate about the reasons for the difficulties encountered in cross-cultural communication because the practice of efficient communication seems by Gricean principles to be rather simple and straightforward. Cross-cultural communication is, however, not as simple when taking into account the linguistic and cultural differences that can hinder an interaction.

Living in a globalized world, businesses will more and more often find themselves in situations where they must engage in cross-cultural communication with partners from a different culture. Different cultures, however, put emphasis on different aspects relating to communication stemming from cultural norms and behaviors.

### 3.1 Problem statement

The primary point of focus for this thesis will be to unveil some characteristics of British communication styles and behaviors. Examples of Danish and American businesspeople engaging with the British suggest that there are aspects of the communication in which the British differ from the Danish and American associates. A definition of British is important to provide in this context to avoid confusion. The term British in this thesis in reality only covers the English because they differ from the Scots, Welsh and Irish. Experience, however, shows that the term British, when used, is a cover term mostly used to refer to the English, therefore the term British has been used throughout this thesis to refer to the English people.

The detection of a remarkable difference between the UK and her closest cultural neighbors in many business relations makes you wonder what the reasons are for these differences. The problem that this thesis will try to identify, therefore, is:

¹ Spencer-Oatey p. 4
Why are the British so difficult to communicate with?

And to substantiate the primary research question, the following sub-questions have been added.

Which aspects have an influence on the difficult communication process between people from the presumably same culture and in continuation of this, should the British be defined as high- or low-context culture?

The analysis will be based on three case studies relating to Anglo-Danish business relations and Anglo-American business relations respectively and an anthropological observation made by Kate Fox. The theoretical part will be based on Goffman’s Face Theory, Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory, Hall’s theory of High/Low Context Cultures, Spencer-Oatey’s Rapport Management Theory and Barna’s Six Stumbling Blocks to Intercultural Communication.

3.2 Theory and method

The method used in this thesis is based on a hermeneutic analysis, which is an approach used to deciphering the message of a text (Langergaard et. al. p. 126). The method used relies on inductive empirical data consisting of case studies indentifying cultural communication difficulties between American and Danish businesses collaborating with the British.

The theory used in this thesis is related to the concept of culture and the concepts of face and politeness. Culture will be explained by using the theory by Hall on High/Low Context Cultures. Face will be explained by means of Goffman’s Face Theory and politeness will be explained by looking at Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory and Spencer-Oatey’s Rapport Management Theory. Furthermore, I will incorporate Barna’s concept of the Six Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication as a means of understanding the difficulties of interacting with someone from another culture from an “outside” perspective, meaning that the aspects apply to the things an outsider needs to be aware of when engaging in a foreign culture.
3.3 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is made up of two parts; the first one consisting of the presentation of the different theories and the second part consisting of the analysis.

The theoretical part will begin with a presentation of Barna’s Six Stumbling Blocks followed by a presentation of Goffman’s Face Theory, Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory, Spencer-Oatey’s Rapport Management Theory and finally Hall’s concept of High/Low Context Culture.

The analytical part will be based on the three case studies as well as the observations by Kate Fox. The beginning of the analytical part will consist of four paragraphs which give a brief overview of the case studies and Fox’s observations. The analytical part will also contain a discussion of the Politeness Theory and how best to apply the theory to new research. Finally there will be a recapitulation of the findings.

4 Intercultural communication barriers

Most cross-cultural exploration begins with
the annoyance of being lost.

Edward Hall, *Beyond Culture*

Intercultural interaction will inevitably be faced with barriers and communication challenges that can cause the intended communicative message to be misunderstood. There are many sources which can lead to this misunderstanding such as incorrect decoding by the receiver, imprecise interpretation and “noise” as in technical obstruction (Guirdham p. 179). However, other factors can also cause misinterpretations and are of a more personal character, namely that the way in which people communicate is affected by their comings from different backgrounds including their cultural differences.
4.1 Barna’s Six Stumbling Blocks in Intercultural Communication

Communication between people from different cultures can be quite difficult and even where a presumably friendly approach is chosen and the best intentions are expressed it is sometimes not sufficient and can cause misunderstandings.

Laray Barna proposes six stumbling blocks in intercultural communication, that can provide an answer to many of the “why’s” which are likely to arise when interacting with people from another culture (Barna p. 337). The six stumbling blocks include assumption of similarities, language barriers, nonverbal misinterpretations, preconceptions and stereotypes, tendency to evaluate and high anxiety.

4.1.1 Assumption of similarities

One of the reasons why misunderstandings occur frequently in intercultural communication is due to the fact that people wrongly assume that there are sufficient similarities between people from different cultures to facilitate communication (ibid. p. 337). “Assumptions are taken-for-granted, unquestioned beliefs which can affect our communicative behavior” (Guirdham p. 148). Guirdham points to two different sets of assumptions that are of special importance to intercultural communication, ethnocentrism and stereotypes.

When assuming similarities people not only adopt an ethnocentric view towards people from the other culture but they also reveal a defense mechanism which enables them not to have to face the differences, that are right before their eyes (Barna p. 337). Ethnocentrism is “a biased set of assumptions in favor of one’s own ethic group” (Guirdham p. 149). These assumptions are contributory to an approach towards people from other cultures labeled ethnocentric. The ethnocentric person will think of their own culture and its norms, beliefs and customs to be correct and will look down upon other cultures (ibid. p. 149).

