

**MPhil in Intercultural Communication
General Linguistics 897**

Module 4

**A characterization of communicative competence and the barriers that impede
successful intercultural communication**

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1. Introduction

Intercultural communicative competence is, according to Ting-Toomey (1999:261), about the ability to apply theoretical knowledge of cultural differences in a sensitive way that facilitates successful intercultural communication. In this sense intercultural communication is, according to Bennett (1998:2-3), “difference-based” versus communication between people from the same culture (mono-cultural communication) which is “similarity based”.

This assignment discusses the central role that sensitivity to cultural differences plays in successful intercultural communication. The assignment comprises five sections. The first two sections describe the underpinning criteria and components of intercultural communicative competence. The third section deals with the role of sympathy and empathy in intercultural communication. This is followed, in the fourth section, by a description of intercultural communication barriers. Finally, the fifth section examines an example of a deficient intercultural interaction.

2. Criteria for intercultural communicative competence

This section describes the criteria against which intercultural communicative competence should be measured. Ting-Toomey (1999:262) identifies three criteria for communicative competence. They are “perceived appropriateness, effectiveness and satisfaction”. She adds that intercultural communicators infer appropriateness, effectiveness and satisfaction from the verbal and non-verbal messages that are exchanged during an interaction (Ting-Toomey 1999:262).

2.1 Appropriateness

Ting-Toomey (1999:262) states that appropriateness refers to the extent to which intercultural communicators behave in ways that are mutually acceptable. She adds that perceptions of acceptable and unacceptable behavior are shaped by the communicators respective “cultural socialization experiences” (Ting-Toomey 1999:263). For example, in certain African cultures gratitude is expressed by clapping the hands and averting the eyes to the ground. Thus a non-African that does not perform this ritual in the appropriate circumstances may be regarded as ungrateful and rude.

2.2 Effectiveness

Effectiveness, according to Ting-Toomey (1999:263) refers to the extent to which intercultural communicators are able to realize their shared communicative goals. Ting-Toomey (1999:263) claims that effectiveness depends on addressing “the three layers of meanings that ... increase intercultural understanding”. These are content, identity and relational meaning (Ting-Toomey 1999:263-264).

Firstly, content meaning is about the information and subject matter that is contained in the messages. For example, in certain cultures it may be appropriate to answer questions, which may compromise the questioner, indirectly in order to preserve their face (Ting-Toomey 1999:263). Secondly, identity meaning refers to the way that intercultural communicators demonstrate and perceive face-saving and face-honoring behavior relative to their own and each others culturally inspired self image expectations (Ting-Toomey 1999:196 & 264). For example, in certain cultures it is disrespectful to challenge higher

status individuals in front of their subordinates. Thirdly, relational meaning is about the way that intercultural communicators define the intimacy and formality of their relationship to each other (Ting-Toomey 1999:264). For example, it would be ill advised for a junior manager from a low power-distance culture to adopt an informal approach to a senior executive from a high power-distance culture.

2.3 Satisfaction

Ting-Toomey (1999:265) proposes that interaction satisfaction is dependent on intercultural communicators recognizing and affirming the identity images of each other. Identity images refer to the self-perception of the communicators with reference to factors such as professional, social, cultural or gender background (Ting-Toomey 1999:265). If intercultural communicators demonstrate behavior that reinforces mutual identity images, thereby building self-esteem, then they will be satisfied with the interaction. For example, Ting-Toomey (1999:265) contends that behaviors that reinforce “person-based self-worth issues” are most likely to lead to satisfaction for individualists.

3. Components of intercultural communicative competence

Ting-Toomey (1999:265) claims that optimal intercultural communication is dependent on three components of communicative competence. These are “in-depth [intercultural – BL] knowledge, heightened mindfulness and competent communication skills”. She states that in-depth knowledge is the most important of these.

