Communicating Meaning

3

3.1 Introduction

Have you ever sat in a meeting and noticed that someone with very good language proficiency still had a difficult time achieving his or her objectives? That is, even though the person could speak the target language or the lingua franca well, they still left the meeting frustrated and without distinctly resolved goals? Most of us have witnessed this at some point or another, or perhaps even you were the one who left with confusion, frustration, or even anger! In this chapter, we are going to talk about how this can happen even to those with strong language proficiencies. On the other hand, you or someone you know may have only an average proficiency, but you still manage to achieve your goals and objectives in your business activities. Why is that?

In order to better understand how problems can arise in our communication, we feel it is imperative to lay a level of groundwork in understanding how communication itself works. But to save you hours of boring academic research, we will present some basic elements of interaction within a few pages, highlighting the most relevant and common patterns we find in all forms of verbal communication globally.

What we will do is take a very close look at communication in action, and to sift through the details in order to glimpse cultural expectations and practices. Our starting point is that communication involves both verbal and non-verbal actions, and meaning can be communicated in a variety of ways. Since we are always interacting with one another, this is where we will begin—with language use. Notice that this does not mean we are talking about proficiency; rather, the important factors here have to do with **how people use the target language** (or lingua franca) in ways that lead to successful or unsuccessful interactions. You might be quite proficient in the language in which you do business, and yet find yourself facing barriers and misunderstandings—maybe even without knowing why this has happened.

Sociolinguists make a distinction between language proficiency and language use. The former of course has to do with how well we master the lingua franca or another language. Language use, however, is commonly referred to as **discourse** (Martin and Nakayama 2007). Discourse is essentially **how people use their**

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Fig. 3.1 Interaction forms a major part of our lives. (learn4good.com)

language in order to achieve certain purposes. For example, if someone wants information, one way to achieve this is to ask questions. Another way is to use hints. Depending on the culture involved, the discourse style will vary—sometimes dramatically.

Why do we place such a focus on language use? In fact, language use is by far one of the most critical components in building our communication. Much of our day is spent interacting with others, and often the main or only focus is on how well a person can speak the language of the culture in question. Learning business English might offer you good grammar and lexical skills, but it often does not explain why many cultural misunderstandings occur. We argue here that such an approach is short-sighted and can often leave us with unsuccessful, frustrating interactions.

In this chapter, we will discuss the importance of being communicatively competent, not just proficient in the language. Part of being communicatively competent means that we recognize how much interaction occurs on a daily basis, and how important it is to building personal and professional relationships. As Fig. 3.1 describes, face-to-face interaction plays an enormous role in our daily lives—in spite of massive technological advances. Importantly, we must also discuss how we communicate through other means than verbal language use. Certain choices we make communicate a good deal about what we value, and these are evident in various forms of body language, advertising, written communication, and even symbols, as we shall see.

3.2 Our Objectives in This Chapter

The goals for this chapter are to acquaint you with some of the most prominent discourse patterns we find globally, and to define and explain these in ways that will help you to recognize them. Next, we will branch out into culturally specific ways of portraying our norms and expectations using these described patterns. In fact,

many components of communication that we find globally are used differently in different contexts and cultures. **The key for us is to be aware of this fact, and to learn how some of these components might be used in different ways than you are used to from your own cultural background**. All of this will be done through language use, or discourse! In fact, you might be amazed at the level of cultural detail that we can identify when taking apart short segments of talk. Our ultimate objective is to help you to watch for and recognize potential problems or barriers in your own future interactions, and thus to become more successful and communicatively competent in business, and also in private encounters.[1]

3.3 Language as Organized Interaction

Language is organized! We can create and use new sentences all the time, using the grammar and lexicon that our language provides us with. In fact, all human languages follow certain rules, and can be both expanded and reproduced over and over. This might not seem so evident to you, especially during those difficult years of language study in school. But in fact, all languages do conform to certain basic rules, and all contain basic interactional features. These rules are not necessarily the same for each language, of course, but there are some principles and guidelines that we find globally. One of the most basic is the concept of **turntaking**, and we examine that interactional component first.

3.3.1 Turntaking

Have you ever noticed how people talk to one another? The speaker is usually speaking to some form of audience (this could be a single person or a group), and generally maintains the role of speaker 3 until the message has been given. Then the audience (or individual listener) has the chance to take their turn as speaker, and the roles shift. This continual process of speaker role shift is what we call **turntaking**. Turntaking was formalized by linguistic sociologists Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson in 1974, and since then, scientists have been able to use this structure to compare and examine cultures worldwide. Obviously, there are variations in how cultures take turns, but the basic pattern options are shown in Fig. 3.2. As you can see, in a basic turntaking model, a speaker has a turn, and then there are a variety of options for who gets the next turn. That person then becomes the current speaker, and the whole process starts all over again.