One cannot even assume that the nonverbal language will be similar because our different cultural upbringings will affect how we for instance show emotions and display them via our body language, and whether or not these emotions will actually be expressed or
suppressed depends on the accepted cultural beliefs, therefore signs of grief or happiness may be completely different from one culture to another (Barna p. 337).

### 4.1.2 Language differences

Language differences are evidently some of the biggest obstacles when it comes to intercultural communication. Apart from the obvious fact that non-native speakers of English will not have the same linguistic variations and understandings of the language as natives, there are also culture bound cues that determine for instance what ways are appropriate for starting a conversation or when a person involved in the conversation has a right to speak, which can be lost on people from an outside culture (Guirdham p. 192).

### 4.1.3 Nonverbal misinterpretations

Communication can consist of other than the spoken language. Non verbal communication is understood as the process of communication in which wordless messages are sent and received. It can consist of e.g. facial expressions, body language and gestures and are used to express meaning and reveal feelings and attitudes. *(ibid. p. 92).*

People from different cultures have different nonverbal communication styles and what has been adopted by one culture have certain meanings to the members of that particular culture which is interpreted through their cultural frame of reference. Members of specific cultures see the world in personally recognizable patterns and if certain nonverbal signs are not comprehended this poses an obvious communication barrier (Barna p. 341).

### 4.1.4 Preconceptions and stereotypes

Stereotypes were, along with ethnocentrism, one of the two sets of assumptions detected by Guirdham as being essential for intercultural communication. “Stereotypes are over generalized second hand beliefs that provide conceptual bases from which we “make sense” out of what goes on around us, whether or not they are accurate or fit the circumstance and help reduce the threat of the unknown by making the world predictable” (Barna p. 341).

Stereotypes exist because they have become firm myths by our own national culture and present a hindrance to communication as they obstruct our ability of objectively making sense
of the world. Stereotypes continue to exist because they are sustained by only recognizing that information which is supported by the views the stereotypes present us with (Barna p. 341).

4.1.5 Tendency to evaluate
The tendency to evaluate refers to the process of approving or disapproving the statements or actions made by a person from another culture rather than trying to understand them based on the other member’s world view (ibid. p. 342). The tendency to evaluate can be successfully compared to the notion of ethnocentrism. Both ideas share the assumption, that people will favor their own culture which may seem more right and natural instead of trying to be open-minded and understand the behavior and attitudes of the other.

4.1.6 High anxiety
High anxiety and tension refer to the emotional state of feeling uncomfortable in cross-cultural connections where many one is faced with many uncertainties. The presence of tension makes the possibility of changing the stumbling blocks mentioned to the positive doubtful. Being in the state of high anxiety in an incomprehensible environment makes you resort to your various defense mechanisms in order for you to alleviate stress when finding yourself in unknown situations, however none of these defenses will lead to effective communication (ibid. p. 343).

5 Theories
The theories discussed in this part of the thesis consist of culture-related, face-related and politeness-related aspects and the highlights of the theories will be presented and used for the analysis which follows the theoretical part.

5.1 The need for “face”
Face is a concept which is difficult to define precisely but it is a notion which is concerned with “people’s sense of worth, dignity and identity and is associated with issues such as respect, honor, status, reputation and competence”. Spencer-Oatey believes face to be
something universal but other theorists such as Ting-Toomey argues that “culture can affect
the relative sensitivity of different aspects of people’s face, as well as which strategies are
most appropriate for managing face” (Spencer-Oatey p. 12).

5.2 Goffman’s Face Theory

The sociologist Erving Goffman established the Face Theory in which the emphasis is to be
found on the concepts of face and face work. The theory helps us determine first the how and
why behind people’s construction of their public image and secondly, which types of
strategies they use in order to maintain or restore either their own or other’s images. (Metts et.
al. p. 203)

Goffman defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for
himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of
self delineated in terms of approved social attributes” (Goldsmith p. 220). Goffman’s concept
of face is related to people’s social self and public image. We display this in our interaction
with others and as it is a social construct, losing face will be a typical human concern (Metts
et. al. p. 203). Goffman compared the concept of interaction with “drama” which was meant
as a metaphor to explain how face was constructed, lost and maintained. Goffman believed
that similarities could be found between the process of social interaction and the process of
actors getting ready to perform on stage. The actors would take on a role and receive
acceptance by the audience meaning in short, that “our face is a type of performance, in that
we present an image of our “self” through our appearance, our messages and our a
ctions that
we believe will give the impression that we are competent and worthy social interactants”
(ribid. p. 206).

