

ASSOCIATIVE LISTENING AS A BUG IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Paul Bijlsma, M.A.

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prebijlsma1966@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Intercultural communication is communication between one or more parties from different cultures. This type of communication is more subject to misunderstanding and miscommunication. This misunderstanding and miscommunication originates usually in the process of listening. Part of the process of listening is interpreting the message/interaction by the receiver. This interpretation takes place amongst others by 'associative listening'. Associative follows the meaning of psychologically associating, an association is a bond or connection between two or more images, thoughts, ideas, or other psychological phenomena, whereby the occurrence of one tends to bring to mind the other (Christopher Morris, 1992). Associative listening means giving meaning to a received message or interaction by means of association. Meaning is derived from the frame of reference, which is determined by individual development and experience. Culture is the underlying basis or soil in which the frame of reference develops. Frame of reference and culture are thus determining one's perception. Culture is described by the findings of Hofstede et al (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) and communication is defined in a working definition. The findings in this paper are gathered from literature study, observation and the writers experience and understanding.

Keywords: *intercultural communication, associative listening, culture*

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication is a risky subject to write a paper about. Almost everything about Intercultural communication is not clear. The definition of communication depends on who is consulted, as does the definition of culture. And even with clear definitions of communication and culture, still intercultural communication is a slippery subject, because intercultural communication is subject to misunderstanding. Of course this is nothing new,

everybody who has communicated with somebody from another culture knows that generally speaking it is more difficult to understand and be understood.

Why is it like that and what process plays a part in this misunderstanding is subject of this paper. First of all, the writer finds it important to have clarity about and a common understanding of communication and culture, so the no misunderstanding can originate from here. Although the scientists are not done yet with researching communication, the reader will learn what communication is. The reader will also learn about culture and what it contains. We will look at the definition we will learn by the model designed by Geert Jan Hofstede et al (1984), how cultures can be compared using six dimensions or paradigm's.

The next subject being discussed is Frame of Reference. In communication and especially in listening and interpreting, one's frame of reference plays a big part. There are messages which are immediately clear, like one and one is two. Nobody will argue that and the process of interpretation or giving meaning to it is very limited. Messages which are not immediately clear will need to be interpreted. The interpretation, giving meaning to a message is done for the most part by what comes up from one's frame of reference. The frame of reference is a personal, private quality from which one's perception of the world originates. Cultures refers to frame of reference like the glasses we wear to perceive the world around us.

A new term is introduced: 'Associative Listening'. Associative in this paper follows the psychological meaning of association. In this context, an association is a bond or connection between two or more images, thoughts, ideas, or other psychological phenomena, whereby the occurrence of one tends to bring to mind the other(s). To start a communication a message or interaction is sent to a receiver (the communication partner). The receiver receives the interaction and interprets it, giving meaning to it. Associative listening is the process of the message being connected to what comes up from his frame of reference in order to give meaning to the message. The frame of reference a significant extend shaped by and given content by a person's culture. Associative listening as a term has not been used to designate the process of understanding in communication. It has been used in relation to listening to music. If people listen associatively the music depicts an event of a story. This can be a personal experience, then the music evokes a strictly personal interpretation or it can be programmatic; then the music evokes the image or story that the composer has intended.

In intercultural communication Associative Listening plays a bigger role than in communication with a fellow countryman. If the culture is different the interaction is usually not as effortless understood as when communication takes place between two people from the

same culture. An even bigger appeal on Associative Listening is being done if the communication becomes more conceptual or figurative; flowery language leaves more room for interpretation. An example of this is sayings, cultural boundaries are almost always the dividing line between understanding or not understanding the meaning of a saying. But also a very simple difference in pronunciation can lead to misunderstandings. If two people from different countries speak in a language they both understand but which is not their mothers tongue, differences in pronunciation can make it difficult to understand each other. If this occurrence is added to the fact that people, for reasons of politeness or shyness, do not easily say that they don't understand, misunderstanding and miscommunication is bound to happen. For instance, if the question: 'How are you doing' is answered by: 'I am greed (instead of great)', a bigger appeal is being done on association to understand the meaning and intention. The findings in this paper are gathered from literature study, observation and the writers experience and understanding.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Communication

What is Communication I

The simplest definition of communication which I could think of is the following one: "Communication takes place when a sender sends a message to a receiver and the receiver reacts to that message." (I don't have a reference for this definition, I remember this from my study from over 30 years ago, but unfortunately don't remember who composed this definition).

