

## Text 1.

### A universal language

People love to compare and contrast. In most parts of the UK, you buy your bus ticket on the bus. Yet in France, your port of call would be a metro station and in Australia, the newsagent's. This sort of comparison frequently entertains, and books on cross-cultural communication exploit our curiosity by analysing diversities among people worldwide: in social behaviour, their roles in society, their attitudes to money, the significance of their body language and so on.

Proxemics, the study of different standards of personal space, provides one example. How close we stand to someone when speaking to them depends not only on our relationship with them, but also on our culture. This is important because if the person I am with is not used to standing as near as I do when we are talking to each other, they might feel uncomfortable. Statistics tell us that the average distance at which two people stand in a social context – neighbours chatting for example – can be anything between 1.2 metres and 3.5 metres. This distance tends to decrease in Latin cultures and also in China, while in Nordic cultures, people usually stand further apart.

The messages conveyed by your posture and gestures is another case in point. It is quite common in European countries to sit with your legs crossed and top foot outstretched. However, as I know from personal experience, people from Arab countries hardly ever sit in this way because they risk showing you the sole of their shoe, considered a serious insult. It is said that Filipinos often greet each other by quickly raising their eyebrows, whereas this would equate to surprise in the USA, and unlike Bulgarians and Greeks, who use a single upwards nod to mean no, we nod our heads to affirm.

Such details fill the pages of travel guides, yet the usefulness of what are presented as 'essential' or 'must-know' facts should really be questioned. Clearly a little should be known about eating customs, tipping and the rules concerning basic greetings – whether you should bow or shake someone's hand. But beneath the surface, we are not so different. There is a wide range of signs that are universal in the emotions they communicate. Focussing on these similarities – that which we all have in common – is a much more profitable route than examining the differences.

Aside from smiling, which is perhaps the best known of these, behaviourists have proven that sadness comes across in a similar way the world over. The face 'falls', the mouth becomes downturned and the eyes begin to look glassy. The person will probably look down or away and seem distracted.

Those who are bored also exhibit certain tendencies. They will look at other things in an absent-minded way – their watches, for example. Their feet will begin to move restlessly, indicating that they want to escape, and they may tap their fingers or scratch their heads. Anger can also be easily perceived in the tensing of facial muscles, which causes people to frown, and staring eyes, that fix themselves on the target of their rage; blood rushes to the face turning it red. If the anger is great, the body will also tense up as if preparing itself for a physical fight.

Understanding these universal signals and reacting appropriately is the real key to cross-cultural communication. If we all apply just a little sensitivity and common sense, it is unlikely that we will cause lasting offence by making the wrong gesture or invading a stranger's personal space. Naturally some cultures show their emotions more openly and others prefer to keep them more hidden. But isn't that also the case within cultures, from one individual to another?

## Text 2.

### What Makes Us Happy?

Do you want to be happy? Of course you do! But what does it take to be happy? Many psychologists are now using scientific methods to try to understand the nature and origins of happiness. Their results may surprise you.

Surprisingly, happiness has been shown to be a constitutional trait. The study of different types of twins; identical and non-identical, has enabled scientists to calculate that 50-60% of self-identified happiness - and what other sort is there? - is down to genes. Of course, there is no one specific gene that determines happiness, but a great many and they tend to overlap with the genes that determine personality. People who are emotionally stable, sociable and conscientious, tend to be happier according to the research.

Now, many people believe that money makes us happy. However, there is no clear relationship between wealth and happiness. Once out of poverty, increases in wealth do not automatically turn into relative increases in happiness. For example, winning the lottery may give a rush of joy and excitement but does not ensure long-term contentment. In fact, studies have shown that lottery winners take less pleasure in everyday events following their win. It seems that they soon get habituated to their money, while at the same time they have distanced themselves from their former lives and identities by leaving jobs, friends and lifestyle.

So, what can we do to improve our sense of well-being? First we need to realise that we are not passive victims of external events. We should adopt a positive attitude, and overcome feelings of worthlessness and build our own self-confidence and self-esteem. We should try to reduce the burden of unnecessary worry. If there is something that can be done about a problem we are worrying about then we should do it, and stop worrying. And of course there is no point in worrying about things we can't change. Happiness is also a by-product of keeping active. But not just being busy, we need to be doing things that raise self-esteem and bring us satisfaction; controlling our own schedule and prioritising activities that satisfy our own needs. And saying 'no' to other people if necessary. Of course, this doesn't mean we have to be selfish. Being active members of the community or volunteering for a charity or helping your family can all create happiness.

So, should we actively pursue happiness? Curiously, the happiest people seem to be those who do not actively seek it - indeed the pursuit of happiness may be counterproductive. To a large extent, happiness emerges as a by-product of who we are and what we do. Conversely, people who focus on making others happy usually make themselves happy in the process.

### Text 3.

#### Clocking cultures

What is time? The answer varies from society to society

Back in the 1950s, anthropologist Edward Hall described how the social rules of time are like a 'silent language' for a given culture. He described how variations in the perception of time can lead to misunderstandings between people from separate cultures. 'An ambassador who has been kept waiting by a foreign visitor needs to understand that if his visitor "just mutters an apology", this is not necessarily an insult.' Hall wrote. 'You must know the social rules of the country to know at what point apologies are really due.'

Social psychologist Robert Levine has conducted so-called pace-of-life studies in 31 countries. In *A Geography of Time*, published in 1997, Levine describes how he ranked the countries by measuring three things: walking speed on urban sidewalks, how quickly postal clerks could fulfil a request for a common stamp, and the accuracy of public clocks. From the data he collected, he concluded that the five fastest-paced countries are Switzerland, Ireland, Germany, Japan and Italy; the five slowest are Syria, El Salvador, Brazil, Indonesia and Mexico.

Kevin Birth, an anthropologist, has examined time perceptions in Trinidad. In that country, Birth observes, 'if you are meeting friends at 6.00 at night, people show up at 6.45 or 7.00 and say, "any time is Trinidad time".' When it comes to business, however, that loose approach works only for people with power. A boss can show up late and say 'any time is Trinidad time', but those under him are expected to be on time. Birth adds that the connection between power and waiting time is true for many other cultures as well.

The complex nature of time makes it hard to investigate. 'You can't simply go into a society, walk up to someone and say, "Tell me about your concept of time";' Birth says. 'People don't really have an answer to that. You have to come up with other ways to find out. So he attempted to get at how Trinidadians regard time by exploring how closely their society links time and money. He surveyed rural residents and found that farmers - whose days are dictated by natural events - did not recognise the phrase time is money, budget your time or time management even though they had satellite TV and were familiar with Western popular culture. But tailors in the same areas were aware of such notions. Birth concluded that wage work altered the tailors' view of time.

In addition to cultural variations in how people deal with time at a practical level, there may be differences in how they visualise it from a theoretical perspective. The Western idea of time has been compared to that of an arrow in flight towards the future. Some cultures, such as the Australian Aborigines, see time as closely connected with space. For other cultures, time may be seen as a pattern incorporating the past, present and future. But theory and practice do not necessarily go together. 'There's often considerable variation between how a culture views the mythology of time and how they think about time in their daily lives,' Birth asserts.