Goffman points to several characteristics that are essential to our understanding of the
concept of face. Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective manifests itself in the concept of face
being claimed and situated. Face has to do with our ability to play roles and losing or saving
face has to do with our ability to stay in character and behave accordingly to the expectations
of that particular role. Face is something we claim “when we enact the characteristics that go
along with some line in an interaction and when others act toward us in ways that sustain that
image” (Goldsmith p. 221).
According to Goffman, face, therefore, is a mask that changes according to the situation – the audience in front of you or the social interaction in which you engage. People are emotionally attached to their face, which is created in social settings and so people will use different politeness strategies in social situations as a means to help maintain each other’s face because they strive to maintain the face which they have constructed (Metts et. al. p. 206).

What can be concluded from the latter is that face is both public and social. Face happens in our interactions with others and refers to ”what kind of image is revealed in your own and other’s actions”. Face can be observed in public actions and interactions and because it includes not only the individual’s own face but also the actions of the participants, face is also social (ibid. p. 220).

5.3 Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory
Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory is an expansion of Goffman’s Face Theory in which they differentiate between positive and negative face. “Negative face is a person’s want to be unimpeded by others, the desire to be free to act as she/he chooses and not be imposed upon; and positive face is a person’s want to be appreciated and approved of by selected others, in terms of personality, desires, behavior, values and so on” (Goldsmith p. 222).

Brown and Levinson believe that our desire to maintain face is a reason why we do not say what we mean in the most efficient way possible. In many daily situations we are faced with actions that have the potential to threaten our face. Whether it is criticism, apologies or orders and whether it threatens either your own or the hearer’s face, politeness theory focuses on how to respond to threats to the hearer’s face (ibid. p. 223).

Politeness according to Brown and Levinson refers to “all of the verbal and nonverbal resources available in a language for making FTA\(^2\) less face threatening” (ibid. p. 224). The theory has given us the possibility of identifying different forms of politeness.

5.4 Spencer-Oatey’s Rapport Management
In the previous paragraph an explanation of Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory was presented and in continuation hereof Principal Research Fellow in Linguistics Helen Spencer-Oatey’s model of Rapport Management specifies further what she believed was lacking from

\(^2\) FTA = Face Threatening Act
Brown and Levinson’s model namely that the concept of positive face was underspecified and that the negative face issues was not necessarily face concerns after all (Spencer-Oatey p. 13). Rapport Management refers to the management of harmony and disharmony among people and it involves two main components. Firstly, the management of face involves managing face needs and Spencer-Oatey’s definition of face is equal to that of Goffman emphasizing that it is the positive social value that concerns us. Secondly, the management of sociality rights refers to the management of social expectancies which Spencer-Oatey defines as “fundamental personal/social entitlements that individuals effectively claim for themselves in their interactions with others”. Spencer-Oatey proposes yet two components within each of the two mentioned above. Within the management of face we find quality face, concerned with personal qualities and self-esteem, and identity face, concerned with values effective in social or group roles. Similarly, within the management of sociality rights we find equity rights and association rights. Equity rights consist of yet two components referring to the extent to which we are exploited and the extent to which people impose on us, the latter being the notion of autonomy-imposition and the former being the notion of cost-benefit (ibid. p. 14).

5.4.1 Rapport Management vs. Politeness Theory

Spencer-Oatey’s Rapport Management is a refinement of Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory as it presents a social component to the theory. It distinguishes between face needs which refer to a person’s personal or social value and sociality rights which refer to a person’s personal or social entitlements as can be seen in table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Components of rapport management

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Face management</th>
<th>Sociality rights management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(personal/social value)</td>
<td>(personal/social entitlements)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal/independent perspective</td>
<td>quality face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(cf. Brown and Levinson’s positive face)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>equity rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(cf. Brown and Levinson’s negative face)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 Spencer-Oatey p. 15
5.5 Hall’s High/Low Context Culture

In his theory of high- and low-context cultures, Hall argues that “contexting is a fundamental aspect of culture; and members of a culture will have a shared bias, either towards communication through the text or the context” (Katan p. 247) and Hall defines context as “the information that surrounds an event” (Hall p. 6). He states that the emphasis is not on sending the “right” message but rather releasing the right responses. Whether or not a person releases the right responses depend among other factors on observing the rules of the other culture (ibid. p. 28). Hall further explains that “as context is lost, information must be added if meaning is to remain constant” (ibid. p. 247) because “we tend to believe we know how much needs to be said and explained to have our message understood the way we meant” (ibid. p. 247).

Hall differentiates between a high-context and a low-context culture. In a high-context culture the message contains very little explicit information because most of the information is already in the person (Hall p. 6). People from for instance Japan or the Arab countries are high-context cultures because they emphasize close personal relationships and have extensive networks among family, friends and colleagues. A low-context culture, on the other hand, requires much more background information when engaging in an interaction because the information lies within the explicit code. People from Germany and America are examples of low-context individuals in which relationships are divided into categories such as friends, family, colleagues etc. (ibid. p. 6-7).

Another factor distinguishing the two is the concept of space. Every human being has an innate characteristic which is strongly influenced by culture and this notion of territoriality is concerned with laying claim to and defending a territory. This concept can be extended to almost all possessions today and it is not uncommon to hear people today labeling something as “mine”. We talk about another form of territory when we turn to the notion of personal space. This bubble of space can be influenced by a number of things including the relationship to the people nearby, one’s emotional state, their cultural background etc. People from Northern Europe have a large bubble whereas people from Southern Europe tend to have little distance between them. This causes friction between the two because a normal distance
in the South can penetrate the bubble of space for a Northern European thereby making that person uncomfortable or aggressive (*ibid.* p. 10-11).