[1] Researchers have come up with different ways of dealing with this issue. One article even suggests following what the author calls the *Ten Commandments* of intercultural communication (Hahn 2005). Here we present a combination of theory and anecdotes so that you can make your own decision on how to act or react.

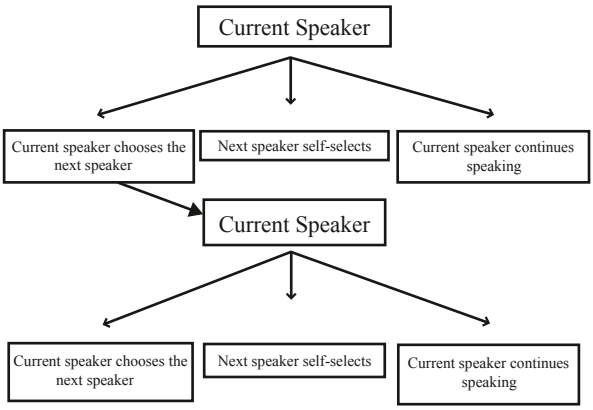


Fig. 3.2 Turntaking is a part of interaction and takes place in every culture. (Adapted from Sacks et al. 1974)

Don't forget that real interaction takes place so fast, that many times a few seconds can contain several turns. Let's take a look at a real example of this phenomenon. Note how the following interaction consists of 2 turns:

Maria I think we should go to the movies tonight.
John Okay.

Maria is the first speaker, and expresses her objective of going to see a movie. Then she becomes the listener, and John takes his turn as speaker. He can agree, disagree, change the subject, or perform a variety of responses. Here, he chooses to agree. The turns in this interaction are very evident, and relatively simple. Speaker/listener roles are clear.

Not all turns are this simple, however. Speakers can be a single person, a group of people, or even an entity or organization. Listeners also can consist of multiple people, or can even be the general public (such as when a politician gives a speech). Furthermore, turns can be structured with questions, hints, commands, long speeches or short, partial words, or even simply a sound. Here's an example:

Maria I think we should go to the movies tonight.
John Okay.
Maria There's a really good romance comedy playing.
John Hmmm.
Maria You don't want to see it?

In this interaction, Maria and John take their subsequent turns, but in John's second turn he doesn't actually speak. Instead, he makes a short *hmmm* sound during his turn. This sound achieves his turn-taking without actually using any explicit language. Note that Maria recognizes both the turn, and the sound, and interprets it as a sort of disagreement for the romance comedy idea. Although John has not actually spoken words, he has still conformed to the basic pattern of turn-taking, and Maria now knows she can take her next turn.

What this example highlights is the existence of turns even with a minimal use of language (in fact, try replacing the *hmmm* with silence and you will find the very same effect in this interaction). People tend to take turns in what and how they communicate, and the roles of speaker/hearer are relatively clearly defined. Business communication is no different. People will use the basic turntaking pattern within meetings, negotiations, interviews, etc. There are times when turns will be longer than the examples here (as in, for example, a presentation) but the structure remains the same generally.

Turns are used to accomplish all sorts of interactional tasks. You can ask and respond to questions, give or receive information, agree or disagree with someone on a topic, give or respond to a command or order, or even give or receive compliments or critique. We greet one another with turns, we say good-bye with a turn structure—in fact, the list of what we do with turns in language goes on and on. You can probably think of many ways that turns work in your own discourse, and in your own cultural environment. Each of these turn groupings we will call **sequences**; for example, here is a **question/answer sequence**:

Maria What would you like to drink?
John Water, please.

Here the structure is clear. Question/answer sequences occur all throughout our interactions, and help us organize how we transmit information to one another. The same goes for greetings, closings, agreements, etc. Again, not all turns are performed individually—turns can be taken collectively as well. Speakers/listeners can be in groups, or even in an organizational format.

Not all turns proceed so neatly or simply. There are times when the turn sequence is broken, halted, or extended. Based on the context of the interaction (situation, speakers, topic, etc.), there is a lot of variety in how the turns proceed. At times hierarchy or situation determines who gets to be the speaker—for example, the manager, vice-president, or CEO often has a greater perceived 'right' to initialize turns, or to take on the speaker role because of their higher level on the hierarchy. You will notice that certain factors play a greater role in organizing turntaking depending upon the context.

3.3.2 Face to Face Interaction

Is there a global principle that we can observe in turn sequences? In fact, **communication does not occur in isolation**. For communication to actually occur there has to be at least one communicator, and at least one communicatee. In other words, there must at least be a speaker and some intended audience. This is a behavior that we can recognize globally, and so we will use it as a starting point for understanding human interactions. Furthermore, turn sequences always contain some sort of message; that is, trivial or non-trivial meaning is evident in turns globally. Whether or not the speaker is successful in communicating her or his meaning is a different issue—here we can say that all turn sequences are subject to some objective or intent of the speaker.