3.1 In-depth knowledge

Knowledge of the values that underpin cultural behavior is, according to Ting-Toomey (1999:267), essential to the understanding and accurate interpretation of intercultural communicative behavior. For example, Ting-Toomey (1999:267) states that the ability to accurately identify individualist versus collectivist and low power-distance versus high power distance cultural orientations helps communicators identify when to adopt high-context or low-context communication styles. Ting-Toomey (1999:267) contends that individualists favor a low-context direct style whilst collectivists prefer a high-context indirect style. She states that understanding the impact of these cultural variables is a pre-requisite for overcoming potentially damaging “ethnocentric” communicative paradigms (Ting-Toomey 1999:266).

3.2 Mindfulness

Mindfulness involves a conscious process in which communicators suspend their own ethnocentric assumptions whilst simultaneously becoming more aware of the ethnocentricities of the other parties to the intercultural interaction (Ting-Toomey 1999:267). According to Ting-Toomey (1999: 268) this conscious approach enables the intercultural communicator to accommodate and adapt to unfamiliar communicative behaviors. Ting-Toomey (1999:269) maintains that this is because it prepares the communicator to adapt to the perspective of other cultures during intercultural interaction.

3.3 Communication skill

Communication skill refers, according to Ting-Toomey (1999:269), to the ability of intercultural communicators “to interact appropriately, effectively and satisfactorily”. Ting-Toomey (1999:269) defines four skill sets for achieving this. They are mindful observation, mindful listening, identity confirmation and collaborative dialogue.

Mindful observation involves avoiding snap judgements in favour of taking a deliberately analytical approach to intercultural interactions. The goal is to consciously identify the reasons for unfamiliar communicative behaviour in terms of a cultural rationale (Ting-Toomey 1999:269). For example if an intercultural communicator responds evasively to direct questions then his behaviour should be considered in terms of his cultural terms of reference. This is in contrast to making a reactionary judgement about the person. Ting-Toomey (1999:270) states that mindful listening involves the ability to identify and correctly interpret factors such as intonation, pause, use of silence, gesture and other nuances of the intercultural interaction. For example, certain cultures, such as the American Indians, use longer pause in conversation than do others. This idiosyncratic use of pause could be misinterpreted as a turn taking signal by communicators who are accustomed to shorter pauses.

Identity confirmation requires, according to Ting-Toomey (1999:270), communicating in a way that reinforces the positive self-image of others. She states that this may, for example, require addressing people by formal titles if this is important to their self-image (Ting-Toomey 1999:270). Collaborative dialogue,

according to Ting-Toomey (1999:271) involves the ability to share power in intercultural interactions. She proposes that this requires respectful and “culture-sensitive” styles of interaction in which intercultural communicators avoid imposing their views on each other (Ting-Toomey 1999:225 & 271).

4. The role of sympathy and empathy in intercultural conflict management

“Intercultural conflict is defined as the *perceived or actual incompatibility of values, norms, processes, or goals between a minimum of two cultural parties over content, identity, relational and procedural issues.*” (Ting-Toomey 1999:194). Given this definition it is probable that effective intercultural conflict management techniques will be based on strategies that are sensitive to the differences that exist between intercultural communicators. It is in this difference-based context that the following discussion about the role of sympathy and empathy in intercultural conflict management is presented.

4.1. Sympathy

Sympathy, as an intercultural communicative strategy, is associated with the assumption that people are similar and that they view the world from the perspective of a single reality (Bennett 1998:192). According to Bennett (1998:197) a communicator can evoke sympathy by referencing a personal experience that is similar to another person’s or by imagining how he personally may react to an unfamiliar situation. Sympathy therefore involves the communicator applying his personal perspective to understand the experience of others.

The use of sympathy with its concomitant emphasis on similar experiences and similar realities has the potential to exacerbate rather than to soothe intercultural conflict situations. This perspective is supported by Bennett (1998:202) who identifies four disadvantages that are associated with sympathy as an intercultural communicative strategy. He says firstly, that sympathy is blind to the differences between people because it focuses on similarity of experience, feeling and thought. Secondly, sympathy can be perceived as patronizing because it assumes a universally applicable experience of reality. Thirdly, sympathy can promote defensiveness because it can be perceived to marginalise the experiences of others who retaliate by defending their values. Fourthly, sympathy perpetuates assumptions of similarity between people thereby reinforcing an ongoing cycle of intercultural misunderstanding.

