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Cross-cultural Communications: A Real Challenge For Diplomats?

International networking of individual, state, corporate, NGO, cultural, and social activities, intensified by the process of globalization have strengthen the need of cross-cultural communication. It is beyond doubt that culture covers the entirety of the human's life. Most human activities that are related to the society's activities are shaped by culture (Piotrkiewicz 67-68). Every culture is determined by different social codes: customs, fashion, music, society relations, linguistic norms, etc. To be more specific, when one says "it's history" in Poland the words are associated with something important that determines people's lives. However, when one says "it's history" in the United States, it is perceived as something insignificant, past that has no influence on the present life (Ogonowska 12). Cross-cultural communication is an issue which frequently generates a great deal of heated debate. Nowadays, hardly a day goes by without the subject of culture being raised in most countries. However, it is highly debatable whether cross-cultural skills of a diplomat are more important than other considerations, such as his or her intelligence, knowledge, and education background, which some people consider to be of greater significance. As world is becoming every time more and more united, and globalization plays an important role, free movement of people and

workforce, one should not overlook the fact that in order to be a successful negotiator one must be able to communicate effectively within various cultures.

To begin with, during the cross-cultural negotiations, diplomats represents not only the aims of their visit, but also the culture they belong to (Matsumoto, Juang 553). Effective intercultural negotiations require a diplomat to look into the variety of cultural values from other countries and compare them to their own values, which are obviously determined by their own culture. It is important as intensive contacts can lead to successful negotiations and undertaking of action. However, language and communications skills are demanded in order to guarantee that the message sent to the other party will be understood correctly, not only cognitively but also emotionally (Hofstede 436). Experienced diplomats usually need a professional *savoir faire*, which enables them to negotiate fruitfully on subjects they are empowered to decide by themselves. The only problem is that when a diplomat has to negotiate a really important issue, she or he is monitored by politicians, who have power but unfortunately no diplomatic *savoir faire*. This is due to the fact that they often decide about the domestic situations and this is the role for diplomats to explain it to foreign negotiation partners (Hofstede 436).

What is more, cross-cultural communications can be done on two spheres: verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication can be simply described as computing thoughts through words. However, as languages vary significantly a problem of untranslatability arises. More to the point, in Japanese 'hai' means 'yes'. However, Japanese people use 'hai' not only to confirm something, but also to express interest in the conversation. This small difference creates a lot of problems to translators and diplomats. Some of them misinterpret the word 'hai' (Griffin 155). Another good example of culture differences is silence. Giles, Coupland and Wiemann (1992) conducted research comparing the Chinese and American opinion on talking. Americans perceived talking as something pleasant and important, and as a way of

controlling what goes on while Chinese were more keen on silence and they perceived quietness as a way of controlling what goes on. Moreover, Japanese people found silence as a tool to control negotiations (Smith and Bond 141). By the same token, in Finland silence means attentiveness and encouragement to the speaker to continue, while in some countries speaker will go on while he or she receives verbal or non-verbal acknowledgement that he or she is listened. If a speaker misunderstands the meaning of silence, it can lead to conflicts, distrust, communication breakdown, and even to the end of the negotiation process.

Additionally, it is vital to point out that communication involves also non-verbal aspect. People look, smell, gesture, position their bodies, shift their posture, and emit facial cues such as smiles. One can easily offend people from different cultures by inappropriate use of, for instance, the ‘thumbs up’ sign, which in various cultures has a different meaning. ‘Thumbs up’ is commonly associated with ‘OK’ meaning (Hodge 110). However, in Iran and in Bangladesh it is an obscene gesture. In Japan it means a man or a male gender. In Greece and Sardinia it means ‘get stuffed’. Furthermore, in the USA it is traditionally used by hitchhikers to solicit rides (Axtell 53). As it can be concluded from the above-mentioned examples that one has to bear in mind all different meanings of a specific gesture in order to use it correctly. Also, many diplomats underestimate the importance of clothes and colours. For example, white in most countries stands for purity, youth, and innocence. In many cultures it is a brides’ colour, but not in Indian culture where a bride wears a red or yellow dress. Moreover, in China, Japan, and South Korea white is used for mourning (Bartosik-Purgat 131). For a young diplomat wearing a white dress during official meetings in China will be perceived as disrespect to their culture. The other vital difference is the perception of distance. To take one example, Arabs do not share the American concept of ‘personal space’ neither in private meetings nor in public situations. It can be easily observed that American people try to keep their distance during meetings while Arab people try to shorten the distance

and they come closer. It looks like an ‘American-Arab dance’, all space in the room is used. It is also worth mentioning that greetings vary among countries. In Saudi Arabia greeting is a kind of ritual. First, a person should say *salam alaykum*, then shake a hand and say *kaif halak*. (Bartosik-Purgat 101). An Arab man can hold your arm and kiss you on both cheeks. If he is accompanied by a woman, do not expect that she will be even introduce to you (Bartosik-Purgat 101). In China the most appropriate greeting is a bow and eventually a handshake. In Syria men greet themselves by embracing while women by kissing on cheeks (Bartosik-Purgat 103). In US it is common to shake hands firmly. By contrast, in France a traditional American handshake is considered too rough and rude. French people prefer a quick handshake with only slight pressure (Braganti and Devine 25).

All things considered, culture can be a platform for international relations, an aspect determining political and economic relations among countries, a guarantee for maintaining country’s sovereignty and independence, a tool for political activity – cultural diplomacy and the culture’s promotion in the world (Zenderowski, Cebul, Krycki 128). Culture differences manifest themselves in several ways. The differences among cultures, at the international level and also at the domestic level, create a great challenge for diplomats. In order to deal with cultural-bound obstacles a diplomat not only needs knowledge about the target culture, and well-matched methods of negotiation, but also a great deal of creativity and talent. He or she needs to be a kind of mediator between two cultures. Furthermore, he or she should be able to identify intercultural barriers and solve them. As a matter of fact, the best diplomats are those who are able to combine their knowledge and intelligence with cross-cultural communication skills.

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