This does not mean that each culture or situation will take turns in exactly the same ways. What is important for us here is to note that these turn sequences exist, and are the basic means of communicating with one another. However, one of the most visible cultural differences in interaction has to do with **how** a culture organizes and takes their communicative turns. This is a critical aspect to our discussion here, and will form the basis of most of our examples in this and the following chapters.

To summarize, we are saying that human communication is the primary basis for all of our interaction, be it intracultural or intercultural. The analysis of language as a means of examining how people do things and make sense of the world around them has been emphasized by many sociologists, philosophers, and cultural researchers, including Wittgenstein (1973); Austin (1962); Sacks et al. (1974), and more recently Duranti and Goodwin (1992); Hall (1982, 1990) and Hill (2008).

3.4 Communicative Competence

As we noted above, discourse represents how language is used in our interactions. The issue is not necessarily our proficiency, but rather how we use the language to accomplish our various objectives. As you can guess, an important part of how successful we are depends upon whether or not we can transmit and receive messages appropriately. We use language to both perform tasks and to act out our social relationships with one another. Knowing how language relates to our social world is having **communicative competence**.

Remember, as we have pointed out, this term does not simply mean language proficiency, although it can of course include proficiency in its definition. Instead, **being communicatively competent means that you understand how the language is used in relation to various contexts**. For example, take another look at our short question/answer sequence from earlier:

Maria What would you like to drink?
John Water, please.

This sequence works because both Maria and John understand what a question/answer sequence is, and both choose to perform it as such. But what would happen if John left this normal pattern and chose a different type of sequence response:

Maria What would you like to drink?
John I'm going camping next week.

Here we would encounter a problem; namely, that John has broken the expected question/answer pattern and has not answered Maria's question. The communication could repair itself, stall, or even break down in this instance. We learn several principles from this example. First, communication is usually intended to be understood. Maria has asked an information question, and most likely is expecting a specific answer to that question so that she can decide what drink to give John.

> One of the most interesting facts about communicative intentions is that they are intended to be recognized. When speakers try to communicate something, they intend to be understood as trying to communicate, and they are successful in communication when the hearer recognizes that intention. Thus, for a speaker to request hearers to do something and be successful in the communication, hearers must understand not only what is being requested but also that they are being requested…communication breaks down if the speaker intends the utterance one way and the hearer intends it another way. (Akmajian 1990:319)

Second, a speaker who is communicatively competent is expected to understand how the language functions in the overall social context, so that John should know that he is expected to answer Maria's question with a statement about what he wants to drink, not about what he will be doing next week. In business communication, we find exactly the same communicative competence requirements:

Maria Have you finished the blueprints yet?
John We thought we could go Chinese for lunch.

It's not hard to see that John has not only ignored Maria's question here, he has also completely changed the subject. Now, from Maria's point of view, John could be avoiding her on purpose, which would mean that he has some reason for not providing the information (maybe he is not finished, or maybe he doesn't want to show her the blueprints). Nevertheless, the fact that this question-answer sequence sounds so strange is because we expect a certain kind of an answer to Maria's question. Not providing this will cause John to either be viewed as incompetent, inattentive, or strategically avoiding the topic.

Universally speaking, we tend to build most of our interactions on the principle of communicative competence. In fact, we often simply assume that the other person(s) are or will be communicatively competent. What complicates this process is the fact that communicative competence is a learned quality—as we grow and become more culturally socialized, we learn what is expected in our cultural context.

A person who does not possess strong communicative competence will often display certain social inadequacies. For example, a young child may or may not yet have learned what the sequence of telephone questions mean:

Caller Hi. Is your mother home?
Child Yes. (***2–3 second pause***)
Caller Well may I speak to her, please?
Child Okay.

In this instance, the child has not yet learned to recognize that the question 'Is your mother home?' actually includes the request to speak to her. So for the child, answering with simple information is enough. This is not what the caller was intending, and therefore the caller had to ask an additional question to achieve his or her goal of talking to the mother.

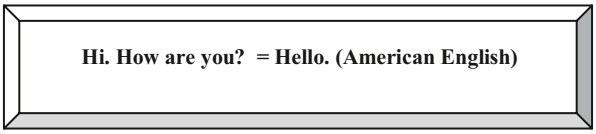
We can smile at this example because it involves a young child, but the reality is learning how to be communicatively competent, that is, knowing how a language

is used appropriately, is an ongoing process. In fact, when we are interacting in other cultures, our own communicative competence has to be learned in much the same way as the child in our example. **Knowing how the language communicates meaning in another culture might be very different from how it works in our own cultural context.** Here the challenge is that we don't have the necessary communicative competence for the culture in question, and therefore we run the risk of creating misunderstandings, barriers, or unsuccessful interactions. This means that we hear and understand the talk in ways that match our own expectations or cultural norms, and respond to it accordingly. However, the speaker might have had a different expectation, and then our response could clash with their norms. Thus, sharing the interactional turn-taking sequence might seem **on the surface** to make communication simple, while in reality it can be quite complex.

