

Reviewed by Bertha Du-Babcock

"The Cultural Context in Business Communication" is a collection of readings edited by Susanne Niemeier, Charles P. Campbell, and René Dirven and drawn largely from the 24th LAUD Symposium held in Duisburg, Germany in 1996. The book is organized around five topic areas: "Theoretical Issues"; "Interculturality"; "The Cultural Context"; "Linguistic Perspectives"; and "Training". As stated by Susanne Niemeier in the introduction, the purpose of this edited book is to "enable business negotiators, or future business negotiators, or their trainers, to become aware of the different kinds of intercultural traps they may encounter when dealing with representatives of foreign cultures" (p.2). Besides these practitioners, the book contains topic areas that will also appeal to both teaching- and research-oriented academics.

The wide-range of selected topics allow readers to be exposed to theoretical, research, and applied perspectives on key international business communication issues. Readers also are exposed to American and European scholars and researchers (e.g., United States, Belgium, Ireland, Finland, Canada, England, the Netherlands, and Germany). The focus and coverage of the book is wider than its title implies but it also misses large and growing elements of intercultural communication. The collection of articles clearly demonstrates the diversity of possible topics in the field, but there is no integration among the five topic areas. Only a few readers will be tempted to read the book cover to cover but rather search out particular topics and skim or ignore the rest. As could be expected in a collection of readings, the writing styles of the authors vary widely and the book contains some tedious and difficult passages. Even so, the individual articles are well worth reading and will appeal to readers of varying backgrounds.

Part I Theoretical Issues starts with Edward Hall's "Three Domains of Culture and the Triune Brain", in which he explores the relationships between different brain structures (reptilian brain, limbic system, and neocortex) and associated cultures (formal/hierarchical bureaucratic culture, informal/intuitive emotional culture, and technical/intellectual culture). In this article Hall does not refer to his seminal book "Beyond Culture" (1976) where he introduced the useful and field defining construct of showing high- and low-context cultures along a continuum to distinguish national cultures. As such the article may be of interest in presently new insights and showing what Hall is currently looking at but also is frustrating in seeing him fail to connect or even mention his earlier seminal work.

The second essay, "Rhetorical Ethos" by Charles P. Campbell, extends and uses Hall's construct of high- and low-context culture in examining the way business texts are written in English and in Chinese. Campbell also introduces contrastive rhetoric (first presented by Kaplan in 1966) and combines concepts of Aristotelian rhetoric (Western Rhetorical Principle) with
Chinese rhetoric (Jing and Qing). Integrating theoretical, research and applied topic areas, Campbell provides a framework and a transition to the sections and articles that follow.

In Part II "Negotiating with Foreign Business Persons: An Introduction for Americans with Propositions on Six Cultures", Stephen E. Weiss and William Stripp compare the negotiation styles across six cultures. The authors cautiously pinpoint the possible culturally-based differences regarding negotiation attitudes, behaviors, and contexts (p.5) and painstakingly compare the 12 identified variables across the six cultures.

One drawback of the article is that the data used for contrasting cultures dates back to at least 1985 and there are more recent comparisons available from alternative sources (e.g., Brislin, 2000; Cleary, 2001). Even so, the framework, examples, and insights provided in the essay serve well as an introduction and overview of the field.

In Part III, "The Cultural Context", two essays are included. The first essay, "Power and Distance as Cultural and Contextual Elements in Finnish and English Business Writing" written by Hilkka Yli-Jokipii, examines how a person's position (hierarchical power) in an organization affects the way that individual communicates with others at different levels within the same organizational system. The second essay "Cultural Values and Irish Economic Performance" by W. Fred Scharf and Séamus Mac Mathúná, looks at how cultural characteristics of a country affect its economic performance. Although these two essays share the same theme "The Cultural Context", they address very different audiences. Yli-Jokipii adopts the linguistically oriented pragmatics and discourse analytical approach geared toward the reader with an interest in applied linguistics and pragmatics, whereas Scharf and Mac Mathúná address the reader with a social and economic orientation. Both essays are similar in that they deal with "power" and "distance", but these concepts are embedded in significantly different contexts: The "context" of business letter writing and the "context" of Irish society. The second essay surely helps the reader understand the impact of cultural concepts on the economic aspects of international business environment, but the reader from disciplines of linguistics or pragmatics may find this reading outside their scope of interest.

