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Analyzing Communication in the International Workplace

What's a Meeting?

> Recently we attended a meeting of a professional association in Budapest, Hungary. Delegates from all over the world were present. A key point in the five days of meetings was the business meeting of the association, in which a rather delicate issue was discussed having to do with a conflict between a delegation from Israel and their supporters and another delegation sympathetic to Palestine and their supporters. Shortly after the meeting we met a colleague who is a Brazilian now resident in England. We asked about the meeting and she said, "Oh it was very good. There was a bit of discussion and everything was resolved amicably."
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> This conversation took place in the main hotel reception area. Our Brazilian colleague was called away to deal with something at the reception desk and another colleague, a South African, sitting close by said, "Were you at that meeting?" We said that we had not attended. She then went on to say, "It was terrible. They were shouting at each other and very threatening. If something like that happened in our country, they'd be arrested!"

Two of our colleagues had attended the same business meeting. One felt it was an outrage to sensible business meeting practices, that things had very nearly gotten out of control, and that, on the whole, the behavior of the delegates was very improper. The other felt that it was quite a good discussion and that a sensible conclusion had been achieved. Two people from very different cultural backgrounds attended the same meeting far from their own homes and together with many others from equally different cultural backgrounds. All of them were members of the same profession and yet their idea of how a meeting should be conducted was so different that they came away with very different impressions of the meeting and of their professional colleagues. One felt they had behaved very appropriately; the other that they had not.

Our purpose in writing *Professional Communication in International Settings* is to give the reader a useful means of learning how to survive in such a complex international environment in a very concrete and personal way. We want the reader to be able to discover through his or her own resources how to be most effective in such complex international settings, as well as how to interpret the behavior and communication of other colleagues in these settings most effectively.

There are many books on the market about cross-cultural communication or, as we call it, intercultural communication. Such books can be very useful in providing you with general concepts of how intercultural communication works and even give specific details for how people in different cultural groups approach such common business and organizational events as meetings. For example, in the case of this meeting in Budapest, it would be useful to know that Brazilian meetings can be quite chaotic from the point of view of, say, British people. A colleague in São Paolo told us recently that at meetings in his organization "everyone talks at the same time." He described a British colleague who has been in Brazil for almost twenty years, and yet at each meeting he waits patiently to get his turn at the floor, and as time goes by he gets more and more agitated until he finally just blows up and begins shouting quite angrily. As our colleague put it, "He still hasn't been able to understand how we do it."

In Rio de Janeiro we watched a "Meet the press"-style program on television. The norm for North American programs would be to have two or three guests and a moderator. We have seen French programs of this type with up to five or even six guests. On the program in Rio there were ten guests seated facing each other, five on each side of a U-shaped desk with the moderator seated at the top of the "U" facing the camera. There were two moving shoulder cameras as well to track the discussion. While at the beginning one or another speaker would talk at a time, within five minutes or so, there were many side conversations among the participants as well as two and usually three of the speakers speaking at the tops of their voices, even shouting at each other in a sequence so rapid that the moving shoulder cameramen could not track the exchanges of turns. Finally, as the program neared the end the moderator faced the camera and used exaggerated mouth and lip movements and nonverbal signals to conclude the program, because she could not be heard at all in spite of the fact that each speaker was wearing a separate lapel microphone.

If we *know* that a typical Brazilian "meeting" will consist of a lot of simultaneous speaking as well as a lot of side conversations, then we can easily interpret how one South African woman can describe a meeting as almost scandalously uncontrolled and yet a Brazilian woman can describe *the same meeting* as a "good discussion" with an amicable outcome. The problem arises when some people interpret simultaneous speech as "a good discussion" and other people interpret it as "very threatening." Of course it would be best if a person could simply know all of these particulars of how people in different cultural or even organizational groups are expected to behave. Unfortunately, very few people who are not research specialists have time to develop this rather complex body of knowledge. What is the ordinary business person supposed to do when he or she receives an assignment to go to Brazil, Indonesia, or Hungary, Hong Kong, Germany, or Egypt?

The Changing International Workplace

In this book we take the position that the international workplace is now so complex that we cannot solve this problem by just assuming that there are only two cultures involved in an intercultural interaction. After all, the case we have just mentioned involved a Brazilian woman who has lived for years in England, another woman who is a South African, and still other colleagues who were Belgian, Israeli, American, and Dutch, and the meeting was taking place in Budapest. Where would one find the book which could give simple guidelines for dealing with such levels of complexity? It would have to be an encyclopedia of cultural communicative behavior and then all one would have would be examples of pure cases, not the incredible mixtures of experience we see around us in our daily lives. The mixtures grow increasingly complex with migration of populations from continent to continent as well as increasing global trade, diplomatic, and nongovernment organizational contacts. The entry of Finland and other Scandinavian countries into the European Union, for example, has been viewed as shifting the balance from French to English. The development of new interpersonal communication technologies also makes the prospect of effective communication in international settings bewildering. We have yet to see the effect of the use of Chinese domain names on the World Wide Web.

We also believe that it is not a viable solution to try to standardize professional communication practices around the world. In preparing this book we have reviewed dozens of books on professional communication. While there is some very important and useful advice in such books, most of them take the mistaken view that it is possible to standardize professional communication. There are two problems with the idea of standardization we will elaborate in the following chapters. The first of these problems is that most of these so-called standardizations are not really attempts to develop an international standard that everyone can accept as workable. Instead, they are attempts to get everyone to accept the cultural and communication practices of one group of people as "the standard." Mostly, of course, these "standards" are simply the cultural communication practices of North American business people. For example, it is the custom among business people in North America to speak to each other on a first-name basis wherever possible. This gets translated in the "Dale Carnegie" tradition of "winning friends and influencing people" into the rule that you should always focus on learning a person's personal name and then use that name to address the person.

