

The Sound of Culture: Intercultural Communication

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### Abstract

This article presents an abstract concept—the sound of culture as a form of communication, reviews elements of nonverbal communication, and examines the characteristics of high and low context cultures. It also offers a new definition for the term culture and identifies nonverbal communicative cues that form barriers to the effectual transmission of intercultural communication. Sound interpretation is examined through the lens of an interpretive process that provides a framework of systematic analysis and an alternate application for the exegesis methodology that relates to both the environment and the interpreter.

*Keywords:* Cross-cultural communication, globalization, and intercultural communication

### **The Sound of Culture: Intercultural Dialects**

From the tranquil sound of the passing Crocodile River in Mozambique, South Africa to the fizzing noise generated by the magnificent glaciers melting in the Antarctic; to the cacophonous backdrop of bombs that symbolized the conflict in Lebanon, to the linguistic soundscape that shapes London's national tongue emerges the sound of culture. The heart of a nation is its culture. Language is the symbolic dance of communication that weaves cultures into existence. Worlds of being and meaning are formed as a result of the communicative process of language. The sound of culture as a form of communication is one that cannot be taught, but must be experienced.

### **Soundscape - a Nonverbal Communication Modal**

Edward T. Hall, author of the book *Silent Language* (1959) explored the effect of culture on communication and concludes that culture and communication are intertwined so closely that "culture is communication" and "communication is culture (as cited by Gudykunst and Kim, 2003, p. 4)." Hall is credited with the development of nonverbal concepts that have the potential to enhance the effectual transmission of verbal communication.

In Hall's communication theory, context is identified as a key factor. Context relates to the framework, background, and surrounding circumstances [the environment] in which communication or an event takes place (Hall, 1973). Context is examined on two cultural dimensions: high context and low context. In the high and low context dimensions the subjective antecedent is relationship.

A high context culture is one where the mode of communication is less direct and relationships tend to be long term. 'In-group' clusters where verbal communication is

minimal and nonverbal communication is emphasized characterize this cultural environment. In low context cultures communication is more explicit and the relational dimension is less developed. Low context societies where people tend to have many connections (Beer, 2003) are easier to penetrate and develop a sense of cultural comprehension.

### **Overcoming Cultural Barriers**

If Hall's premise is true, that culture and communication are synonymous, then can one postulate that the barriers that negatively impede verbal communication are also common cultural barriers? Does his research further imply that silent communication concepts can be instrumental in breaking through cultural barriers? If it is indeed a possibility, how might this feat be accomplished?

Let us begin by identifying cultural barriers. To accurately identify barriers to culture, we first define culture. Culture as defined by this author for purposes of illustration is an experience expressed through thought, emotion, and feeling. It manifests in visual form, can be heard audibly or felt intuitively. Culture transforms generally accepted practices into societal norms.

Based upon this definition, cultural barriers are attitudes, perceptions, perspectives, and patterns of thought or actions that prohibit one from experiencing, embracing, or accepting societal practices that translate into cultural norms. Cultural environments relate to people, objects, and issues from an orientation of control (Moran, Harris & Moran, 2011); and vary based upon societal norms, values, perceptions and ideologies. These complex environments are comprised of multicultural, multisocial, or multibusiness experiences; therefore, to become an interculturally astute leader one must

remain long enough in the other culture to become immersed in it (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002, p. 30).

To rephrase McCall & Hollenbeck's statement, the international environment must be inhabited for a period of time sufficient enough for one to adapt to and be transformed by the new culture. It is only through prolonged exposure will one gain the insight to identify the nuances that characterize the prevalent culture within an organization, community, or society. Time invested in other cultures allows leaders to develop competencies that aid in distinguishing between cultural types such as monochronic versus polychronic cultures or high context versus low context communication styles.

### ***Cultural Exegesis***

We have discussed the 'what' and the 'why' of environmental sounds present within a specific culture, now let us turn our attention to the 'how' – as a leader in a new culture, how do I develop a relationship with this culture? How do I experience this culture and appropriate this experience accurately to the mutual satisfaction of both my interests and my potential partner's interest?

This writer suggests the concept of exegesis is a viable option to develop a competency for interpreting the sound of culture. We have already established environmental sound in the context of language by connoting the sound of culture as a form of communication. This premise is further confirmed by Westerkamp's postulation that sound can be understood as a type of language (2007), a language that can thus be interpreted as spoken word. Exegesis in the context of sound analysis is an anthropologic

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methodology that can be used to extract out of an environment what is in it. Robbins defines exegesis as a discipline of reading out from a text what is in it (1996, p.5).