Here's another example of what we mean. In the US, often greetings are ritualized into a question sequence. For example, Americans tend to use the following greeting form:

Speaker A Hi. How are you?
Speaker B Hello. How are you doing?

What is tricky about this greeting ritual is that it is structured in a question/answer sequence, but doesn't actually intend to perform the information function that the question would imply. Instead, often Americans use the small package of words as a simple greeting ritual. In this case, the sum total of the words contains a greeting functional intent:



You have probably all experienced this ritualized greeting at some point. For our discussion here, a communicatively competent speaker would recognize this, and not give an information answer to the question 'How are you?':

Speaker A Hi. How are you?
Speaker B I'm doing terrible and couldn't sleep all night.

Such a response would be very unexpected, and sound strange to the first speaker. In fact, Speaker B's response could even cause Speaker A to feel awkward or uncomfortable:

Speaker A Hi. How are you?
Speaker B I'm doing terrible and couldn't sleep all night.
Speaker A Oh… uh—I'm sorry.

Here Speaker A apologizes in his turn, even though he might have absolutely nothing to do with the status of Speaker B. In fact, what has happened is a case of **communicative incompetence**, so that Speaker A's expectations have been violated and he now feels flustered with the communication. The [greeting + question] sequence is a highly ritualized form that is not usually asking for the state of the hearer's physical or mental being. In the above example, Speaker A is thrown off, confused, and searches for a response. We can see how Speaker A then apologizes, even though he probably has had nothing to do with Speaker B's problem—they may, in fact, have just met! "The apology might be a token of sympathy for Speaker B's problem, or it may be that violation of the norm makes Speaker A feel that he or she is somehow the cause of the problem" (Moll 2003:14). Either way, what we can see from this example is that expectations and norms can be violated even when using similar interactional forms, such as turn sequences (in this case, for a greeting).

Being communicatively competent is critically important if we expect to be successful in our interactions. That is why we place such an enormous emphasis on language use, or discourse, in our approach. Language is one of the major ways that we constitute our social life and societies, and has even been called the "primordial locus of sociality" (Schegloff 1987). We cannot study cultural communication without understanding that **interaction is governed by principles, and that these can differ from culture to culture**. Even within our own cultures, most of our day is dominated by either talking or listening to someone. We interact constantly, and this dynamic process both shapes and is shaped by our social context. Intercultural communication is even richer in the sense that cultural worlds intersect right where our norms and expectations are evident—in our interaction.

Importantly, our reactions to intercultural interactions—whether these are business or private—will often be tied to our expectations. If you expect someone to answer your question directly, and they don't, you can get flustered or misinterpret their answer.

In order to both illustrate and help you to understand the complexities of intercultural communication, we will now turn our attention to very specific cultural patterns, and how these are used differently in different cultural contexts. You will note that many patterns which look similar on the surface in fact are not used in the same ways throughout and among cultures. **Being aware that these differences exist is the first step in our communicative competence, and an important part of achieving more successful interactions**.

3.5 Cultural Patterns

How do people act and relate to one another culturally? How do they perform greetings, negotiations, wedding rituals, religious events, speeches, funerals, discussions, disagreements, and so on? The answer to these questions is found in the notion of behavioral trends, or patterns, and we can identify several of these globally. People in cultural groups, whether this be regional, ethnic, or even

Fig. 3.3 Greetings styles differ from culture to culture. (corbis.co.in; asylum.com; pbase.com; theapricity.com; examiner.com)

political, tend to share similar behaviors. Earlier in this text, we noted that culture is essentially the way or ways people interact with one another within their social setting. In fact, this definition is also cyclical in the sense that we define a culture by the behaviors its members share. So, for example, people living in Niger, West Africa will greet one another in different ways from those living in Japan. In Columbia, South America, turn-taking is quite different in structure from that in Austria or Switzerland.

The ways in which people in a culture interact, socialize, and relate to one another and their surroundings are what we call cultural patterns. **A cultural pattern is a recognized behavior or group of behaviors that defines and is defined by the people who perform it**. What this means is that a cultural pattern is the norm for how to act in a given culture. It is also the **expectation** of the members of that culture, so that most people will expect a certain pattern of behavior from communicatively competent members of their society (Fig. 3.3).[2]

One of the dangers of identifying cultural patterns is falling into the trap of stereotyping. Here our purpose is not to stereotype, or make overgeneralizations, but rather to **identify trends** that are evident in all analyses of cultural behavior, and to make some observations about how people interact. Once again, we are aware that there are exceptions to most generalizations, and that context and situation play an enormous role in how we interact with one another. A person in a panic situation will probably react quite differently than that same person in a calm, collaborative

[2] Here again the metaculture will often play a role—a handshake can serve as a globalized greeting. However, this is not always the case, since certain cultures forbid forms of contact, including between men and women. Also, and importantly, just because a behavior is found in the metaculture does not mean that everyone will expect or even accept it.