Using the practices of just one cultural or social group to try to standardize communication in international settings does not work simply because it can only be achieved by doing violence to very important cultural practices within other groups. For example, there are at least three options in addressing others in a business encounter: simple first name, as in many North American meetings; title plus first name, as for instance in Brazil; and title plus last name, as in Asian cultures. Many very successful business people around the world are insulted when they are addressed by their personal names and the sales representative who is going by the book is not likely to have even guessed that he or she is being insulting. Furthermore, practices change, so there is no way of knowing from books or past experience whether or not a given person will find being addressed by personal name insulting. For example, with the recent change in Japanese government policy of listing family names first in foreign publications, it will not be easy to know which is the family name and which is given.

There is a second and more practical reason why standardization does not work in international settings, and that is simply that there are too many players on the international scene now and no one group can be said to be in a dominant position. We know, for example, that the long insistence that the ability to speak English is enough to be able to work anywhere does not suffice, for the reason that there isn't just one *English*. There are many *Englishes* in use throughout the world, and the fact that one might grow up speaking "English" in Iowa is no guarantee that he or she will understand a word of a conversation in London's East End, much less in Sydney, Hong Kong, or New Delhi.

We believe that a really effective and practical approach to professional communication in international settings is the one we present here: we need to learn how to learn *directly from the people with whom we need to interact*. That is, we do not need to read a book on how Brazilians run meetings. If we are going to a meeting in Brazil, we need to learn how Brazilians run meetings from our Brazilian counterparts themselves and we need to learn from them how they perceive the way we do our meetings, whether we are Chinese, Australians, or Israelis.

The Communication Display Portfolio (CDP) Exchange

We can describe our method quite simply here, although it will take the rest of the book to make it clear why we believe this method works well, and how to actually begin to do Communication Display Portfolio (CDP) exchanges. Our method is to exchange best-case examples of one's own professional communications with counterparts in other countries, cultural groups, or organizations for reflective discussion and feedback. The purpose is to find out as directly as possible how significant counterparts perceive our own communications and to tell them how we perceive theirs, so that we can make whatever adjustments are needed to simply get on with the other tasks we are trying to accomplish. Our thesis is that successful communication in the international workplace requires a self-reflective understanding of the processes of communication.

To give an example, we could imagine that we have a small team of buyers based in Frankfurt who have established contact with producers of supplies in Guangzhou, China. The buyers will be going to China and the Chinese team will be visiting Frankfurt, as the relationship is expected to last over a period of at least several years. A traditional approach to the intercultural aspects of this program would be to provide training to the German team in Chinese communicative and cultural practices and also, if at all possible, to provide training to the Chinese team in German practices. Of course, this is already extremely idealistic in that it would be quite difficult to find effective trainers and training materials to conduct this training. We know of only a few experts who could work with German–Chinese intercultural relationships, and in those cases, their expertise is focused on Mandarin-speaking Chinese, not Cantonese-speaking Chinese.

Our approach, in contrast to this, would be for at least some members of each team to put together a professional CDP, which would include things already at hand such as product brochures, business cards, letters, faxes, and resumés and also, wherever possible, videos or other materials which would show how a meeting was conducted, or a sales presentation, or whatever other sort of communication might occur frequently in future exchanges. These CDPs would then be exchanged between the two teams. Each team would then conduct a "focus group" discussion of the materials from the point of view of their communicative effectiveness. That is, they would say what seemed confusing to them, what was missing, what seemed excessive or unnecessary, or whatever other adjustments might be needed to improve on their ability to understand. These comments and reflections would then be returned to the other team for them to consider and digest.

To give just one example from our own research projects upon which we have based this book, we found that a representative of a computer company in Hong Kong provided a very lengthy and detailed resumé which included all of his past employment and even information about his nonprofessional life and interests (see appendix 2). His counterpart in Beijing provided a very brief resumé that focused much more closely on a particular job assignment. Their counterpart in Finland did not provide a resumé at all. It was very clear upon reflection that these three counterparts – all of them were representatives of computer or other high-tech manufacturing companies – saw the resumé as a different kind of communication. One saw it as a way of making a rather broad personal introduction, another saw it as a way of presenting credentials for a specific task. The third, as we were to learn, felt that personal contacts were the most effective way to make self-introductions. As to credentials, he believed that other means – particularly third-person evaluations – were the best and most reliable way of handling that question.

Perhaps most important is that when the Beijing group saw the Hong Kong resumé they felt it was very exaggerated and they tended to mistrust the person because of the length of the resumé. Also both Beijing and Hong Kong participants were doubtful about the Finnish participant because a resumé was absent. This was taken to mean that he had no credentials which could be displayed. Once all parties were able to see these differences, however, and especially once they were able to see that the resumé was really serving a different function for each group, they were able to focus on those functions and set the resumé aside, as it was no longer so relevant to the question. Chapter 3 discusses the resumé in more detail.

From the point of view we are taking in this book we do not really care whether the differences participants find in CDP exchanges are thought of as cultural, national, or simply personal. In fact in our research projects the participants almost never mentioned cultural or national backgrounds, as we will describe in the chapters that follow. It does not really make any difference at all *how* the participants explain the differences as long as they come to see *that* their own practices and those of their counterparts are different, and therefore they are able to adjust their own practices somewhat to become more effective. If they find that their Finnish counterparts do not emphasize the resumé but feel strongly about third-person endorsements, they could focus on having some third-party person speak on their behalf. On the other side of it, perhaps the Finnish participants would feel that for the comfort of their counterparts a brief resumé might carry a lot of weight in establishing good relationships.

Our overall goal in *Professional Communication in International Settings* is not to tell the reader how to communicate in any particular setting. Instead our goal is to show the reader one proven way to establish good relations with colleagues in other settings and to begin the learning process together toward establishing their own best means of communicating. We believe that since each case will be largely unique, the best source of knowledge about how to communicate within that setting will come directly from the participants themselves. In a sense all that is required is that the participants become reflective about what they are doing and how, and the learning process can begin. We believe that the CDP is an effective tool for establishing the process of learning to communicate professionally in international settings.