Exegesis is accomplished via rhetorical analysis. Rhetoric refers to the way language in a text is a means of communication among people (Robbins, 1996). Robbins has created a process whereby the intersection of exegesis and rhetorical analysis serves as a framework of analysis from multiple perspectives. This process is termed socio-rhetorical analysis and includes the following explorative dimensions: inner texture, intertexture, social and culture texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture analysis. For this particular application, we will engage the ideological texture perspective to aid in the identification and interpretation of cultural sound. Applying the principles of rhetorical analysis to sound interpretation provides a framework of systematic analysis and an alternate application for this methodology that relates to both the environment and the interpreter.

Ideological texture concerns particular alliances and conflicts the language in a text and the language in an interpretation evoke and nurture (Robbins, 1996, p. 4). The feature of ideological texture that is most useful in this application is the way the text itself and interpreters of the text position themselves in relation to other individuals and groups (Robbins, 1996, p.4). This characteristic provides a methodology whereby leaders can assess their position in a culture by analyzing their attitudes, perceptions, perspectives, patterns of thought and actions in relation to the individuals and groups within a specific culture. This perspective spotlights the nature of the “particular view itself” that the language evokes and nurtures by offering a thorough examination of ideological issues that evoke different points of view, the nature of interpretation, and the

nature of the relation of the interpreter in relation to other interpreters (Robbins, 1996, p. 4).

The primary focus of ideological analysis and interpretation is people ((Robbins, 1996, p. 95) and the dynamics that lead to conflict in communication. It provides a forum to analyze the social, cultural and individual location and perspective of the communicators involved within a cultural discourse. The ideological analysis concept will be used to provide a systemic mechanism that allows leaders to confront biases, opinions, preferences, and stereotypes of a specific cultural environment. The analysis process begins with the interpreter. This element of self-analysis as the place of origination is what makes this concept a suitable methodology for this particular application.

### ***Socio-Cultural Analysis Process***

As work we through the interpretation process, let us review the elements of culture previously identified: values, perceptions, traditions, power structures, speaking dynamics, customs, laws, policies, and norms and defined barriers: attitudes, perceptions, perspectives, patterns of thought and action. As leaders, we must evaluate how each of these elements influences our perspective and ability to develop a relationship with the culture. An additional variable is the impact these elements and barriers have on the group relationship and power dimension prevalent in the culture.

The proposed structure for evaluation is a 4-phase process whereby the leader is required to:

- Observe –What do I see, hear, or feel? Who or what are the actors? What do I intuitively discern about the environment?

- Analyze – Research the cultural elements present, their significance, and their contribution to the cultural portrait. What are these elements saying to the interpreter? How can these elements be accurately and appropriately interpreted?
- Synthesize – Interpretation of characters, actions, verbal and nonverbal communication, silence, customs, traditions, laws and norms. Based upon the messages transmitted through the cultural elements, how can the interpreter become a part of the culture? Is this an open or closed culture? How does one gain access to the “ingroups” within this culture?
- Assimilate – A personalized response to the cultural elements, which includes transformed perspectives and attitudes, revised bias and perceptions. Will surrendering to the change process change who I am? Am I willing to undergo such a transformation? How will this change contribute to the development of a relationship with this new culture and the natives? How will my transformation affect my relationship and perspective toward the elements that characterize my culture and the groups within my culture? Who have I become as a result of this experience?

The above process requires an investment of time on the part of the leader? Time to experience the culture through observation, analysis, synthesis and assimilation. Time to become a product of the environment characteristic of the culture.

Just as a cardiologist spends years studying and learning how the heart works and developing an intuitive sensitivity to the audible sound of the heartbeat, so must the [cross-cultural] leader learn to listen to the sounds of culture with intuitiveness. Heart sounds are the noises generated by the rhythmic movement of the heart, flow of blood

through the heart and the isovolumetric contractions created by the opening and closing of the heart valves (Caret, Moser & Cohen, 1992). The sound of culture encapsulates the rhythmic movement of the norms relative to the culture. A cardiologist must become astute in the art of auscultation—listening to the internal sounds of the body (Stevenson & Waite, 2011). Auscultation is to the cardiologist what intuitive listening is to the cross-cultural leader. A cardiologist's greatest challenge is to equip the patient with tools and knowledge required to break through the influence of cultural habits. A cross-cultural leader's greatest challenge is to acquire the tools and knowledge required to break through barriers [both internal and external] to the new culture.