Time is part of the measuring system used to sequence events and especially two kinds of time systems have proven to cause difficulty in international business; monochronic and polychronic time.

The following table shows some of the direct differences between the high- and low-context cultures. More differences are present but these specific areas have been chosen out of relevance for the topic of the thesis.

Table 1.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contexting Categories and Related Cultural Characteristics in Intercultural Business and Technical Communication Literature⁴</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>High-Context Characteristic</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directness of communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary message is implicitly coded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open conflict is avoided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politeness is emphasized.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous information is preferred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow messages are appreciated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close attention is paid to social cues and context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical cues are important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values and beliefs about work and relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships take precedence over</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

⁴ Cardon (2008) p. 418
problems or tasks. precedence over relationships.

6 Analysis

“Today’s globalization process has reduced the cultural differences”

The quote stems from a paper on the business relationship between Spanish toy manufacturers and their British customers and reveals certain differences between the two cultures. The two had difficulties working together and understanding one another because of the fact that cultural and linguistic barriers had not been taken into consideration as possible hindrances to business communication and relationships.

The following analysis will use three different case studies as well as an anthropologist’s observations of the British as the basis for identifying and analyzing the cultural and linguistic barriers likely to be encountered in cross-cultural interactions. A brief summary of the material will be presented first then followed by the analysis in which all the texts and theories will incorporated in an overall analysis of the problem statement. Lastly a final sub-paragraph has been devoted to the concluding part of the analysis which will give a recap of the findings.

6.1 Watching the English – A social anthropological observation

By Kate Fox

In her book “Watching the English – the Hidden Rules of English Behaviour”, the social anthropologist Kate Fox gathers the results of an extensive observation of the English people’s customs, behaviors, traditions etc. and provides an insight into the commonalities which make up the English culture. Fox’s intention was to discover the hidden rules of English behavior and “reveal”, so to speak, the “unofficial codes of conduct that cut across class, age, sex, region, sub-cultures and other social boundaries” (Fox p. 2).

Fox collected her data through participant observation which enabled her to detect certain characteristics, which were not naturally applicable to all English people, but rather

5 Nieto p. 4
patterns common enough to be taken in and significant (*ibid.* p. 9). Fox refers to her work as “a book about the “rules” of Englishness” (*ibid.* p. 9) by which she intended to identify the norms and guiding principles about “normal” English behavior and the differences in these rules help us distinguish one culture from another (*ibid.* p. 13).

6.2 Similarities and differences in perceptions and evaluations of the communication styles of American and British managers

*By Kathleen Dunkerley and W. Peter Robinson*

The United States and Great Britain are perceived as two countries divided by a common language. Both the United States and Great Britain are categorized by Hofstede as being individualistic countries and Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, cited in the essay by Dunkerley, explain that those types of countries should both prefer the direct speech which goes correctly for the American preference however not for the British (Dunkerley *et. al.* p. 394-395).

Dunkerley and Robinson conducted a study on the differences and similarities between American and British managers on issues related to the workplace communication and in different areas such as humor, directness, politeness and criticism. The study relied on answers given by 13 American managers and 13 British managers all working in American owned companies located in England and who had experience working with members from the other culture. The study was designed around the hypotheses that: 1) the Americans would emphasize efficient communication, 2) the British would show preference for delaying decisions yet be efficient and 3) misunderstandings between the Americans and the British were likely to occur (*ibid.* p. 396). The results showed unanimous agreement on a number of issues and help to explain the difficulty in communication between the Americans and the British. The results will be discussed in further detail below using the theories accounted for in the first part of the thesis.
6.3 Getting to No. A Matter of English Ethics or Culture? and
Northern European Business Cultures: Britain vs. Denmark and Germany

By Malene Djursaa

Both articles by Malene Djursaa are based on data which consist of 55 interviews of people actively engaged in Anglo-Danish business relations and the articles provide a useful insight into the communication customs of the British. Of the 55 interviews conducted, most of the Danish participants revealed an annoyance towards the British business people’s lack of being able to say directly what they mean. What Malene Djursaa wanted to show with her articles was that communication difficulties could be derived from cultural differences rather that the mere language itself (Djursaa (1995) p. 1).

The interviews also disclosed an excessive overestimation of language skills by the Danes but rather than not being able to understand the English words, the problem lied in the extra messages surrounding the surface value of the words, meaning the context or the cultural message (ibid. p. 2).

6.4 Analysis

The analysis will first identify the characteristics observed from an “outside” perspective. In identifying these, we will use Barna’s theory of the Six Stumbling Blocks to Intercultural Communication. Secondly, the case studies will be analyzed using the theories by Goffman, Brown and Levinson, Hall and Spencer-Oatey in an attempt to unveil the hindrances for effective cross-cultural communication caused by cultural norms and behavior.