What this definition learns us is that in order to have communication one needs a sender, a receiver, a message and an interaction which goes both ways. The sender says: "how are you doing?" If there would be no response than according to this definition, there would be no communication, it would merely be an interaction. But as soon as the receiver reacts, although only with something like a smile or a nod, then the interaction goes both ways and then there is communication.

But there is more to communication than meets the eye. The following diagram gives more insight in the process of Communication:

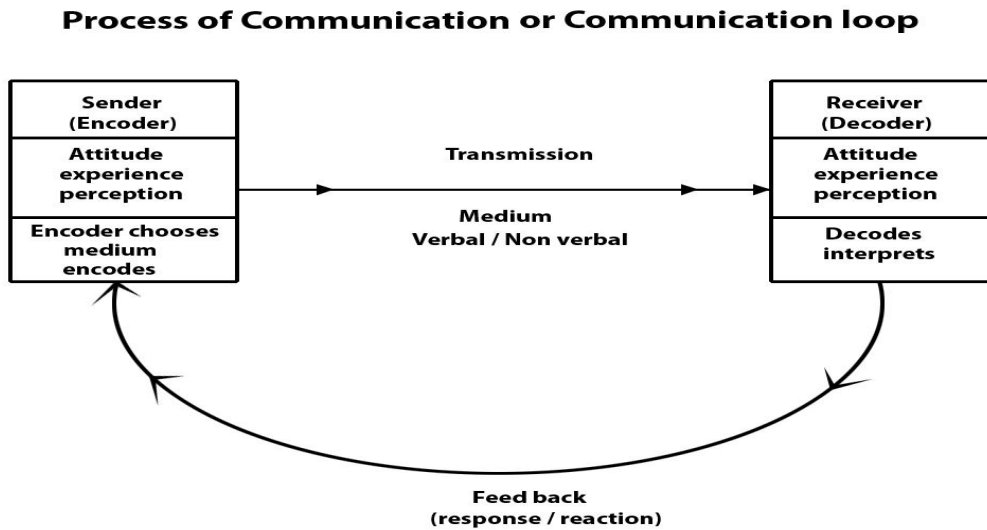


Figure 1: Process of Communication

The sender, in response to an external or internal stimulus, perceives a message. He puts it into an appropriate code of verbal or non-verbal symbols. He transmits it across to the receiver through an appropriate medium. This act of the sender is conditioned by his mental attitude, his experience and his perception of all the related factors. The receiver, based on his experience, attitude and perception of all related factors decodes the message, interprets it and reacts or responds to it (<https://www.communicationtheory.org/communication-loop-the-process-of-communication/>).

What is Communication II

From the above mentioned definition, diagram and description, we learned what communication is. But if we take a closer look at what is said and written about communication, then we will find out it is a tricky and slippery subject. Many scientists, writers, (self-proclaimed) experts and other highly educated people have been writing books, articles, papers etc. about communication. And the old Dutch saying: Zoveelzielen, zoveelzinnen (so many souls so many opinions) comes true; there are too many definitions, descriptions, observations, field researches and experiments. Clarity about communication is getting snowed under (Dutch expression, translated in English, meaning there is too much distraction from what it actually is about).

A few examples:

The types of communication alone are a lot: verbal, nonverbal and written communication, there is intentional and non-intentional communication and there is meta-communication. If

we take communication beyond the interpersonal communication then we find that there is public communication, enterprise communication, marketing communication, internal and external communication, theme communication and action communication. Then if we think that intercultural communication is difficult, how about the book written by the American author and relationship counselor John Gray, which suggests that we all should learn intergalactic communication, titled: 'Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus' (1992), about the difficulties in inter gender communication. A book well worth reading by the way. Another golden example is the axiom from Paul Watzlawick, Austrian author, psychotherapist, sociologist, philosopher, which states: 'One cannot not communicate'(Watzlawick., Beavin & Jackson, 1967), meaning that if two or more people are in the same space, there is always communication although there might not be one word spoken. He states that with our acts and behavior, we sent out messages and these messages are responded to by other people and that is why we always communicate, or in other words, we cannot not communicate.

What is communication III

In order to be able to move on to Culture, a mutual understanding of communication is needed. So for this paper this following four-path (working) definition of communication will be used:

1. Communication is a two ways interaction
2. In communication the messages (interactions) are interpreted.
3. There are different types of communication
4. In company one cannot not communicate.

Culture

What is culture?