Not only is social and cultural change occurring extremely rapidly in our contemporary globalizing business environment, but also technologies and practices for communication are changing so swiftly that the only way to stay current is to keep your eyes and ears open wherever you find yourself. Cellular phones, for example, are proliferating so fast that there has been time to conduct only a few studies on their use in professional settings. Our research, however, indicates that major changes are taking place in the ways people answer the telephone. With fixed-line phones the opening must focus upon the identification of *who* is calling and *who* is answering. With mobile phones the first primary question is more often *where* the callers are located. Just this simple difference makes most of the research and textbook manuals for business calls on telephone calls in business and private obsolete. Because of the rapid pace of change, we have made no attempt to provide analysis of current practice but rather concentrate on exemplifying the process of learning from one's associates. In Finland, though everyone owns a mobile phone, people use them only when necessary and would not think of bothering people with casual calls. Professional people go to lunch leaving their cell phones at the office so they can enjoy their meal in peace. In Hong Kong, on the other hand, one constantly hears people telling friends or family members where they are and where they are headed, and people are even scolded for not answering their calls quickly enough.

Though we collected messages sent by e-mail and fax in our research, these were not regarded as significant by any of our participants. For this reason we have not discussed these media in any detail. Rather than evaluating the use of particular technologies, we noted the attitudes of participants in different settings toward technology in general by paying attention to their comments on particular uses of technology. One Finnish professor of organizational communication, for example, refuses to use videoconferencing technology for lecturing at a distance. Instead, he combines slides of graphs and other visuals with audio presentation.

The Research Base

The field of intercultural communication is developing rapidly in tandem with changing international business alignments. As, perhaps, the world's largest undeveloped player, China's business potential is widely recognized. At the same time, with European unification, formerly less central business players such as Finland are taking on a much more significant role. Our own consultation and training projects, with companies including some of the world's largest mobile telephone producers, have shown a significant underdevelopment of the research and training literature on intercultural professional communication dealing specifically with Hong Kong Chinese and Mainland Chinese organizations. We began to try to address this lack while at the same time providing solid research support to professional training programs.

Many aspects of intercultural communication might have been considered. One of the problems with materials now available is that they cover too broad a range of intercultural differences, including religion and philosophy, table manners, or how to buy train tickets in a foreign country. All of this is interesting and important, but we wanted to focus more closely on situations which would be most useful for people involved in professional communication. We assumed that they could buy a standard travel guide to assist them with the more practical day-to-day matters of getting around, exchanging currency, or finding entertainment. Thus we focused on the problem of how professionals present themselves to others, both in first contacts through letters and resumés and in meetings and formal presentations. These contacts are being made by e-mail and fax as well as by telephone, fixed-line or mobile. The participants in our study did not notice differences in e-mail and fax communication. Nor did they comment on the use of mobile phones, though some of them worked for manufacturers of these products. Generally technology was not viewed in cultural terms but rather as a neutral tool for doing business.

Many of the crucial sites at which professional communication across cultures takes place involve formal presentations. In product presentations, contract negotiations, and many other such interactions it is important for members of one corporate or governmental group to communicate with people in another similar group. Details of presentation, from business cards and dress to the use of computer technology and gestures, as well as language, can affect the course of the interaction through participants' perceptions of each other's intent, confidence in their product or company, competence, or sincerity. Yet it is not easy for persons involved in communication to be aware of the reactions of members of another cultural group to their presentation style. There is a large body of research in this area which demonstrates that perceptions of how other people are performing are responses to subtle cues that are habitual and largely outside of conscious awareness.

For example, as we learned in our research, a Finnish participant's formal style was "read" by Chinese as too stiff and even as possibly incompetent. The Finnish participant delivered his presentation by reading a text, and we believe that he did so in order to show his sincerity and careful presentation. Nevertheless, the Chinese felt that only high-ranking officials who do not write what they read or people who do not know their material would read. A truly knowledgeable person should be able to speak directly to the audience without relying on texts.

This book is based on our research in many countries over the past decade. The research project upon which we will focus our central attention was designed to test the concept of the exchange of professional CDPs in three sites: Hong Kong, Beijing, and Jyväskylä, Finland, so that we could elicit perceptions of presentation effectiveness of each site in each of the other sites. We were trying to get answers to two main questions:

1 What do members of a corporate group select as crucial aspects of their self-presentations? That is, how do they present themselves when they are trying to put forward their best image?
2 How do nonmembers, especially those from another cultural group, respond to these presentations?

We asked members of corporate groups – in each case high-tech computer or communications companies – to develop CDPs, which were then comparatively examined and critiqued by corporate members within each of the three sites. This was to determine the corporate group's own self-assessment of their communicative image and self-presentations. Members of three unrelated high-tech corporate groups in Beijing, Hong Kong, and Finland were asked to prepare videotaped and textual documentation of some significant event, possibly an internal communication such as a meeting or an external communication such as a sales presentation or a negotiation. Corporate documentation such as memos, letters, product catalogs, or annual reports were added to these video materials to form a professional CDP of normal, day-to-day corporate communications. In focus groups and through interviewing, corporate members critiqued their own CDP indicating their own assessment of strengths and weaknesses. This was the first phase of the project.

In the second phase of the project, each of the groups sent their CDPs to the other two groups, and focus groups at each site viewed and evaluated the CDPs of the other sites. Summaries of the evaluations were then circulated to each site to elicit secondary responsive reflections and perceptions of these primary perceptions. Even though our focus in this book is on the use of the CDP for self-development and training across culturally different sites, we also found that the CDP was an effective tool for reflective self-analysis of the effectiveness of presentations even internally within the sites we studied.

