

Why do Foreigners Act Like That?

— An Analysis Based on the Works of E T Hall —

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In a previous paper (Brown 2005), I described how culturally-based misunderstandings can occur between Japanese people and those from English-speaking countries, especially within an educational context. This was based on differences in mindset, relating to the role of the individual in society, and was based largely on the writings of Geert Hofstede (Hofstede 1980, 1984, 1994). In this paper I shall attempt to outline various kinds of more overt behaviour and communication style which might cause conflict or misunderstanding. Much of this account will be based upon the works of the eminent American anthropologist Edward T Hall.

Edward Twitchell Hall was born in Missouri in 1914. Having received his Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1942, he served in U.S. Army in Europe and the Pacific, where he first observed that many failures in communication result from cultural differences. In 1946, He married Mildred Ellis Reed, with whom he would collaborate on many of his later academic projects. Unlike Hofstede's works, which are based on a statistical analysis of a large volume of hard data, Hall's style is more observational and anecdotal. Nevertheless, many of his observations and ideas have formed the basis for a large body of cross-cultural literature, and many of the terms he originally coined are still in wide use in the field of cultural anthropology.

Hall (1976: 16) stated that "there is not one aspect of human life which is not touched and altered by culture." Similarly, Cushner and Trifonovitch (1989) point out that an "ethnorelative perspective" is an important attribute in successful cultural integration, implying that we need to understand that there are other ways of viewing the world which, though strange at first sight, may be just as valid as our own. A similar point is made by Knotts (1989), who emphasises that people from all cultures should be willing to accept the habits and actions of others, however incomprehensible they may initially seem.

Context

According to E.T. Hall, all communication (verbal as well as nonverbal) is contextually bound. What we pay attention to or do not attend to is largely a matter of cultural

context. Cultures act as "selective screens" and can be divided into categories, low- and high-context. In low-context cultures, the majority of the information is explicitly communicated in the verbal message. In high-context cultures the information is embedded in the context of the relationship. High- and low-context cultures also differ in the way they view social hierarchies, human relationships, ethics, business practices, and also in time management. Examples of low-context cultures include Scandinavian, German, British and North American. In contrast, Mediterranean, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Middle Eastern, and Latin American cultures appear on the high end of the continuum (Hall 1977: 105 - 116). High- and low-context cultures differ in ways which may create conflict when people from different cultures interact. Hall and Hall (1987: 9) remark that people from a low-context culture live in a "sea of information", and that people from a high-context culture, such as Japan, may be irritated by low-context people's insistence on giving unnecessary information. Indeed, even in low-context cultures, giving too much information can be seen as patronizing. On the other hand, people from English-speaking countries are often frustrated by what they feel as being kept in the dark.

Too much information frequently leads people to feel they are being talked down to; too little information can mystify them, or make them feel left out. Ordinarily, people make these adjustments automatically in their own country, but in other countries their messages frequently miss the target. (Hall & Hall 1987: 11)

Many of these high-context traits go hand-in-hand with the characteristics of a group-oriented culture, as I described in an earlier paper (Brown 2005). Group oriented cultures tend to have complex and highly-developed means of circulating information indirectly, meaning there is less need for the kind of explicit transactional nature of much communication in low-context cultures. Foreigners in Japan may be frustrated by such concepts as *amae* and *nemawashi*, which hint at goings on beyond their comprehension. Working in a Japanese organisation can, for a foreigner, seem like playing a game without knowing the rules, and, what is more, being forced to play it in the dark. Of course, the rules can be learnt, and the night vision can improve, but this takes time. In the meantime English native speakers in Japan will often fall back on the strategy of simply asking lots of questions. This may well make them appear childish and ill-mannered (Naotsuka & Sakamoto 1981: 3), thus exacerbating the problem.