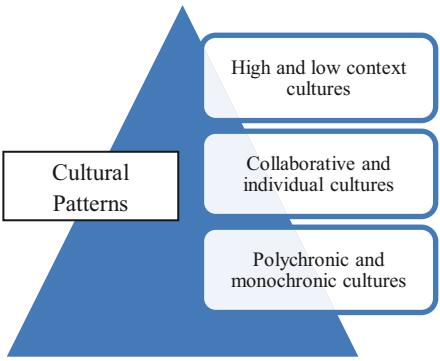


Fig. 3.4 Cultural patterns. (Moll 2011)

context. On the other hand, being able to identify trends in human behavior will go a long way in increasing our awareness of how cultural interaction works.

In order to identify and examine various cultural patterns, we will draw upon the work of Edward T. Hall, who has been instrumental in defining both culture and cultural patterns, and is well-known for his position that **culture is communication**. Previously we made the case that one of the best places to look for cultural distinctive is within our interaction, or language use. Now we will try to set the parameters for identifying and observing various behaviors.

Over time, researchers have defined many categories for looking at culture; some of these overlap and coincide with one another, and some cater to more discipline-specific research. You have probably encountered other ways of looking at cultural behavior, or of classifying culture types, and many of these are valid and relevant. Importantly, no one model of cultural communication is complete. Instead, all are abstractions of sorts, and usually designed to examine the kind of data the researcher is looking for. However, in order to provide a more coherent overview of our cultural data, we are going to adopt certain parameters or theoretical constructs. In advance, we recognize the limitations of such an approach, but argue that some categorization is necessary to achieve our stated objectives. Further, it is important that the categories be general enough to be adaptable to many sorts of behavior, and account for substantial amounts of communication data. With this in mind, we have adopted the following culture type constructs (Fig. 3.4).

None of these patterns operate in isolation from the others. In fact, what we can see are various trends in how these patterns are linked to one another. For example, many high context cultures also tend to be collaborative and polychronic. On the other hand, various low context cultures highly value individualism and tend to approach time monochronically. In making this statement, we do remember the danger of simply stereotyping all members of a certain society into one or another group. However, social scientists have made good progress in identifying trends or tendencies with regard to cultural norms.[3]

[3] Here we note the many contributions of E.T. Hall, Geert Hofstede, and Fons Trompenaars, just to name a few.

3.5.1 High and Low Context Cultures

Because in this book we are talking about communication, we will make the notion of **high or low context** our first and most basic division to describe culture types.[4] Incoming messages don't simply operate in a vacuum, but instead depend upon a good deal of contextual information for interpretation and the meaning to be recovered. The amount of contextual information that members of various cultures tend to use in communicating with one another is what is meant by high and low context. Specifically, a **high context culture** is one in which much of the meaning or intended interpretation of the talk is found in the context or situation of the speakers, and less information is contained in the actual talk itself. A **low context culture** is one in which speakers encode much more of the specific information in the talk segment, and less information is shared in the situational context in which they find themselves. As Hall puts it:

> A high context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. Twins who have grown up together can and do communicate more economically (HC) than two lawyers in a courtroom during a trial (LC), a mathematician programming a computer, two politicians drafting legislation, two administrators writing a regulation. (1990:6)

In other words, high context communication is used in situations where participants can make sense of incoming information **without a direct or explicit encoding of the intended message**. For example, consider the following short interaction between Maria and John:

Maria Are you thirsty?
John What would you like to drink?

Here the question-answer sequence has been broken, but for a very specific purpose. Maria, on the surface, seems to be asking John for information, but he interprets her talk as a request. In fact, he simply skips to the choice of drink that Maria would like. In this example, Maria has not explicitly communicated that she would like John to get her a drink, but based on their relationship and his familiarity with her style of communication, he knows that she wishes for a drink. This part of the message is essentially encoded in the context of the situation, which at the least includes Maria and John's relationship, their styles of communication, and his ability to perform her request. The amount of information that John recovers from the context is thus **higher** than what is included in Maria's short, indirect question.

Low context communication works just the opposite way. Most of the message is **encoded in the actual talk directly or explicitly**, so the speaker/listener can give

[4] Obviously other researchers (i.e., Trompenaars) might make a different basic division, depending upon their particular focus towards the research data.

and retrieve the meaning efficiently. For example, many Western cultures can be described as low context:

> This style of communication, which emphasizes explicit verbal messages, is highly valued in many settings in the United States. Interpersonal communication textbooks often stress that [Americans] should not rely on nonverbal, contextual information. It is better, they say, to be explicit and to the point, and not to leave things ambiguous. (Martin and Nakayama 2007:220)

Germans also predominately use a low context communication style. Germans tend to be very direct, to the point, and often highly value efficient messages. The assumption is that the message itself is relevant and contains the required information for meaning recovery.