Barna’s stumbling blocks pose some serious difficulties in attaining proper cross-cultural communication without misunderstandings. It suggests that there exist six stumbling blocks that can prevent efficient cross-cultural communication is important in cross-cultural business relations because the understanding of the other’s culture can make or break a business deal. The stumbling blocks include; the assumption of similarities, the language barriers, the tendency to evaluate, the high anxiety, the stereotypes and the nonverbal misinterpretations are all contributing to creating difficulties when engaging in cross-cultural interaction. In order for miscommunication not to take place, one must be aware of the fact,
that one’s own cultural background cannot automatically be transferred to another culture. Djursaa presents the example of a Danish margarine manufacturer trying to make a deal with an English supermarket and the process of the initial negotiations seems positive to the Danish company. Their assumption of similarities overshadows the context in which the British were actually giving the Danish company their turndown. One can argue that the Danish posses more similarity assumptions than is actually the case. The language barrier is an obvious difficulty when a conversation is made between a native and a non-native speaker of English. As Djursaa also points out in her article, the Danish tend to overestimate their language skills, and though speaking English well they seem to have an over-confidence and believing that they speak it even better (Djursaa (1995) p. 2). The English language surely has a variation of the language that even the Danish do not know how to use, even though belonging to some of the non-native speakers in the world who do actually speak English well. Language itself is ambiguous and can cause a huge amount of confusion. English being the lingua franca of the world means that the native English speakers almost expect their partners in interaction to adopt the same ways of using the language as they do but this puts tremendous pressure on the non-native speaker as he/she for instance will have to comprehend the English use of voice modulation and understand that questions can be expressed as statements. We only have our own knowledge about the world and the what kind of language the speaker has used to rely on in situations like this (Guirdham p. 191).

Barna’s concept of the tendency to evaluate can be applied to the Danish company in the sense that they took the British company’s actions as a positive sign. The Danish perception of “approved” behavior is clearly demonstrated in the case of the Danish paint manufacturer trying to negotiate a deal with a British firm. Barna’s tendency to evaluate states that one either approves or disapproves the statements or actions made by the other, and in the case of the Anglo-Danish business relation, the Danish “approved” the actions made by the British, who gave off positive signals and permitted a total of three visits by the Danish company, who had started an advanced planning process at the time, before turning them down by means of a letter. The Danish evaluation was not consistent with the reality of the message that the British wanted to send because the Danish process of negotiation differs from the British.

Answers given by Danes, Americans and Brits in both case studies agree that the British are indirect in their form of communication. The British people’s inability to handle simple
matters efficiently such as greeting and parting is partly related to the almost exaggerated British politeness. The British do not want to know any personal information about a stranger until a much higher degree of intimacy has been established between the two. The British pertain almost in scholarly manner the practice of beating around the bush because of their extensive use of indirectness.

Anthropologist Kate Fox observed, that the British find it much to direct for a foreigner to simply introduce themselves on a first-name basis. The “right” way to introduce oneself in a social setting, would be simply not to introduce oneself at all but work one’s way into it by, for instance, making an initial remark about the weather. (Fox p. 39) Fox states that the British people’s obsession with talking about the weather is a matter of easing your way into a conversation with another person and the weather-talks, she states, are a means for the British of getting passed their natural reserve and actually talk to people (ibid. p. 26).

“The British construct roundabout ways of introducing topics - it avoids social embarrassment”

The statement, given by an American businessman in the Dunkerley and Robinson study, support the argument, that the British are anything but direct. Fox argues that a smooth and confident style of communication is un-English and, surprisingly as it may seem, a hesitant and almost ineffective style is the correct behavior (ibid. p. 41). The determination of the level of directness can among other theories be explained by means of Brown and Levinson’s concept of politeness.

Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory states that the level of directness conveyed in communication is related to the losing and maintaining of one’s public image (Kakabadse et. al. p. 13). In high-context cultures, the preferred way of communicating is the indirect mode and the use of a direct form may be unsettling for one’s own face. The decision to use the indirect form of communication is therefore a conscious attempt to avoid face-threatening acts but also a form of communication which will inevitably cause ambiguity and equivocation (ibid. p. 13) Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory distinguishes between positive and negative face. By positive face wants we refer to having one’s social image accepted by others and negative face wants involve the rights of that image, meaning in short that we take

---

6 Ibid. p. 399
exception to it when people impose on us or do not show us the respect we see fit (Goldsmith p. 256). The distinction between positive and negative face, however, only relates to an individual/personal conceptualization of face (Spencer-Oatey p. 15). Interaction and communication requires a social component and the Politeness Theory will therefore be used in the analysis of the case studies in interlacement with Spencer-Oatey’s Rapport Management Theory as they do share some similarities.

Both participants in an interaction strive for both positive and negative face wants, so it is in the participants’ best intention to help and corporate in maintaining each other’s face (Goldsmith p. 222). The British, being both indirect and polite, take precedence over personal relationships and social cues (cf. table 1.2) and by avoiding open conflicts they help maintain the other person’s face, as the following suggests.