The Three-Culture Reflective Model

In the international corporate environment, successful communication depends upon understanding how clients and business partners perceive each other's positions and interpret their messages. When businesses work across international or cultural boundaries, it is important to tailor corporate communications to the interpretive frameworks of clients, suppliers, and partners so that both contractual clarity and clearly projected corporate images can be achieved.

The methodology of our project was based on the classical interactional sociolinguistic method of recording actual instances of language use – real resumés, messages, videotapes or audiotapes of actual telephone calls, and presentations – analyzing that data, and then returning that material including the analysis to original participants for cross-checking. We have found, for example, that many of the most important insights come from this final cross-checking or "playback," when the original participants were able to discuss with the researchers their own interpretations of the situations in light of the researchers' analysis.

To this research method we added a further triangulation by having the data and analyses of each site cross-culturally compared in two other sites and then having the responses in those sites returned to the original locations. By adding this methodology to standard interactional sociolinguistic methodology, we believe we were able to provide a second level of perceptions which greatly enriched both the theoretical and practical training perspectives of this project.

Our methodology went beyond linguistic analysis. In international settings everyone is normally aware of differences in language, which are often handled through simple translation. Unfortunately, much research in interactional sociolinguistics and intercultural communication has shown that more often problems arise from aspects of communication other than language itself. As we will discuss in the chapters which follow, there are many features of communication that research has shown to set the stage for communicative difficulties. Among them are:

- body language, dress, tone of voice
- use of space, layout, and design of both physical spaces and publications
- the use of colors to reflect subtle impressions
- timing at the face-to-face level as much as the degree of punctuality in meeting deadlines
- the use of meetings for negotiation as opposed to ratification of already agreed positions
- leading with main topics as opposed to leading with social relationships
- talking vs. silence
- formal agendas vs. open discussion.

The purpose of this research project was to construct a productive environment in which self-assessment and self-reflection on these aspects of corporate life could be achieved without risk to either corporate or individual identity while providing researchers with rich direct and interpretive data. The three cooperating groups were chosen so as not to be involved in direct contractual negotiations with each other or to be direct competitors in the same markets. At the same time, by participating in the project, members of each group received support from the other two groups in contrastive self-assessment to enable them to increase their own capacity for reflective communicative development.

One of our goals in this project was to extend the scope of interactional sociolinguistic research to move beyond simple two-way comparisons and to enrich the crucial concept of contextualization cues to include non-verbal communication in its broadest sense. Research in interactional sociolinguistics has focused to a large extent on data of two types: (1) intracultural face-to-face social interactions and (2) bilateral intercultural interactions. By adding a third group we overcome the limitations of two-party comparisons. Contextualization cues are forms of metacommunication that tell the participants what kind of situation they are engaged in and how what they say is to be interpreted. Participants in sociolinguistic studies have been audiotaped and sometimes videotaped, with linguists analyzing transcriptions of what was said. What is noted on the written transcriptions tends to be the content of what is said, with some marking of tone of voice, pausing and interruption, and other paralinguistic aspects of communication. Intonation, for example, is a kind of contextualization cue that tells a listener whether the speaker is being ironic or serious. Differences in conventions or habits for using intonation often lead to misinterpretation of what people say. Only rarely have other semiotic systems such as proxemics, the study of how people use space, or kinesics, how people move in time, been considered.

Through triangulation we tried to overcome binary or two-way comparisons which easily lend themselves to the reinforcement of stereotypes, whether negative or positive or simply exotic. Through self-reflective analysis we felt we were able to bypass the narrow loop of external analysis by researchers, which is reported as "findings" in the literature and later gleaned by practitioners for application. Because of the time lag between the analysis and publication of results and the limited range of observations reflected in research reports, not to mention intervening social change, applying research literature can be of limited value, as we have suggested above. There is also the danger of misapplication if the context in which data is gathered is not taken into account, especially if commonly held stereotypes remain.

Personal vs. Professional Knowledge

Our colleagues from Brazil and South Africa reacted to the meeting we described in the opening of this chapter on the basis of perceptions that grew more out of their personal than their professional knowledge, though both play a part in making people from the same country react to a situation in ways that may not be shared by colleagues from another country. Although all are in the profession of studying how people communicate with each other using language, in the business meeting of the organization they were acting as human beings, not as professionals reflecting on their communicative practices. In the international business meeting, participants were discussing the affairs of the organization in light of their own personal views shaped by their nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, political orientation, and other factors.

We believe that it is important to keep in mind that there are two orders of knowledge: one which we might call "human knowledge" and another which we can call "the institution's knowledge." The first of these is the basis of all of our interpersonal relationships. From birth we have been getting to know people. First we have come to know those who are most like us, normally, because these are the people who bring us into the world and nurture us into our first habits. In due time, however, we begin to learn the institutional order of knowledge through formal institutions such as churches, clubs, schools, and employers. As two of the authors (Scollon and Scollon) have said in the book *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*, our human knowledge derives from being members of groups that are based on who we are, where we are born, our gender, who our parents and immediate intimate relationships are, the age or period of our birth, and so on. Because we have little or no choice of these identities, at least initially, these memberships are largely involuntary. By that we just mean that they are presented to us as "given," though, of course, we often do much to try to change aspects of this form of personal background knowledge. We take up this question of personal knowledge again in chapter 3.

In contrast to these involuntary memberships, our memberships in institutions are voluntary. They are governed by purposes – the institutions' purposes and our own. We join a company to earn a living. The company exists to make a profit. From this point of view, institutional knowledge is dominated by these goals and motives. We join international professional associations which have goals which may differ from those of our company. Our behavior as members of voluntary groups is largely conditioned by our socialization as members of involuntary groups such as family, church, class, and nation, though we may not be consciously aware of the sources of our responses to the communicative behavior of members of different involuntary groups.