Sociologists and anthropologists have adopted culture and made it one of the main subjects of their studies and research. Although they have studied culture intensively and thoroughly, turned it inside out and upside down, still they have not reached consensus. Therefore, the best thing to start with to get an understanding of culture is to take a look at the dictionary first, to see what it has to say about culture. In the Cambridge online dictionary, we find the following definition: Culture: "the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time"
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/culture>

Although this already is kind of clear, there are also a lot of questions raised by this definition. For instance: How does one acquire this way of life? Some general customs and beliefs can be originated from naturally cause, how does this relate to culture? If culture is reserved only for groups, can we talk about a National Culture or not? How long does a group have to exist in order to establish culture?

In Intercultural Communication, it is important to have an understanding of culture is and how it can affect Intercultural Communication. In the next section of this paper culture will be further discussed.

Culture as an onion:

Culture is like an onion. Just like Culture an onion has many layers, but only the outer ones are visible.

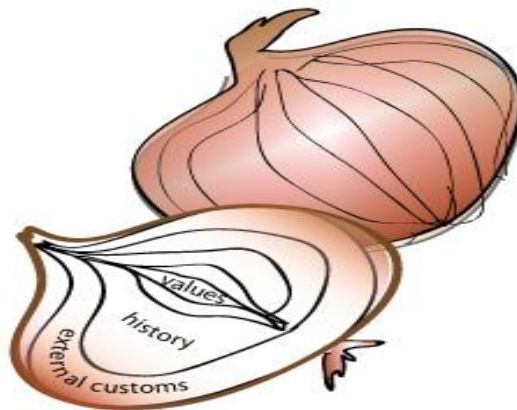


Figure 2: layers of culture

An onion has lots of layers that are connected together underneath the exterior skin.

- The full brown onion: Represents culture in its entirety. The onion is made up of layers and a core.
- Core: The core is our values. These are the guiding principles that influence how we behave. Like a moral compass, they are those things that help us to decide what is right and wrong.
- Layers: The layers are our behaviors, the external customs, shaped by history (individually and collectively) and influenced by our values, the core (Trompenaars and Woolliams, 2003).

If one sees an onion, then one only sees the outer skin and layer. This means that the core remains hidden. An outsider can see and experience the behavior and customs, but the history and values, where behavior springs from, is not visible.

It is important to establish that Culture is acquired, learned, opposed to nature, which comes naturally. It influences our thinking, our behavior and our feelings and it forms and deforms our perception. Having shared beliefs, values, and norms means that members of the culture have a similar way of thinking about how the world operates and how people should behave in it.

Hofstede's approach of culture

(The following information is more or less derived from the website: <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/>) Professor Geert Hofstede conducted one of the most comprehensive studies on national values, introducing the dimension paradigm. His most popular book, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, has been translated into twenty languages.

Geert Hofstede has defined "culture" as: *"The collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others."* (Geert Hofstede, 1980)

In 1980 he published his book "Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values. As the title suggests, this book was entirely devoted to the study of culture at the national level, in which values played a major role. The book's main innovation was its use of the concept (paradigm) of dimensions of culture: Basic problems to which different national societies have over time developed different answers.

The six dimensions of national culture are based on extensive research done by Professor Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, Michael Minkov and their research teams. The application of this research is used worldwide in both academic and professional management settings.

DIMENSIONS OF NATIONAL CULTURE:

The Hofstede model of national culture consists of six dimensions. The cultural dimensions represent independent preferences for one state of affairs over another that distinguish countries (rather than individuals) from each other. The country scores on the dimensions are relative, in that we are all human and simultaneously we are all unique. In other words, culture can only be used meaningfully by comparison. The model consists of the following dimensions:

POWER DISTANCE INDEX (PDI)

This dimension expresses the degree to which the less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. The fundamental issue here is how a society handles inequalities among people. People in societies exhibiting a large degree of Power Distance accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. In societies with low Power Distance, people strive to equalize the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power.

INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS COLLECTIVISM (IDV)

The high side of this dimension, called Individualism, can be defined as a preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of only themselves and their immediate families. Its opposite, Collectivism, represents a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular ingroup to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. A society's position on this dimension is reflected in whether people's self-image is defined in terms of "I" or "we."

MASCULINITY VERSUS FEMININITY (MAS)

The Masculinity side of this dimension represents a preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness, and material rewards for success. Society at large is more competitive. Its opposite, Femininity, stands for a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life. Society at large is more consensus-oriented. In the business context Masculinity versus Femininity is sometimes also related to as "tough versus tender" cultures.

UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE INDEX (UAI)

The Uncertainty Avoidance dimension expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity. The fundamental issue here is how a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known: should we try to control the future or just let it happen? Countries exhibiting strong UAI maintain rigid codes of belief and behaviour, and are intolerant of unorthodox behavior and ideas. Weak UAI societies maintain a more relaxed attitude in which practice counts more than principles.