“The British are more cautious – they have more of a concern for people’s sensivities”

Brown and Levinson argue that our aspiration to respect face makes us less direct and efficient in expressing what we actually mean (ibid. p. 223). There is a genuine interest in almost a type of “looking after one another” which takes precedence over a business deal. Spencer-Oatey proposes two ways in which rapport can be threatened. If someone asks something of us which we feel they have no right to, they threaten our equity rights, and if someone speaks to us in a manner that is too personal for us they threaten our association rights (Spencer-Oatey p. 16). The British “obsession” with avoiding conflicts and thereby also the loss of face, makes them aware of using different linguistic options that serve as strategies for managing face and sociality rights (ibid. p. 20). As Djursaa witnessed in the analyzing of her data, personal relationships are important for the British when doing business. As previously stated, the degree to which the two components, the interactional association-dissociation and the affective association-dissociation differ depends on the culture and the norms and behaviors relating to that specific culture. The British take the concept of interactional association-dissociation seriously when engaging in business relations, as the following example shows.

\[7 \text{Ibid. p. 399}\]
“The human side means a lot. If he doesn’t like me, there won’t be a deal – for the Englishmen the people are vital, whether you get along.”

Spencer-Oatey defines this aspect as “the type and extent of our involvement with others” (ibid. p. 15). Spencer-Oatey’s Rapport Management builds on Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory and adds a social component which is distinguishable from the Politeness Theory. She differentiates between a personal perspective in which one’s values are at stake and a social perspective in which one’s entitlements are at stake (Spencer-Oatey p. 15). The association rights are also made up of two components, the interactional association-dissociation and the affective association-dissociation.

The association right is the personal fundamental belief that we are entitled to an association with others which is related partly to the extent of our involvement and to the extent we share feelings and interests. These rights differ from one culture to another because the suitable amounts in which these rights are expressed partly depend on the culture’s sociocultural norms (ibid. p. 15). In the case of the Anglo-Danish business relations the British show behaviors very similar to those characteristic for the high-context cultures. Spencer-Oatey’s sociality rights are concerned with personal or social expectancies and our concerns with for instance social inclusion.

As Hall identified, the UK is a low-context culture (Hall p. 7) in which less attention is paid to social cues and context, physical cues are unimportant and problems or tasks take precedence over relationships (cf. table 1.2). However, it can be detected in the Djursaa articles, that the British felt that their association rights were threatened. An English business man visited a Danish stand at an exhibition was genuinely surprised and offended that his Danish hosts did not spend time being social with him and inviting him to lunch (Djursaa, (1994) p. 140). This example shows in all its clarity the major cultural differences between the British and Danish cultures.

In Djursaa’s article Getting to No, the Danes expressed confusion and annoyance with the behavior of the British (Djursaa (1995) p. 1). The Danes perceived positive signals and an interest in a possible business deal when in fact the British were in the process of turning their proposition down. Not surprisingly the Danes were puzzled by the turndown but the British

---

8 Djursaa (1994) p. 140
were not being rude rather they were behaving according to the conventional codes normal for British communication behavior.

“We don’t like saying no, especially if we like somebody. We’d rather they went away reasonably happy”

The statement, stemming from a British respondent from the study, indicates that the British somewhat differs in the communication styles from countries supposedly belonging to the same “type” of culture as the British.

Denmark, which is defined by Hall as a low-context culture (Hall p. 7), accentuate directness and prefer getting to the point and not beat around the bush. In general it is assumed, that the low-context individual is very literal minded; what is said is what is meant. The high-context individual on the other hand, is already contexted, meaning that most of the information is already in the individual (ibid. p. 6). The Danish company was most likely assuming that their way of doing business and their practice of turning someone down would be similar. Their ethnocentric view caused a miscommunication between the two companies because what can cause problems between high- and low-context individuals is that the low-context individual cannot decipher the high-context individual’s indirect messages (Djursaa (1994) p. 3). The fact is though, that it has already been determined that the UK is a low-context culture so why the miscommunication?

When applying Hall’s concept of high/low context cultures, both Denmark and the UK are identified as being low-context cultures (Hall p. 7) in which directness is emphasized but the quote “We don’t like saying no, especially if we like somebody. We’d rather they went away reasonably happy” obviously indicates, that the British do not wish to let the Danes directly down but just giving them a no. The British share similarities with countries, which are by definition high-context cultures, such as Japan and the Arabian countries.

In Japanese business connections, the giving of a no is considered impolite and a foreigner could therefore easily be given a yes which in fact means no simply because of the fact, that neither party thereby would lose face and both parties could part as friends (Djursaa (1995) p. 3). The same similarities can be detected in the Arabian world, where you do not turn someone down directly unless that person has offended you. Turning one down directly

Djursaa p. 4
British Communication Behavior
Kathrine Markussen
Exam number 401254

is regarded as impolite, so how can you know if the yes you have received in fact means no? The answer lies in the culture. In the Arabian world a yes will mean yes when it is repeated many times and accompanied by a clear positive attitude expressed via body language and eye signals (ibid. p. 4). Instead of providing a short and clear turndown, the high-context people are slow at getting to the point. The American businessman thinking that the British had too many confusing ways of introducing a topic, support the argument that the British are different from their “cultural” neighbors.