In professional communication it is sometimes crucial to separate personal knowledge or human knowledge from professional or institutional knowledge, though the unconscious, taken-for-granted nature of knowledge embodied in habits formed as members of involuntary groups makes it difficult to distinguish. In families or neighborhoods we assume we know who is married to whom and how long they have been together. Although people move about a lot more than they used to, associates at the workplace often act as if they have access to the same sort of personal knowledge about their professional colleagues, though they may in fact be quite mistaken. A friend of ours has been married for decades to the same man, but not everyone in her office knows this. When a bouquet of flowers was delivered to the office with a card saying "from your first husband" and her husband arrived to meet her for lunch, office personnel took great pains to conceal the flowers. They felt it was necessary to protect the husband, her one and only, from embarrassment. It is comical if you know that the man was playing a joke, and the incident reveals how much personal information is assumed to be shared by co-workers in an institution, in this case an American university.

Expressions of love are often mingled with professional communication in the workplace, whether in the corridors, over the phone, or on the Internet, and employees are not always careful to monitor their personal communication in the office, although some workers have to be circumspect in using e-mail on the job. Thus an e-mail message with the subject header "I love you" and an attachment carrying a potent virus was automatically opened by countless office workers in the United States, shutting down operations for hours. It is difficult to determine how many clicks on this attachment were automatic, how many were made by workers expecting a message from their loved ones, and how many were cynics knowing any virus shutting down company computers would give them paid time in which they could not work.

In professional communication, whether dealing with e-mail, having meetings, making phone calls, or preparing documents or presentations, it is necessary to decide how much personal information to include. This judgment is difficult enough to make within a familiar cultural setting, but when crossing national, cultural, or other boundaries, one's behavior becomes highlighted, especially if it is inappropriate. Having others react to one's communication is essential in facilitating critical self-reflection.

The C-B-S Style

Whether it is personal or professional, many people expect information to be presented in a clear, concise, and sincere manner, what Lanham, a professor of English at UCLA, calls the clarity-brevity-sincerity or C-B-S theory of composition. He traces this theory of rhetoric to Aristotle, but points out that composition texts are always full of contradictions. He says, for example, that, "Students of style are bombarded with self-canceling clichés, giving 'a quintessence' published in the last century" (Lanham 1974:16). He seeks to get beyond these exhortations: "Anyone who dips into The Books soon sees that their advice runs to a dreary sameness. Yet successful prose styles vary as widely as the earth" (Lanham 1974:17). Lanham is writing about prose style, but we would say that any form of professional communication has styles that vary "as widely as the earth" as well.

In this book we first give a "quintessence" of guidelines for business and professional communication. Our reason is not so that readers can follow these guidelines. Quite the contrary: our purpose is to show just how difficult it is to follow these "essential guidelines" in daily practice. That is, we go through what the "experts" say about professional communication style. Then, we show by using examples from our research how styles vary widely across the earth. We conclude as Lanham and many others do: "No absolute norm of 'clarity' prevails" (Lanham 1974:34), "For clarity is not any single verbal configuration but a relationship between writer and reader" (Lanham 1974:32). Whether talking over the phone, sending e-mail, preparing a resumé or presentation, or meeting face to face, clarity in communication depends on being aware of the requirements of the audience, not necessarily on being brief. Our method of exchanging CDPs helps us to pay attention to the participants in professional communication who are most likely to resemble the ones the reader of this book will enter into relationship with.

In Scollon and Scollon's earlier book (*Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*) the development of the C-B-S style was traced to the ideology of the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There they developed the argument that this C-B-S style represents the preferred style of what they call the utilitarian discourse system. This is the dominant communicative system in the business and governmental world, which began with the Utilitarian philosophers but is now seen wherever Euro-American utilitarianist values are present. Clarity and brevity demand that the speaker or writer answer these questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? For our purposes in this book, we critique the idea that communication *must* follow these norms. We will try to show how while they may once have seemed appropriate, changes over the course of the last century have made them questionable. In order to sort out to what extent people assert this ideology and to what extent they follow the C-B-S style in professional communication, we take different perspectives on communication in various international settings.

Four Perspectives

In our research and in this book we approach professional communication from four different perspectives. These might be outlined as:

- ***members' generalizations.*** This is what the members of a group say they do. Of course, people will often tell others, especially researchers, what they believe they should say or what they think others want to hear.
- ***the objective or neutral view.*** This is what an uninvolved or external observer would say about the behavior in question. Normally some form

of objective record is made, such as a video/audiotape recording or a photograph.

- ***individual case histories.*** This is what an individual member of a group will say he or she does. Quite often this is very different from the members' generalization.
- ***contrastive studies.*** This is a comparison with how people in other groups do the same thing, and could also include a contrast between the analyst's explanation and the member's explanation of a particular behavior.

Members' generalizations (what the members of a group say they do; another term for this might be "conventional wisdom"). Members' generalizations may be found in many places. For our research on this book we found these in textbooks on professional communication, in in-house style sheets and other policy and procedures manuals, and in what people would say about their own corporate or organizational practices. This is the sort of statement you find when a textbook on professional communication says, "It is most effective to always state the 5 Ws – Who, Where, What, When and Why." Throughout the world of organizational communication, as we will show in chapter 2, it is emphasized that effective communication is *clear*, *brief*, and *sincere*.

The objective or neutral view. Our own research and the research of many others has shown that there is often a huge gulf between what members of a group *say they do* or *say they should do* and what they actually do. Many researchers call this distinction the difference between a normative (or prescriptive) view and a descriptive view of behavior. Organizational personnel handbooks are filled with the normative or prescriptive view, but only experience within the organization will tell the new employee what one should really do to succeed. In questions of international communication we have found it is extremely important to distinguish between what people say they do and what they actually do.

Individual case histories. One reason both the normative standards of members' generalizations and the objective findings of research are ignored in actual practice is that each individual knows that much of what one does is highly idiosyncratic and allows for a display of individuality and personality within the corporate environment. This perspective keeps alive the concept of pragmatic flexibility and individual creativity, and shows how in many cases what is supposed to work (members' generalization) or what is theoretically right (objective view) has little relevance in the day-to-day complexity of successful communication.