LONG TERM ORIENTATION VERSUS SHORT TERM NORMATIVE ORIENTATION (LTO)

Every society has to maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and the future. Societies prioritize these two existential goals differently. Societies who score low on this dimension, for example, prefer to maintain time-honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion. Those with a culture which scores high, on the other hand, take a more pragmatic approach: they encourage thrift and efforts in modern education as a way to prepare for the future. In the business context, this dimension is referred to as “(short-term) normative versus (long-term) pragmatic” (PRA). In the academic environment, the terminology Monumentalism versus Flexhumility is sometimes also used.

INDULGENCE VERSUS RESTRAINT (IND)

Indulgence stands for a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun. Restraint stands for a society that suppresses gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms.

How does this affect Intercultural Communication?

It is important to know what underlying values play a part in how people relate and communicate. For instance (power distance index), in Indonesia it would be very rude if one would meet the Governor of Jakarta on the street and shout: “Hey Anies, how are you doing?” In the Netherlands the Prime Minister, Mark Rutten, reacted with a smile to such an interaction and shouted back: “I’m great, how are you?”

These dimensions of national culture help us to understand how people’s life in another culture are shaped by the way they relate to these dimensions. Usually this relating is unaware, people grew up and are shaped that way. Hofstede has, by measuring culture by objective dimensions, given us an instrument to obtain insight and understanding of people of another culture. For instance, if one invites a Westerner to have diner, it is normal that he will come alone. On the other hand, if you invite somebody from Indonesia to have diner, it is not unusual if he or she brings some relatives. The individualism versus collectivism dimension is likely to predict that. The score of Indonesia and the Netherlands on Long Term versus Short Term Orientation, will provide insight in why many employees after Lebaran (Sugar Festival) will not return to their employer as quickly as expected, or may be not return at all, as they have received enough money to be able to stay with their family for some time and

the stimulus for them to return to work is when the money is running out. In the Western Societies there is more focus on the long term orientation and employees, who usually have a solid employment contract, will return to work after the mutually agreed vacation. Cultures with a high Indulgence index permits members to more or less freely indulge in enjoying life and having fun. This will result into more spontaneous communication than in Cultures which are more restrained in following impulses. People from these cultures do not often start a spontaneous communication with somebody they don't know.

Frame of reference

One's frame of reference plays a big part in how we perceive the world and also in how we interpret it. In Associative listening one's frame of mind can be regarded as a big barrel from which associations bubble up. Therefore, it is good to have an understanding of what a frame of reference actually is.

According to the website www.changingminds.org a frame of reference can be defined as follows: "A frame of reference is a complex set of assumptions and attitudes which we use to filter the stimuli which we receive from our surroundings, to create meaning. The frame can include beliefs, schemas, preferences, values, culture and other ways in which we bias our understanding and judgment."

(http://changingminds.org/explanations/models/frame_of_reference.html)

Our frame of reference defines our reality, our perception of our world. Unlike culture, a frame of reference is something individual, every person has his own frame of reference. But our culture does play a significant role in our frame of reference. We selectively perceive the world based on our individual experiences, our education, our religious upbringing, our work experience, and so forth; in sum, we perceive the world from our cultural background. To use an equation: we experience the world through our frame of reference and the glasses we wear is our culture.

Associative listening

Listening is something we all do. In the definition of communication which we established, listening is actually an element of the second part of the definition. We receive a message we hear the words being spoken and we see the non-verbal communication. Associative comes from the word Associate or Associating and in its core it means connecting. In this paper the psychological interpretation of associating is used.

‘The term "association" is a bond or connection between two images, thoughts, ideas, or other psychological phenomena, whereby the occurrence of one tends to bring to mind the other. The simple thought of one idea produces the thought of the other. For example, when you read the word "stop" did a word come to mind? (Maybe a stop sign or a red light?)’(<https://www.alleydog.com/glossary/definition.php?item=Association>)

Let’s go back to the definition of communication:

1. Communication is a two ways interaction
2. In communication the messages (interactions) are interpreted.
3. There are different types of communication
4. In company with others one cannot not communicate.

Associative listening takes place in part 2 of this communication definition. The receiver, based on his experience, attitude and perception of all related factors decodes the message, interprets it. The words or parts of the message are connected to what comes up from the frame of reference. They are given meaning by the receiver and understood through the filter of culture and frame of reference. In this way the receiver interprets the message in order to react to it. During this associative listening the receiver is bound to look kind of puzzled because their attention is drawn inwards and the facial expression will be accordingly.