4.2. Empathy

Empathy, in contrast to sympathy, refers to the ability of communicators to “imagine the thoughts and feelings of people from their own perspectives” (Bennett 1998:197). Empathy represents, according to Bennett (1998:207), a communicative strategy that is well suited to intercultural communication because it involves pro-actively taking on the perspectives of others. Bennett (1998:209-212) proposes a six step process for developing empathy. In step 1 the communicator accepts that other people are different as well as the need to understand these differences. Step 2 involves the communicator reflecting on his own principles, values and assumptions so that he does not feel vulnerable to losing his unique sense of perspective. In step 3 the communicator suspends his own identity thereby opening himself to new ideas that extend

beyond his familiar experience. Steps 4 and 5 involve the communicator consciously shifting his awareness toward exploring the experience that others have of their reality. Finally, step 6 requires that the communicator “re-establish” his own sense of self-perspective.

5. Barriers to intercultural communication

It is possible to infer from Guirdham (199:158-161) that intercultural communicative barriers refer to factors that cause miscommunication or conflict during intercultural interaction. Jandt (2004) identifies five barriers to intercultural communication. They are high anxiety, stereotyping, ethnocentrism, assuming similarity instead of difference and prejudice. This section examines the first three of these barriers.

5.1 High Anxiety

High anxiety is, according to Jandt (2004:74), a barrier to intercultural communication because it causes communicators to become pre-occupied with managing their anxiety instead of focussing on the interaction. As a result the communicator neglects important intercultural communicative behaviours such as mindful observation and mindful listening. The implications of this may be particularly striking in situations where one communicator is from a high-context culture and another is from a low-context culture. In this case an anxious low-context communicator may miss the nuances associated with the high-context communicator’s more ambiguous verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

According to Ting-Toomey (1999:222) high anxiety can also be triggered by unfamiliar accents and unfamiliar non-verbal gestures. She adds that, in such cases, the anxiety can lead to communicators withholding trust from each other. This is problematic since, according to Ting-Toomey (1999:222-223), trust is “critical” to successful intercultural communication. Finally, Jandt (2004:78) states that anxiety related to second language mastery can contribute to intercultural communication avoidance. He reports that Japanese workers who were anxious about their mastery of English tended to avoid workplace and social interaction with their US co-workers (Jandt 2004:75).

5.2 Stereotyping

According to Jandt (2004:93-95) stereotyping refers to making positive or negative judgements about people based on their membership of an identifiable group. Furthermore, stereotypes typically favour the in-group and are directed toward people that are different from the in-group (Guirdham 1999:161). This is sometimes demonstrated in white corporate South Africa when white managers resort to “pidgin” English to communicate with their black management peers. The assumption being that all black South Africans have poor command and comprehension of English. Guirdham (1999:163) states that stereotyping impacts negatively on intercultural communication because it biases the way that communicators encode and decode messages during interaction. Jandt (2004:96) supports this view adding that stereotypes can cause communicators to incorrectly interpret, on the basis of false assumptions, the behaviour of others. For example, if a communicator felt that all Greek Café owners were

cheats, then incorrect price marking of an article may be judged to be evidence of this and could lead to a personal attack on the café owner's character.

5.3 Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism, according to Jandt (2004:76) involves “negatively judging another culture by the standard's of one's own culture”. Jandt (2004:79) indicates that ethnocentrism is impervious to cultural differences and tends therefore to ignore the valid perspectives of others. Ting-Toomey (1999:218) supports this view by stating that “Acknowledging our own ethnocentric biases and suspending our reactive evaluations are critical in managing the intercultural misattribution process.”