To illustrate the differences between high and low context communication further, consider the following two request types:

Request 1 Please go and get me the logistic data.
Request 2 I really need that logistic data.

The more direct, and therefore **low context** request type is Request 1. There is little additional interpretation that the listener needs to do in order to know exactly what is expected of him or of her. On the contrary, Request 2 is structured much more as a need statement by the speaker. The listener can deduct that she or he is expected to get the logistics data for the speaker, but the listener can also interpret the sentence as simple information, and not understand that it is an indirect request. The context of the situation thus plays a much higher role in the interpretation of Request 2, making it a **high context** request type.

3.5.2 Collaborative and Individual Cultures

Tightly tied to high and low context communication is the notion of speech styles, which often communicate how collaborative or individualistic a culture is. Looking at the structure of language, we can easily see that there are several ways in which to say the same thing. Here we encounter what we earlier called the 'message packaging' aspect of communication. One way to package a message is simply to say it directly, without any extra softeners or politeness markers. This is what we call **direct speech style**, and is common in quite a few low context cultures. A phrase such as:

► This report is not complete.

Would be an example of a direct speech style statement—the phrase only contains the subject, verb, and complement in its structure.

However, there are other ways to portray the same meaning. In English, for example, speakers can use extra words called 'hedges' which will soften the impact of

their message to the hearer(s). Such hedges can be modals (could, would, should, etc.), or can be polite words (please, possibly, etc.), or can even be question formats. When a speaker wishes to soften the impact of a message, we say that the speaker is using an **indirect speech style**. There are lots of reasons for this—personality and face-saving norms, cultural politeness requirements, and even political correctness can play the motivating role in why speakers might want to use an indirect speech style. Often (not always), the speech style used will also be correlated to the high/low cultural context distinction.

Here's an example of what we mean. Suppose that your boss has called you in to discuss the monthly report which you have submitted. Let's also suppose that the monthly report is not quite as detailed as it should be, since you were under time pressure and didn't have all the required information you needed to complete it. You knew this, but submitted it anyway to meet the deadline. As you enter her office, your boss frowns at the report on her desk:

Boss There's a lot of information missing from this report. It doesn't give me a good overview of the figures for the month.

The obvious lack of data is clearly causing an issue in this situation, and your boss uses a direct speech style to voice her displeasure. In this case, you can easily recover the meaning as well as your boss's perspective from just the words in her turn. She is using direct speech style, and most likely is a member of an individualistic culture, where such a style is socially acceptable and even expected. However, suppose she says the following:

Boss You must have been very busy this week, right?

In this turn, your boss doesn't even mention the report. Instead, she poses a rather sympathetic question about your high level of activity during the past week. A close look at her turn, however, reveals that in conjunction with the report on her desk, and the fact that she has commented on your business, she is in fact making a statement about the report. A communicatively competent speaker should be able to recover at least some of the underlying meaning in this question (i.e. that the boss is not happy with the report). While the first turn is in a direct style, the second is more of a hint, and thus the meaning of the turn has to be recovered other than with the boss's words. This is what we mean by an indirect speech style. Essentially, the basic message in the first and the second example is the same, but as we can see, there are two very different ways of packaging that message!

Another way that speech styles are relevant culturally is that speakers have a range of request types (also called directives) at their disposal, and which one they choose to use will tell a lot about the expected communication style of their culture. Consider the simple phrase 'shut the door'. You can choose to express this phrase directly, or indirectly. On a scale of directness, we can identify at least 6 ways to grammatically structure this request. Figure 3.5 illustrates the possibilities speakers

+ Direct	**Bald imperative**	Shut the door!
	Need statement	I need the door shut.
	Embedded directive	Could you please shut the door?
	Permission directive	Could I possibly shut the door?
	Question directive	Why don't you shut the door?
+ Indirect	**Hint statement**	It is too cold in here.

Fig. 3.5 Direct and indirect requests. (Moll 2011)

have at their disposal (of course, the structure will vary from language to language, but the conception of scale remains).

You will notice that the more to the point or straightforward requests tend to fall on a more direct side of the scale, while hints and question requests often appear on the more indirect end of the scale. From the aspect of grammar, therefore, we can clearly see how these requests are formed differently. However, the ultimate meaning remains the same for each of these structures: the speaker would like the door to be shut. How people decide which request type to use will depend upon the context of the situation, which of course will largely include their culture type. Low context and individualistic cultures tend have no problem with more direct styles, while high context and collaborative cultures often find these styles offensive and will avoid them at most costs. On the other hand, low context cultures often see indirectness as unnecessary, and sometimes even less than frank.