The Part IV "Linguistic Perspectives" contains three essays: "Parallel Texts and Diverging Cultures in Hong Kong: Implication for Intercultural Communication"; "Cultural Keywords in Chinese-Dutch Business Negotiations"; and "Harmonious Cooperation' in an English-German Intercultural Business Negotiation". The first essay by Grundy examines how individuals from a bilingual culture, such as Hong Kong, use different written presentation styles when conveying the same information to audiences with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The findings reveal stylistic differences in that bilingual Chinese writers have stronger "we" in-group identity when writing in Chinese as compared to "I" or "they" out-group identity when writing English messages.

The second essay by Li and Koole takes the concept of cultural differences to a more micro level. The authors compare the variations in meaning that two different cultural groups (i.e., Chinese and Dutch) associate with the word "support". The findings reveal how cultural blunders occur in that different cultural behaviors and expectations may cause
miscommunication in interpreting the word "support" in a given negotiation process. For instance, the Dutch cannot fully understand the nuance of "support" taken by Chinese in cultivating relationships.

The third essay "Harmonious Cooperation' in an English-German Intercultural Business Negotiation" shows differing English and German perceptions of what constitutes 'harmonious cooperation'. The analysis centered on a 35-minute simulation between a German producer and an English sales agent who are negotiating representation, sales commission, and payment conditions. Three aspects are analyzed: orientation; subjective versus objective viewpoints; and coordination (p.221). The concept of 'harmonious cooperation' was operationalized by examining the degree of overlapping and interruption (turn-taking behavior) and the extent that the utterances of German and English interlocutors reflected in their interactional behavior. Although Pörings presents both quantitative and qualitative data, he fails to point out whether the differences in interruption and overlapping behaviors of German and English interlocutors have direct impact on the 'harmonious cooperation'.

In all, the essays in the section of the "Linguistic Perspectives" help the reader understand that effective cross-cultural communication requires an in-depth understanding of linguistic nuances and the way these nuances relate to cultural understanding. The section will be of special interest to academics who have research agendas.

The final part of the book focuses on "Training" and provides practical insights to both academics and practitioners. The first paper "Raising Awareness in Business Communication Training", written by Lut Baten and Mia Ingels, overviews the program developed at the University of Leuven, Belgium for teaching students advanced English language skills. The authors delineate the overall structure of the program based on a three-step spiral procedure. In their "innovative" approach the instructor acts as a facilitator rather than as a lecturer. In the process, students learn to develop not only English language skills but also cognitive thinking skills that are considered to be essential to success in international business negotiation. The paper could have been more practical and beneficial, especially for novice practitioners, if the authors had added more specific details on overall curriculum design such as course content, objectives, and learning activities.

The second essay "The Experience of Sameness in Differences" written by J. Piet Verckens, Teun De Rycker, and Ken Davis reports on a course in international business writing offered simultaneously in Finland, Belgium, and the United States. The authors thoroughly describe course content to illustrate how the theoretical knowledge pillar was integrated with field research and experiential pillars as theoretical knowledge is reinforced through field research and simulation (see also Du-Babcock, 1996). This well-grounded course provides students with the opportunity to get acquainted with what the authors term "sameness in differences". For instance, in a cultural stereotyping exercise, the student participants first write down their impression of a particular culture, then interact with members of that culture, and finally use these interactions to re-evaluate their perceptions towards members of that culture before and after personal contacts. In doing so, student participants experienced what it means to communicate and do business with individuals who come from diverse cultural backgrounds but
on the surface appear to be alike in several basic ways.

In all, this edited book despite its drawbacks is a useful contribution to the ever-challenging area of the cross-cultural context in business communication. The book brings together a collection of readings that are not easily available elsewhere and demonstrates the diversity of intercultural communication. In spite of its wide scope, the book does not define the boundaries of intercultural communication and in fact ignores important topics areas and perspectives of the expanding field (as noted earlier in the review). Still, "The Cultural Context in Business Communication" does present a variety of viewpoints and individual articles worthy of attention. By combining theoretical, research, and applied articles in an integrated framework the book can provide value and useful insights to both academics and practitioners.

References:

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