Contrastive studies. Finally, it is most important to realize that what may seem natural and logical in one cultural or corporate environment is interpreted very differently in other environments. Simultaneous and energetic talk is both the norm and the practice in Brazilian meeting environments, though we know that our colleagues from Brazil are able to shift into British practice when they are in those environments. What is important to know is how one's own behavior is being interpreted by others. That is the only basis upon which we can build a choice of communicative action. Contrastive studies are the best means for learning how the same action can be interpreted very differently in different settings. Our main goal in this book is to provide the reader with a practical means of developing his or her own contrastive perspective on professional communication.

We believe that all four of these perspectives are very useful in coming to understand communicative behavior. It is essential to know not only what people are doing but what they think they are doing. When what they are doing conflicts with what they think or say they are doing, we need to be able to understand this conflict as well. Our strategy in what comes in the following chapters is to bring in observations, examples, and analyses from each of these four perspectives to try to produce as broad as possible a view of professional communication in international settings.

Nonverbal Communication: Conflicting Members' Generalizations

To illustrate these four perspectives, we first summarize what textbooks on business and professional communication say about nonverbal communication; these present the conventional wisdom or members' generalizations. Because this is also a textbook on professional communication, the familiar format may mislead readers into thinking we endorse these guidelines. As we said above in describing the three-culture reflective model, problems in international communication often arise from different conventions of nonverbal communication as well as from differences in language. Such guidelines constitute members' generalizations, in other words generalizations agreed upon by experts who conduct training seminars and write textbooks, most of them in the Anglo-American tradition. Because they have been widely translated into most major languages, they have the appearance of universality. Further, because of the hegemony of Britain and the United States, they are uncritically accepted around the globe. People naively believe that American business has flourished because American business people follow these guidelines.

We will use the other three perspectives to show that these generalizations, while familiar to everyone who reads books about or has had training in professional communication, represent the ideology of a particular group.

Outside of the United States, the same society in which Dale Carnegie wrote his books, these assumptions about communication are not widely shared. Though professionals in Beijing or Finland may express some of these maxims, what they actually do is at variance with some of this very same conventional wisdom. They also evaluate other professionals not according to this conventional wisdom, which arises from another tradition, but according to the conventional wisdom of their own social, cultural, and historical circumstances. We must take these guidelines, therefore, with a grain of salt.

Here is what the textbooks say you should do:

1 Use space for successful communication.
   (a) The person seated in a position to have eye contact with the most people should be able to exert the most control or power.
   (b) Rectangular tables are best used in conference rooms when there will be a designated leader controlling the discussion.
   (c) Round tables encourage equality of participants.
2 Use time for successful communication.
   (a) Some people may perceive the failure of another person to keep appointments promptly as a personal insult and an indication of irresponsibility.
   (b) Some people rarely arrive at the appointed time and this may convey the impression that the person being waited for has higher power.
   (c) Interruptions are a part of the use of time and may also be interpreted in terms of power.
3 Plan your physical appearance to affect communication favorably.
   (a) It is best to avoid fashion extremes in a professional setting.
   (b) Jewelry and other accessories should not distract from the message or impression the speaker intends to convey.
4 Use appropriate gestures and other body movements.
   (a) People use gestures or body movements that reinforce the content of verbal messages.
   (b) People also use body movements and posture with energy that can indicate meaning without using any words at all.
5 Use touch with caution.
   (a) Touching another person may have a decidedly positive or negative impact in communication.
   (b) Avoid any touch that may be perceived as coercive and an unfair use of status or power.
6 Use objects with caution.

(a) Speakers frequently use objects as an extension of their gestures in making a forceful statement or in pointing to something.
(b) Accessories in the office may communicate status, just as accessories on a person influence the perception of a listener.

7 Understand what facial expressions reveal.
(a) Affect displays may be a form of self-disclosure.
(b) Facial expressions should reinforce the content of the message of the speaker.
(c) The most important aspect of facial expression is eye contact with others.

8 Use appropriate voice and paralanguage.
(a) Paralanguage refers to the way the speaker uses vocal inflection, vocal quality, and the rhythms of language.
(b) Use the pronunciation that most educated people use.

These rules of thumb or members' generalizations are so general and vague that it is difficult to know just what they might mean. To gain a more objective or neutral view, we and our associates have videotaped professionals interacting in different settings and analyzed these videotapes for nonverbal elements of communication. This provided a second perspective. To take just the first item, the use of space, we have many videotapes of people sitting around both rectangular and round tables.

For the third perspective, individual case histories, we asked people how they arranged seating. Though round tables are said to encourage equality of participants, one of our Chinese colleagues said that sitting at a round table reminded her of family dinners where children were expected to be silent. One of the authors regularly went to a restaurant with members of a group that practiced *taijiquan* together in Hong Kong, and was told by group members that the leader of the group preferred the seat of honor in the corner of the room. Though all the tables were round it was obvious that he, like many patriarchs, controlled the conversation. In this setting it may be true that the person in the position to have eye contact with the most people should be able to exert the most power, but the textbooks we have consulted do not consider the social roles of people outside of the particular situation. In most cases, they assume that professional communication takes place in conference rooms with typically only one rectangular table.

This leads us to the fourth perspective, contrastive studies. The different reactions of individuals to the same spatial arrangement led us to compare how members of different groups communicate around round and rectangular tables. Our colleague who said that round tables reminded her of family dinners declared that she and her friends would not talk when seated at a round table except to the persons right next to them. She found in analyzing focus group discussions held in Hong Kong that people would not speak to strangers. In presenting her findings to European colleagues she found that they had very different norms for communication around a round table. That is, she found that members' generalizations were different depending on whether they were European or Hong Kong Chinese.