Silence

Related to the concept of context is the use of silence. People from high-context

cultures tend to be more aware of what their interlocutor wants to say, less needs to be explicitly stated, and silence plays a more important role in communication. Kitao and Kitao (1989: 56) explain the preference for silence over eloquence in Japan by its relative homogeneity. Whatever the reasons, silence is certainly valued in Japan, and, as pointed out by Prosser (1985: 228), verbal language is often mistrusted. Hall and Hall (1987: 126) advise Americans wishing to do business in Japan to "be prepared for silence." They describe how transactions may be bungled by interrupting the silence of their Japanese counterpart. Barnlund (1989: 129) describes silence within Japanese communication as "a reflection of meanings no less profound than those expressed through speech", pointing out that, in the West, silence is often seen as a breakdown in communication, or even of a relationship. Feeling the need to fill these embarrassing silences with "as many words as possible", the unwary foreigner in Japan may be guilty of breaking down the very communication she or he is striving to maintain. What for one side is meaning-rich *haragei* may for the other be a panic-inducing *lacuna*.

Gestures and body language

According to the well-known Palo Alto school axiom, whether we want to or not, "we cannot 'not' communicate" (Watzlawick, Bavelas-Beavin & Jackson 1967). Indeed, though figures vary, most studies have found that less than 20% of meaning is delivered through words. As we have seen, what we choose not to say can be as significant as what we do say. Furthermore, the way we stand, the way we use our bodies, the amount of eye contact we maintain all say a great deal about our relationship with the person we are speaking to, or the relationship to which we aspire. At the most obvious level, there are many gestures which, though appropriate in one culture, are deemed rude, inappropriate, or even offensive, in another. The tendency of some foreigners to use a pointing finger, especially in a "come here" gesture is one obvious example of a use of the hands which may offend people in Japan. Similarly, a tendency to stand with hands on hips or arms folded may be interpreted as indicating aggression or impatience. On the other hand, Kitao and Kitao (1989: 133) point out that the Japanese gesture for refusing (waving the hand to and fro in front of the face), may be offensive to some foreigners.

Eye contact, similarly, varies from culture to culture. Malandro, Barker and Barker (1989: 140) make the point that "misunderstandings and conflicts are often caused by too much or too little eye contact." Axtell (1996: 117) contrasts the value placed on eye contact in the United States as a means of showing interest and integrity, as opposed to boredom and weakness, with the situation in Japan, where avoiding eye contact is often more indicative of respect, and too much can be a sign of aggression or even lewdness. The English-speaking guest in Japan may attempt to convey integrity

through what seems like as a distressing and even combative glare to her or his Japanese hosts, while at the same time being perplexed, or even offended, by their apparent shiftiness.

Space and Touch

Attitudes towards space are influenced by culture. Hall (1966) coined the term "proxemics" to describe the study of how people use space. He described four categories of "informal space": the intimate distance for touching, kissing or whispering (0 - 45 cm); the personal distance for conversations among close friends (45 - 120 cm); social distance for conversations among acquaintances (120 - 360 cm); and public distance used for public speaking (360 - 750 cm or more).

If these figures were true for all cultures, then there would be no problem. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Though, again, exact figures vary, studies have found that people from English-speaking countries tend to stand up to twice as close when in one-on-one conversation than do Japanese people. When dealing with visitors from Middle-eastern countries the proximity may be even more alarming. While people from Japan may be made to feel uncomfortable by an acquaintance intruding into the space reserved for close friends, the foreigner in question may be put off by what seems like coldness. While one person is asking "why is s/he being so pushy?" the other is wondering "why is s/he pushing me away?"

Physical contact is similarly culture-dependent. People in some cultures simply do it more than others, even in relatively formal situations. Barnlund (1989: 140) found that Americans used twice as much physical contact during communication as Japanese, concluding that "the two cultures subscribe to different communicative norms with regard to physical contact."

Concluding Remarks

Long-term visitors to Japan, be it for business, study or simply pleasure, need to be aware of the many ways that non-verbal behaviour can lead to misunderstanding or offence. What is more, their stay would be made less traumatic by understanding that what may seem like coldness, over-formality or evasiveness on the part of their hosts is in fact part of a complex cultural tapestry woven over many centuries, which will not be easily picked apart. Similarly, Japanese people should be aware that foreigners are not really childish, overbearing or disrespectful. They are merely the product of a different, and equally valid, culture, and have yet to learn the rules of this one.

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