Goffman recognized in the making of his theory that people are emotionally attached to their face and the directness of the Americans, for instance, may in some cases be a little overwhelming for the British, as the following statement indicates.

“Direct criticism can annoy and anger the British. Americans need to be aware that direct criticism can cause negative feelings”\(^{10}\)

The British prefer avoiding the direct mode of communicating which may involve confrontations which can facilitate losing face and according to Goffman, the negative feelings attained by the British as a result of direct criticism from the Americans is considered a loss of face. Goffman’s theory states that losing face is a typical human concern and as observed by the British themselves in the following statement, they will strive to use the politeness strategies most convenient for maintaining their own face as well as that of others.

“The British are more cautious – they have more of a concern for people’s sensitivities”\(^{11}\)

The theory by Goffman roughly argues that face is a mask which changes according to the variety of the audience. Face is created in social situations and interactions and we construct a “self that fits appropriately into the requirements of the context” (Metts et. al. p. 205). The significant observations made by both Fox and Djursaa point in the direction that the British are relatively more high-context than assumed beforehand. The Face Theory therefore, confirms the observation that the British will engage more in face work. This stems from a

\(^{10}\) Dunkerley et. al. (2002) p. 401

\(^{11}\) Ibid. p. 399
British cultural norm of communication and behavior which determinedly involves a social awkwardness and uncertainty which thereby produces an over-politeness (Fox p. 401).

Although not being fond of using the theory by Hofstede, his concepts of *individualism vs. collectivism* spring to mind when reading some of the answers given by the participants in the Dunkerley and Robinson study including the following quote.

“The Brits prefer collective decisions; they prefer team problem solving and team recognition”\(^\text{12}\)

Having established already that the UK is a low-context culture according to Hall, Hofstede’s theory states that the UK is an individualistic country however, this is not what is evident in the above mentioned quote by an American. The Americans agreed that the problem solving process was a long-term progression in which the British were not as resolute and forward as the Americans because it was more appreciated and valued having an effective and harmonious team rather than hastily coming to a decision (Dunkerley *et. al.* p. 401). However, what is also characteristic about the British, as Fox argues, is that they do not appreciate dramatic change and would rather settle for a compromise. When having established that the UK is a low-context culture, we are taken by surprise by their appreciation of, and emphasis on team work and collective harmony but this may rather be explained culturally as the concept of compromise seems to be profoundly rooted within the English psyche (Fox p. 205). Fox also determines a sense of “social dis-ease” in the British, stating that they are unable to engage in a direct and straightforward interaction with another person (*ibid.* p. 206) which could help explain the notion of fairness in the British behavior. Fox argues that this fairness seems to influence much of the British people’s behaviors and is marked with an egalitarian politeness (*ibid.* p. 207).

\(^{12}\) Dunkerley *et. al.*(2002) p. 401
6.4.1 Summing up

The three articles on which the analysis is based along with the anthropological observations by Kate Fox all suggest that the British culture is rather difficult to categorize by means of the theories discussed in the previous paragraph.

Barna’s theory of the Six Stumbling Blocks suggest that the areas in which most difficulties are encountered are the assumption of similarities, language barriers and tendency to evaluate. Especially in the case of the Anglo-Danish business relations the differences caused many misunderstanding between the companies. The Danish’s assumption of similarities got in the way and caused them to evaluate the actions of the British wrongly. The Danish perception of having English language skills almost consistent with that of a native made them over-confident and may be one of the reasons for the miscommunication. Another assumption was presumably of similar work/business/communication/negotiation behavior by the Danish. The paint manufacturer finally received a decline after a total of three visits and what seemed like positive signals. So what went wrong? The stumbling blocks are something to be aware of when engaging in cross-cultural communication but the UK and Denmark are close neighbors, so one can wonder why there are so many differences that hinder their chances of efficient communication. In the case of the paint manufacturer the reason for the mixed signals received by the Danish has to do with the British concept of face and politeness which can be indentified and analyzed by using the Face Theory, Politeness Theory and Rapport Management Theory.

Hall’s concept of High/Low Context Culture identifies that the UK has many similarities with the high-context cultures even though being defined as a low-context culture.

Goffman’s Face Theory argues that one should try to obtain a self which matches the requirements of the surrounding context. Examples from the analysis show that the British can develop negative feelings when being approached too directly which results in a loss of face. When arguing that the British fall into the high-context category the Face Theory therefore proposes that the British will be more engaged in face work as a result of cultural norms.

The Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson has been interlaced with the Rapport
Management Theory by Spencer-Oatey as they correlate. The Politeness Theory states that there is a distinction between positive and negative face wants, the former referring to having one’s social image accepted by others and the latter referring to upholding the rights of that image. Many of the examples of statements presented in the analysis are instances of negative face wants and taking this concept one step further we can identify instances of *association rights* as defined by Spencer-Oatey as the equivalent to Brown and Levinson’s notion of *negative face*. The British are concerned with the maintaining of face and therefore use different politeness strategies to avoid threatening someone’s *sociality rights*.