Four Situations

In this book, we cannot deal with all aspects of the use of space, time, physical appearance, body movement, touch, use of objects, and facial expression. Therefore we restrict our focus to the use of these means of nonverbal communication in common business contexts where our focus groups raised them as issues in discussion. Voice and paralanguage are salient in telephone communication as well as oral presentations. The use of time and space are significant in meetings as well as in oral presentations, as are gestures and facial expression.

In order to make our discussion as concrete as possible, we have chosen only four rather typical contexts in which professional communication takes place – the telephone call, the resumé, the presentation, and the meeting. Of course we realize that there are many other situations, such as business lunches and dinners; there are business letters and other forms of correspondence (e.g. e-mail, fax); there are business cards, and literally hundreds of other types of documents, reports, and events. Our purpose is not to provide full coverage so much as to show how the reader can think about and analyze typical environments of professional communication.

We begin in chapter 2 with a consideration of the telephone call from four perspectives. First, we begin by bringing an additional historical perspective to bear on the members' generalizations found in commonsense views of how to make phone calls in textbooks on professional communication. We argue that commonsense views are holdovers from the era when primitive phone technology necessitated brief, clear, and loud speech. Like the QWERTY keyboard (with letters on the third row of a keyboard laid out as QWERTYUIOP from left to right), these tenets of effective communication are no longer the most effective means. Using neutral, objective recordings of phone calls made by participants in different businesses, we contrast individual case studies and our own analysis of phone calls with the interpretations of these calls formed in discussions of audiorecordings among participants in different geographical settings. Our comparative perspective suggests that there is no universally accepted way of speaking on the phone either as a caller or as a respondent. In light of conflicting views, individuals can only resolve for themselves what is most likely to work in their particular circumstances by observing and interacting with those most like the people they will be communicating with in their daily work, and getting other perspectives on their own communicative behavior.

Chapter 3 begins by pointing out that even though the resumé has become a fixture in our lives – it might be something to be tinkered with, but not eliminated – there are many people alive today even in industrialized nations who seldom or never read or write resumés. This is true even where those industrialized nations are proud of their cutting-edge information communication technologies. The resumé (or curriculum vitae, as it is still known in English outside of North America) has no agreed-upon standards for how to present information. Again we take a historical and comparative perspective to critique the members' generalizations or conventional wisdom found in dozens of books and word-processing wizards offering guidelines for writing resumés. Because this genre is relatively new and the demands of the international workplace are in such rapid flux, even the conventional wisdom contains contradictions. There are also contradictions between the generalizations of members of focus groups about their national or cultural tradition and what they say they do or strive to do.

Data from our case studies demonstrates that not only do the form and function of the resumé vary across professional and national settings, but whether or not they are used at all cannot be taken for granted. Within the world of transnational computer manufacturing companies operating in Hong Kong and China, standards of length, focus, categories and their order of presentation, and details to be listed vary widely. Correspondingly, specific resumés or objective records were evaluated quite differently not only between but also within different sites.

A major point of contention was the inclusion of personal in addition to professional information. Focus group participants in both Hong Kong and Beijing insisted on the value of personal details such as age, gender, and recreational interests, though these were not included in the resumés presented for discussion. As we found in the dispute over identifying oneself over the telephone, which we discuss in chapter 2, there are broader considerations having to do with geopolitical circumstances. In the case of using the telephone these were considerations of trust and security which vary from city to city, while in the case of resumés there are legal considerations which make the presentation of personal information problematic in the United States and other western countries. In China, on the other hand, there are no legal constraints on personal data as such, but the listing of chronological details of work and residence reminds contemporary people of the social and political demands of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), which makes the chronological resumé distasteful. The functional resumé that emphasizes personal achievements seems to present difficulty to Chinese, who are disinclined to brag, in the same way as preparing a resumé at all is problematic for many Finns.

The conflicts over how much personal information to divulge and how to best present one's professional accomplishments underscore the differences between conversations and documents as ways of communicating on the one hand and between personal or human knowledge and institutional information on the other. In telephone calls as well as resumés there is a tension centering on how much information to volunteer, not only in the way of verbal disclosure of names and institutional position but also in non-verbal cues such as voice quality and pitch, or photographs that may provide clues to gender, age, or ethnic identity. It is these details of professional communication that bridge personal human lives and institutions that often fall between the cracks when national boundaries or other sociopolitical factors separate professionals in the business of communicating. In order to compensate for the interacting participants' lack of years of shared history, we have developed the CDP exchange.

In chapter 4 we turn to a discussion of the presentation, which has evolved with changing technology since Dale Carnegie taught Americans *How to Win Friends and Influence People* over sixty years ago. In our contemporary world, presentation styles that vary as widely as the earth are being homogenized through the use of standardized presentation technology.

Though Windows 98® offers a wizard that helps users make successful presentations using PowerPoint®, it is difficult to follow the advice of maintaining eye contact when the audience's eyes are focused on the screen covered with PowerPoint® slides. Here we have a competition between information conveyed by the person of the presenter and the professional or institutional information which is projected on the screen.

We review several American sources which are widely used overseas on making presentations in business and professional organizations. We summarize the features of the "friendly American style" which was outlined by Carnegie and is still considered essential for successful presentation, especially the feature of maintaining eye contact with the audience. The introduction of visual aids complicates the direct interaction between presenter and audience. Because the presenter must manipulate the machines which are producing the images, and in doing so divide his or her attention among visual aids, speech, and audience, his or her movements are constrained by the technology. A Chinese textbook on public speaking adds to this the relationship of the speaker to his or her material as well as the knowledge the audience has of the material. Besides these considerations are the relationships among speakers presenting at the same event and between them and the organizers of the event.

From place to place relationships among participants, materials, and presentation technologies as well as complex verbal and nonverbal styles vary. Some presenters use effusive gestures and facial movement but others are very still. Our research shows that people negatively evaluate presenters that violate either the unarticulated norms of the social group that is viewing the presentation or the standard norms repeated in textbook after textbook. Because of the contradictions between assumptions and practice, we believe that the most effective way to get useful guidance on how to prepare presentations is through feedback obtained in an exchange of Communication Display Portfolios.