The sounds of culture represent social and anthropological elements of a community or society. Cultural changes produce the sound of shifting paradigms, the integration of traditional and modern perspectives as chaos and conflict arise and fall in response to the wheels of progress. Developing close relational connections emerges from determining to commit to maintain a posture of genuine listening, and a willingness to become assimilated through enculturation in a new culture.

The Wheaton Gospel Choir is comprised primarily of singers from Caucasian, Asian, and Hispanic origin with a cursory sprinkling of African Americans, purposed to sing African American gospel songs the way African Americans sing them. Cross-cultural leaders must purpose to experience cultural elements common to a specific area and emulate these elements in a manner consistent with that culture. The cross-cultural leader has a responsibility to honor the specifics and significance of a culture's elements without reducing them to watered-down versions [vis-à-vis Americanization] that usurp both their context and intent.

### **Relationship Transforms Landscape into Lifescape**

Students who shared a common desire to worship God through black gospel music began so by developing a relationship the genre. The group expanded and formed what is now the Wheaton College Gospel Choir. Ranging from various backgrounds and cultures, these students have an extensive outreach ministry that includes churches, homeless shelters, schools, and prisons in the Chicagoland area (Wheaton College, 2013) and beyond. The strength of this choir is their diversity. They have become models of global change and are bridging cultural gaps through song and dance.

Culture nurtures geographical seedlings of perception and presents them as the fruit of perspective. Culture is a tree of humanity upon which members and nonmembers of a society can partake. It is the heartbeat of the world. Without culture societies would become unidentifiable, indistinguishable, stagnant villages of clonish inhabitants destined for extinction. Global leaders are challenged to develop a relationship with the environmental soundscape present within the culture in which they are attempting to adapt to.

The dimensions of a cultural environment include the landscape, soundscape and lifescape present within a society or community. The landscape dimension refers to visual features of an area of land (Stevenson & Waite, 2011)—geographical elements and topographical surfaces. Soundscape includes the auditory elements that characterize a specific region, the acoustics that emit from an environment (Westerkamp, 2007). The lifescape dimension is inclusive of the social, cultural, and economic interactions across the landscape (Convery & Dutson, 2012); it is the experiential element through which

culture is expressed aesthetically. This article focuses upon the intrinsic soundscape dimension inherent to cultural environments.

The sounds of our home environment offer a strong sense of place (Westerkamp, 2007)—a sense of community, a sense of belonging, a sense of cultural connectedness. In order to understand the significance and meaning of sound, a conscious effort to listen to and develop a relationship with the environment must occur—this must become both an individual objective and organizational strategic intent.

The success of the Wheaton Gospel Choir demonstrates how local organizational efforts develop into global organizational movements. The sound of culture is not an escape from reality it is an engagement of norms into an integrative schema for the betterment of mutual parties.

### **Conclusion**

The sound of culture concept is a derivative of Westerkamp's theory that sound can be understood as a type of language (2007) in that each sound can be interpreted like a spoken word. Pulsating through time and space sound waves send silent reverberations that create cultural paradigm shifts, these shifts represent the sound of progress.

Hall references a concept called the paradox of culture, "beneath the clearly perceived, highly explicit surface culture lies a whole other world, which when understood will ultimately, radically change the way we perceive human nature (1976)."

It is quite conceivable that the students in the Wheaton Gospel Choir have experienced such a radical change to their perception about the African-American culture. By daring to invade and adapt to a foreign culture, they successfully eliminated barriers of perception and perspective that influenced both their attitudes and actions.

Their commitment to experience this culture through song and dance is a testament to Condon's synchrony theory that postulates dance as a slowed-down, stylized version of what humans do whenever they interact (Hall, 1976, p.13). Research has determined that movement is synchronistic with words (Condon, 1971).

Hall posits that communication is culture and culture is communication. He also purports that culture is not just a medium of communication—it is an explicit communication modal (1959). Based upon Hall's research and the success of the Wheaton Gospel Choir, what approaches might leaders consider for application in the elimination of cultural barriers in their personal sphere of influence as well as on an organizational level? Leaders new to a global environment may want to simply stop and listen in order to “begin to hear the truly local, the here-and-now, and after some more time, the inner tone that underlies everything and connects us through our consciousness to the globe (according to Sikh wisdom as cited by Westerkamp, 2007).

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