Some messages need almost no interpretation and association to be understood; other messages do need a lot of interpretation and association to be understood. If one interacts with somebody from the same culture and more or less the same frame of reference, the interpretation process will be smooth and there will be little misunderstanding. If, however the message is send to somebody from another culture, with another set of assumptions and a different frame of reference, misinterpretation is more likely to occur. People ‘dig’ into their frame of reference to get an understanding and give a meaning to the message which is being send. With differences in culture and frames of reference the meaning given to the message can differ from the meaning meant by the sender.

In the process of listening, the part of associative listening is not always present in the same degree. If the message received is clear and unambiguously then the process of interpreting is very quick and the receiver does not need to ‘dig’ into his frame of reference to decode the message. This is the case with an interaction like: ‘One and one makes two’. If the received message is not clear, then the need to interpret and associate will be essential to give meaning to the message.

In the following situations intercultural miscommunication is likely to happen:

If people use colorful language and figurative speech, then the receiver has to interpret and associate a lot in order to create a meaning. And as we already have established, the frame of reference with people from two different cultures is likely to differ more.

The second situation in which intercultural miscommunication occurs is if people do not talk in their own language and may be not master the language very well or not master the pronunciation very well.

People communicating indirect can be annoying for one culture ('why aren't they saying what they mean?') whilst in another culture it is the standard to criticize each other and direct communication under such circumstances would be considered very rude. For instance, if people use sayings in their communication then the chance to be misunderstood is fairly high. A common used Dutch saying: "I will wash that little pig" will let people from Indonesia flabbergasted. Why does somebody want to wash a little pig? In fact it means that the matter will be taken care of. The same goes for the Indonesian 'masukangin', which translates into 'catching a cold'. In fact it means something like that but it can also mean that one has the flu. Another example is: 'Berakit-rakitkehulu, berenang-renangketepian' or also known as the saying: "bersakit-sakitdahulu, bersenang-senangkemudian". Literally translated it means: 'raft upstream, swim to shore' or 'bear sickness first then happiness will follow'. In fact, this saying has karmic wisdom as some Indonesian people do believe this translates into 'karma'. It is comparable to the saying: 'after rain will be sunshine'.

Misunderstanding caused by people talking a foreign language faulty are many. For instance, if one is asked: "are you wanting to sleep here?" one is bound to look somewhat puzzled, especially if the sender means to ask if one lives here. Sometimes a big appeal is done to the patience of the participants in intercultural communication. An overheard conversation in which the sender was asked 7 times to repeat a word before it was understood, might not have succeeded if that sender would have been from another country. But as he came from Indonesia, there was enough patience to repeat the message. Many times people don't ask for clarification for reasons of politeness or shyness or motivated by some 'political correctness' but the consequence is that misunderstanding and miscommunication occurs.

CONCLUSION

Associative listening is something everybody does and if the culture and frame of reference do not differ too much, the communication will be smooth and there will be little

misunderstanding. In Intercultural Communication however, Associative Listening is bound to disturb smooth communication because the meaning added to the received interaction might be very different than the intention of the sender. If we take time to learn about another culture, for instance by applying the 6 paradigm's which Hofstedeet all designed to give more insight in different cultures, the misunderstanding and miscommunication can be diminished. But still pitfalls wait around the corner, for instance if figurative speech is being used or if the communication partner has not mastered the spoken language or it's pronunciation to well.

Associative Listening has, as far as the writer could check, not been used before to designate a part of the communication process. It has been used in the discipline of Music; if people listen associatively to Music then the music depicts a story either created by the listener or created by the composer, almost like a guided fantasy.

In this paper there is much emphasis on reaching clarity and mutual understanding of terms like communication and culture. These terms are frequently and easily used without the true understanding of their meaning. Even scientists do not agree on (certain aspects of) the definition of communication and culture. Too often these terms are taken for granted like something which is commonly understood. Too much 'wisdom' is in this way instantly gathered by students. Therefore the writer has made an effort to not only create clarity of these terms (by means of a working definition and applying the work of a well-known scientist) but also to let the reader reflect on these terms and on their own circumstances.

Intercultural Communication is more and more becoming an aspect of daily life with the development of social media and international travelling becoming accessible for many more people. The writer hopes that through this paper, Intercultural Communication will be executed with a little more awareness for its pitfalls so misunderstanding and miscommunication can be diminished.

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Figures:

Figure 2: Process of Communication. Downloaded from the website:

<https://www.communicationtheory.org/communication-loop-the-process-of-communication/>

Figure 2: layers of culture. Downloaded from the website:

<http://www.untours.com/blog/german-how-are-yous-and-how-culture-onion/>