> Some cultures, such as Germany or Israel, tolerate quite high levels of directness. In fact, in some places, open, frank, and often quite blunt utterances are the norm for conversations. Many German and Israeli speakers and hearers do not interpret direct talk as rude or offensive; rather it is part of the normal cultural makeup. Germans, for example, often will pride themselves on being direct. Some Germans find an embedded directive such as:
>
> Could you possibly get that proposal back by Friday, please?
>
> overdone and foolish-sounding. Such hearers view this type of communication as not necessary, and wonder why a person would need to fill up their sentences with hedges and politeness markers. A bald imperative, in their view, is much more efficient. For the level at which directness is tolerated in their culture, of course, they are right. Directness is more efficient in that the meaning recovery load is lighter for hearers. However, enormous social problems can occur when someone from a highly direct culture uses their conversational norms in a place or culture where indirectness is higher valued and seen as polite. (Moll 2004:33)

This basic division between high and low context cultures is not simply a description of how direct or indirect people are, however. Instead, the terms high context and low context describe how people approach and organize information, social activities, and see their relationships vis-à-vis one another. So, for a high context message to be transmitted, the speaker makes certain assumptions. **High context cultures** tend to place a heavy emphasis on face-saving, so that maintaining and not losing face is very important. This means that a high context communication will typically be structured in what we might see as a polite form, such as:

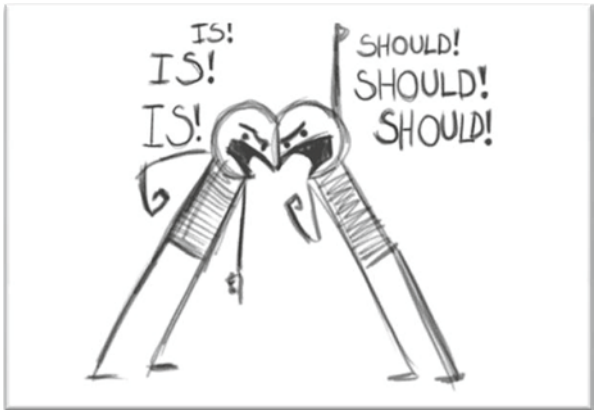


Fig. 3.6 Contrasting direct and indirect style. (wordpress.com)

► If you don't mind, could you please shut the window?

Such a sentence is extensively loaded with 'softeners' such as modals, politeness forms, and a question structure. However, the effects of high context communication don't stop with the grammar. People who use high context communication will typically **not** want to directly say no or refuse the other party. For example, some researchers found that members of certain culture types will make up an answer before they will fail to give one: when asked for directions, some Algerian students will create imaginary directions even if they don't have the necessary information in order to avoid not being able to give an answer.[5] Interestingly, such practice is found in a variety of cultures globally—the emphasis is on external collaboration with the listener, rather than simple information transfer. Agreement, at least on the surface, is of critical importance for a person using high context communication. Many smiles cover outright disagreement in certain Asian circles; the importance of maintaining face and keeping the situation polite takes precedence over other factors in the interaction.

Illustrations such as found in the cartoon in Fig. 3.6 exemplify the conflict that people encounter when deciding how to package their messages. The essential difference in presenting factual information is often tied to whether a person comes from a high or low, direct or indirect speech culture.

3.5.3 Polychronic and Monochronic Cultures

High context communicators often see time as a flexible entity, and place less importance on punctuality than low context communicators. Here we find a significant connection with the concept of **polychronic** cultures. In fact, for a high context person, the goal or objectives is often of much stronger importance than the means or process (including timeline) by which it is achieved. This might be liberating

[5] Personal communication with the author.

Fig. 3.7 How polite is too polite? (wordpress.com)

for the high context person, but of course can create great difficulties when doing business with a schedule-oriented, punctual, low context type. We will return to this point specifically later in the chapter.

High context people will also tend towards a **collaborative** interaction with society around them. Instead of individual achievement, high context communicators stress solidarity and an emphasis on the group as a whole, which means that certain social categories are regularly mixed. Employers might even be seen as connected with whole families or groups in the sense of the employee's well-being. For example, asking a high context communicator about his or her family is usually seen as acceptable and at times even desirable for building your long-term business relationship. Such a practice is much more limited among low context communicators.

In conjunction with group solidarity, high context cultures often place strong emphasis on hierarchy and the traditions shaped by the history of the culture. For high context communicators, therefore, titles can be very important. Not using a title in a high context situation might lead to serious misunderstandings and feelings of disrespect. Politeness is also more evident in a high context, polychronic culture, since the emphasis will often be stronger on historical and hierarchical factors than on efficient, schedule-based frameworks. In fact, as we see in Fig. 3.7, cultures that strongly value hierarchy will often put more emphasis on politeness, dignity, and face saving than on other contextual factors.