The British are unique in their communication styles and it has been identified multiple times throughout the articles and Fox’s book, that they are anything but direct in their choice of style, however this also relates to their excessive politeness which is embedded in the English psyche. Fox observed that the British culture was primarily a “negative-politeness” culture where the emphasis was not on being polite *per se* but rather avoiding intrusion and imposition (Fox p. 173).

Fox’s observation of the “negative-politeness” culture brings us back to the paper on the Spanish toy manufacturer and their British costumers. The study revealed that many of the Spanish respondents were not aware of the existence of linguistic and cultural barriers and described the British as *inflexible, aloof, cold, strict, distant* and *unexpressive* (Nieto p. 1). However, there are certain characteristics which actually confirm such arguments, especially seen from an outsider’s perspective, so let us just end this analysis by establishing that:

> “The British are indirect – it’s a way of avoiding emotional engagement”

### 7 Discussion and criticism

The different theories by Goffman, Brown and Levinson, Hall, Spencer-Oatey and Barna discussed in the previous paragraph and used for the analysis all contain strengths and weaknesses which will be the topic of this paragraph. The Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson contains many strengths that can help us determine many differences in communication and it is therefore a theory especially useful for communication scholars. The

---

13 Dunkerley *et.al.* p. 398
Politeness Theory offers, unlike many other communication theories, a new approach to communication in that it can provide strategies to becoming a more efficient communicator instead of simply predicting what people will say (Goldsmith p. 232-33). Other authors have questioned the usefulness of Brown and Levinson’s theory as they believe their view on culture to be somewhat insufficient. The understanding of face is different from culture to culture and is a concept which is deeply rooted in cultural knowledge and values (ibid. p. 231). Consequently, Brown and Levinson’s notion of face may not be of the same significance in every culture and these concept may also take on different meanings cross-culturally. Brown and Levinson acknowledge the fact that there are cultural differences in the choosing of the politeness strategies and this question the cross-cultural strength because we have different perceptions of differences in communication.

The concepts of face and politeness traditional for the British communication style may determine that the use of the Politeness Theory has different meaning for the British and the Danish or Americans who were the partners in the case studies. Where the theory does work however, is when an awareness of linguistic and cultural differences has been raised. Then it will be possible to use the theory “in action”, meaning that cross-cultural interactants will be able to obtain a better and more efficient communication thereby, hopefully, avoiding cross-cultural misunderstandings.

8 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis has been to try and account for the reasons why the British are so difficult to communicate with by the means of different theories on culture, face and politeness. The British have a unique communication style and behavior which have roots deep in the cultural tradition of the country. It is difficult really to state the reasons why the British differ so significantly in their communication style and behavior because they themselves differ when it comes to identifying and categorizing certain cultural characteristics.

The British can hardly be categorized as an either-or culture because they share similarities with both “ends” of the context scale. The high-context cultures’ emphasis on
politeness and social cues is also relevant when discussing the British people but there is another side to the story as well.

As Barna’s theory suggests, the Danish and American businesspeople took certain similarities for granted, assuming that the British process of doing business would be somewhat the same as theirs seeing as the UK was a member of the same “cultural club”. This hypothesis however, turned out not to be true. Distinguishing between business and personal connections, an individualistic/collectivistic difference can also be detected.

One of the findings in the analysis suggests that the British are high-context when it comes to personal relationships and the maintaining of a group harmony. The British are very biased when it comes to this subject. Being extremely polite on the one hand and offended when not shown the interest in social mingling by a foreign partner, they are described among others as cold, distant, severe and unexpressive on the other hand. In her anthropological observations, Fox argues that the British obsession with politeness is in fact only a matter of almost involuntary deeply ingrained manners. When Goffman states that “we enact the characteristics that go along with some line in an interaction and others act toward us in ways that sustain that image” (Goldsmith p. 221), we decipher this and hereby understand, that the British reserve and social dis-ease are realized through the British behavior in which they judge each other by themselves and assume that everyone else must feel the same way and therefore ignore them. So how come the British are such a difficult people to communicate with?

The analysis provides findings which are useful for detecting certain cultural barriers which can hinder any cross-cultural interaction. The special case with the British, however, is that their ambiguous ways of communication can be hard for a foreigner to detect if not knowing some of the cultural differences beforehand. One way we can answer the why aspect of the research topic, is applying the problem to Hall’s theory of High/Low Context Culture.

Obviously Hall’s theory does not offer a scale on which only countries can be found on the extreme end. The conclusion is not that the British should be defined as a high-context culture because this is not the case. However, the British have remarkably many traits in common with the obvious high-context cultures such as Japan and countries from the Arabian world but that is as far as the comparison goes. The British are not high-context but nor are the low-context. The final statement of this thesis is that the British are a predominantly low-context culture but with many high-context traits in varying degree depending on the
situation. The British are “higher up the scale” than her Northern European neighbors and though not being frightfully different, the differences are significant enough to cause problems in cross-cultural interactions.

9 Bibliography


Nieto, Victoria Guillén, *The invisible face of culture: Why do Spanish toy manufacturers believe the British are most peculiar in business?*, University of Alicante

http://rua.ua.es/dspace/bitstream/10045/4184/2/The%20invisible%20face%20of%20culture.pdf


10 Appendix