Ethnocentrism creates significant opportunities for misunderstanding and for potential conflict in intercultural interactions. For example, Guirdham (1999:169) cites the negative impact that ignorance of ethnic differences has on immigrant children in some UK classrooms. She notes that ethnically based differences in dialect and conversational rules cause certain UK teachers to have lower expectations of Algerian and Indonesian children (Guirdham 1999:169).

Ethnically influenced differences in non-verbal behaviour can, according to Guirdham (1999:170), also lead to misunderstanding between intercultural communicators. For example, the animated use of gesture during conversation may be misinterpreted as a sign of aggression. Guirdham (1994:173) also highlights the misunderstanding that may result from ethnically based views of directness and indirectness. She states that directness and indirectness can be viewed positively or negatively, depending on the communicator's perspective.

For example, directness may signal honesty to some people and rudeness to others (Guirdham 1999:173).

6. A case study of deficient intercultural communication

The intercultural communication that is the subject of this case study involved a meeting between a British executive of a multinational company and black South African union officials. The meeting was arranged to discuss a business restructuring initiative. The meeting ended abruptly in a management walk-out.

The following are key factors that may have contributed to the breakdown of the interaction:

- The union officials arrived at the meeting after the agreed starting time. This resulted in an outburst from the executive. He denied the unionists, who had adopted the role of patient listeners a right to respond to his outburst. The unionists were affronted by this attitude. It also conflicted with an African cultural perspective that all parties to a dispute have the right to be heard.
- The executive was insistent that the outcome of the meeting should be an agreed restructuring schedule. The unionists, whilst not refuting this outcome, behaved evasively and avoided discussion about the proposed schedule. The executive accused the unionists of negotiating in bad faith. It transpired that the officials did not have a mandate to negotiate a restructuring schedule without first consulting their membership. Nor

were they prepared to acknowledge this since it would undermine their perceived status and negotiating power.

- The executive struggled to understand the accent and mannerisms of the lead union official. He resorted to asking other officials to paraphrase the lead official's comments. The other unionists ignored these requests, a response that the executive considered to be rude. As the elected spokesman for the union the "junior officials" were constrained from speaking on behalf of the lead official. They later highlighted these requests as an example of the "disrespect" displayed by the executive.
- The union delegation caucused frequently to discuss responses to the executive's proposals. This frustrated the executive who accused the unionists of "playing delaying tactics". The caucusing was consistent with the unionist's collectivist orientation. It provided the opportunity for an "Indaba" in which each official was able to freely express his/her opinion.
- The executive frequently referred to "you people" and "you lot". The executive's choice of words alienated the unionists and was contrary to their view that the discussion was one in which the parties shared joint accountability for the eventual solution.

The executive, as the most provocative of the parties, could have changed the negative tone of the interaction in four ways. Firstly, he should have accommodated the consultative processes required to support the union delegation's collectivist orientation. Secondly, he should have focussed on understanding the face honouring strategies governing the interaction with the lead official. Thirdly, he should have used more inclusive language. Fourthly,

he should have minimised his role in favour of a local executive when it became evident that he could not cope with the African accented English.

The conflict that resulted from this interaction could have been avoided if both parties had been more aware of their differences and how these influenced their communicative behaviour. This might have involved a conscious approach to identify and understand the underpinning attitudes and values that were driving their respective communicative behaviours. This could have served as the starting point for developing a more empathetic approach to the negotiation. Such an approach may, for example, have involved a practical intervention to brief the unionists prior to the meeting thereby facilitating their mandate process. By the same token, the union's lead negotiator could have positioned himself closer to and established more eye contact with the executive in order facilitate better decoding of his accented English.

7. Conclusion

A key determinant of intercultural communication competence requires that communicators are able to adjust their own expectations of the intercultural interaction whilst simultaneously adjusting their communicative behavior to the expectations of other parties (Ting-Toomey 1999:226-227). This assignment has attempted to characterize the intercultural communicative factors that make this possible. The resultant discussion has examined the criteria and components of intercultural communication, the role of sympathy and empathy in intercultural communication and the barriers that impede intercultural communication. [2511 words]

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