For **low context** people, the emphasis on politeness and face-saving is not as marked. Low context communicators will tend to be much more direct, but not just in the grammar. For example, low context people place enormous emphasis on punctuality and reliability; schedules are important and an efficient logistical structure is critical. Here is where the concept of low context communication will overlap with the notion of a **monochronic** culture type. In terms of **individualism**, low context cultures often will separate social categories of work, family, entertainment, etc. into clear divisions. You might have even experienced this yourself—do you mind if someone talks about personal matters in the workplace, or inquires about your own personal life? Asking a casual German or Austrian business acquaintance

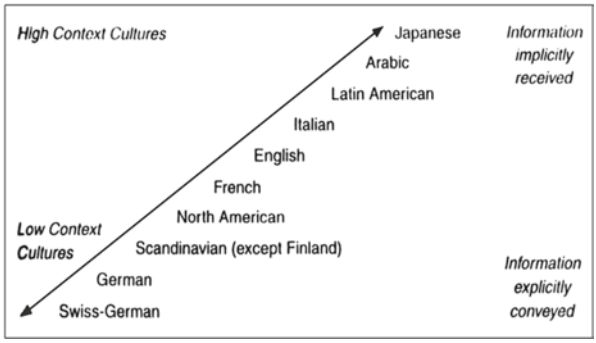


Fig. 3.8 Sample of ranking high and low context cultures. (jic.com)

about their family life is much less likely, since these categories have historically been treated as separate domains (although we might notice a bit of change in this area, we can still recognize strong tendencies to keep work and private life separate in low context cultures).

Using titles and forms of respect are not as expected in a low context situation (although this does depend upon the context somewhat). In low context cultures, such as the US and Canada, first names are acceptable even among casual work colleagues. This practice is aimed at equalizing the workforce and creating higher individual morale. The opposite is the case for cultures which highly value hierarchical systems. For example, a communicatively competent speaker will avoid calling a superior by their first name in a culture that places a high emphasis on hierarchy. Instead, maintaining a certain social distance in both role and rank is required in such situations. Being aware of this practice can make all the difference in how successful the interaction ultimately is.

Great, you say. All this information is interesting, but how can I apply it into my intercultural business interactions? In fact, is there some way to identify those cultures which tend to differ in terms of low and high contexts so that I can prepare adequately? According to the Journal of Intercultural Communication (Pistillo 2003), it is possible to provide a basic ranking of certain cultures on the scale of low-high context. Obviously, this is not an exhaustive list, nor is this categorization based on absolutes, but again we are speaking of trends visible in cultural behavior and norms (Fig. 3.8).

In the following chapters we will take the constructs we have examined here to analyze cultural behavior in various contexts and situations. Before we move on to the detailed look at both verbal and non-verbal interaction, though, we feel that it is important to reiterate the relationship between these cultural patterns. Like we noted above, cultures do tend to link their preferences of the various patterns into groups. Many cultural and social scientists have been able to link various forms of behavior to the low-high context distinction. For example, consider Fig. 3.9.

Of course, it is important to remember that these observations are describing trends, not absolutes, and that there is a certain level of variation even within these groupings. Cultural categories do overlap one another. For example, some members

Fig. 3.9 Cultural pattern groupings. (Moll 2011)

Low Context Culture	High Context Culture
Individualistic and personal achievement	Collaborative and group-focused
Focus on present	Focus on history and tradition
Monochronic time approach	Polychronic time approach
Tend towards direct speech styles	Tend towards indirect speech styles

of a low context culture will use more indirect speech styles, especially for specific strategies within the interaction.[6]

Furthermore, there is a trend developing in some typically high context Asian cultures that connects the individual with their achievements, so that a pay-for-performance (P4P) strategy is evolving. However, it should be noted that this development is very specifically centered on short-term projects, whereas most long-term Asian societal compensation is tightly tied to group or organizational achievement.

3.6 Summary

Communicating meaning is a complex undertaking, especially when we are operating in a culture that is unfamiliar to us. Being proficient in a language is simply not enough to ensure successful interactions. We have to understand what sorts of behavior we expect, and how our language usage has been organized to communicate our expectations. There are a variety of tools to help us understand how people communicate with one another; turntaking and the structure of our talk sequences are a few examples of these. Knowing how language works in our own cultural context can often help us to understand how other contexts might display different patterns. A critical aspect of this chapter is to heighten our own general awareness of communicative interaction, and especially to recognize when a culture differs from our own norms and expectations.

In this chapter we have also explored the constructs that make up culture types, and have divided these into mainly two groups: low context cultures and high

[6] One example of this has to do with societies that are tightly tied to political correctness. In such environments, a direct style often takes on an offensive tone, so that speakers are taught from early childhood that 'being polite' means using an indirect speech style. This is becoming the case in much of North America; especially with regard to both race and gender a direct style is often not tolerated by members of the culture.

context cultures. Within these groups there are trends in how people relate to time and how they see themselves within the larger scope of the group or society. We defined the notions of monochronic and polychronic time usage, as well as what it means to be a collaborative or an individualistic culture.

Equipped as we are now with such tools, we will move on in the next chapter to more specific analyses of how people interact with one another, and how cultural expectations and assumptions are readily apparent through such interaction. Now we will take apart the details of turns and talk in order to discover how interactants portray themselves and the events unfolding in the world around them.