Finally, chapter 5 rounds out the study of four types of professional communication with a discussion of meetings. As we indicated at the beginning of this chapter, these take different forms and are judged differently by professionals from various international settings. We take a functional approach to meetings. Even though they are an inevitable part of professional communication in international settings, meetings take different forms which are shaped by the functions emphasized by the social group that holds them. A meeting can be primarily a place where group members exchange views on issues that arise in conducting their business, or it can be primarily a means of developing group cohesion and team spirit. Whichever function is viewed as primary, social relationships and relative positions among participants are always negotiated and ratified.

We summarize studies of American, Japanese, and Chinese business meetings to add to our opening comments about Brazilian meetings, in order to illustrate some of the different assumptions about how to conduct a meeting and how to behave as a participant as well as to illustrate the complexities that arise when these assumptions come into conflict. For example, these studies, conducted by Chinese and Japanese researchers, highlight the unusual nature of American bank meetings, which are shown to operate according to C-B-S ideology, with speaking turns allocated according to a rationale of egalitarian division of labor. In contrast, Japanese bank officials seem more concerned to create a nonthreatening environment within which consensus can be reached. Personal ties assumed more importance than setting or following an agenda, resulting in a looser, less restrictive conversational structure than in the American meeting.

An analysis of a negotiation between an American expert and a Japanese telecommunications corporation shows the tension and frustration that can arise out of significant differences in assumptions about the function of business meetings. Both functions of exchanging information effectively and establishing good social relationships are important in organizational relations in Japan and America, but Americans give information exchange priority within the boundaries of meetings and relegate maintaining social relationships to casual encounters and other social events.

Chinese organizations achieve these functions in a manner that differs from either the American or Japanese norms exemplified by meetings of small groups of bank officials. In the government and bank meetings analyzed by one of the authors (Pan), the primary role of speaking was neither to develop rapport nor to allocate speaking turns equitably but to ratify power relationships in discussing and announcing decisions. According to our research, the display of official status before, during, and after meetings appears to be much more prominent in China than in Japan or the United States. However, this impression may arise just because we are more familiar with studies in China than elsewhere. As we said in comparing Japan and the United States, the display of status and other social relationships among professionals in America takes place largely outside of meetings and has been comparatively little studied. An exchange of CDPs may reveal that functions that seem exaggerated in other societies are dealt with by ourselves in ways we simply have not paid attention to.

These contrastive studies, which make use of objective analysis by outsiders as well as members' generalizations, demonstrate that the tension between the display and exchange of personal and professional or institutional information in different settings is resolved differently in different societies. The existence of different forms of power and different ways of displaying status and authority make communication in international settings complex indeed. We present a detailed analysis of phenomena found in official meetings in Beijing which would be recognizable to officials and business professionals anywhere on earth.

We end chapter 5 with an individual case history and focus group discussions recorded among professionals in Hong Kong that illustrate conflicts in perceptions of how meetings should be conducted. We feel that the linguistic, social, political, and cultural complexity of a city like Hong Kong gives a good illustration of the difficulties and also the rewards of taking our approach to understanding communication in intercultural and international settings.

The Communication Display Portfolio

In chapter 6 we give a brief summary of the four chapters in which we have presented analyses of specific types of presentations. These chapters all point to the same conclusion: successful communication in the international workplace requires a self-reflective understanding of the processes of communication. We recommend the use of the CDP as a tool for self-assessment to be exchanged with counterparts from other cultures, nations, organizations, or professions. We present the language audit as a part of an individual's CDP as well as a communicative profile of the salient ways of functioning within an organization. This may be useful, for example, for a Chinese businessman who has just taken a job in a Norwegian corporation and needs to know which aspects of his job will require speaking or writing in Norwegian, English, Mandarin, Cantonese, or other languages and how his skills match the job requirements. Phone calls may be more difficult than face-to-face or written communication in Norwegian than in his first or second language, as visual cues cannot compensate for what he lacks in words and tone of voice.

As the final chapter, chapter 6 provides a detailed outline of how to produce a CDP and how to set up a CDP exchange, with a discussion of important issues to keep in mind and possible difficulties in following the outline based on our own experience in our exchange across three cultures. We then enumerate the items in the appendices, which start with a checklist called "The Communication Display Portfolio Exchange Planner." This is followed by a handbook that we have used in training personnel to conduct a CDP exchange. The third appendix provides suggestions on carrying out a CDP exchange. We provide suggestions on using these appendices for various readers, whether trainers, professionals, researchers, or students.

This book has been written to enable the reader to increase shared knowledge between himself or herself and peers in international settings, by suggesting ways of exchanging concrete examples of communication and reflecting on them. In this way differing perceptions can be discussed before they interfere with effective communication. The CDP exchange emphasizes relatively nonthreatening ways of increasing shared knowledge across the boundaries of nations, languages, professions, organizations, and the many other entities that shape the way we communicate.

Chapter 2 deals with a technology (telephone) everyone either loves or hates or both. It illustrates our basic approach to analyzing communication, narrowing the focus to one universal medium, the audio channel. Chapter 3 focuses on a printed document (resumé) whose use arose in the latter half of the twentieth century and is changing with the use of the Internet. Chapter 4 focuses on gestural elements of communication in conjunction with new technologies of presentation. Chapter 5 presents detailed research findings on an elusive phenomenon, the meeting, and illustrates different approaches to eliciting information in focus group discussions.

Readers who want to find out more about the theoretical and methodological bases of our approach will find useful sources in the lists of further reading and references, especially the revised edition of *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*, by Ron and Suzanne Scollon (2001). The present book concentrates on the practical aspects of enhancing information exchange and increasing self-awareness. If we are successful, most readers should not have to read every page in order to accomplish this purpose, nor should they need further reading material.