



# Discourse-based technology support for intercultural communication in multinationals

Discourse-based  
technology  
support

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this research is to suggest a framework based on the discourse approach to analyze intercultural communication problems in multinational organizations. The paper also aims to suggest solutions to these problems by designing support in computer-mediated communication.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper uses qualitative methodology to discover communication problems and strategies as they are used by employees in a multinational organization.

**Findings** – Communication problems and strategies were associated with differences between communicators at three levels of discourse: different assumptions about communication; different ways of structuring information and differences in style.

**Research limitations/implications** – The implementation of the suggested tools introduces potential sensitivities that need to be considered.

**Originality/value** – The paper highlights how to apply the discourse approach to the analysis of intercultural communication problems and suggests several implementations of computer-mediated communication mechanisms and techniques that can effectively mitigate communication problems in multinational organizations.

**Keywords** Communication, Organizational culture, Multinational companies

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Multinational organizations must rely on distributed information processing, communication, and cooperation (Gupta and Govindarajan, 1994). Yet designing computer-mediated communication (CMC) for multinational organizations is difficult not only because of the need to cope with states of high uncertainty but also because of the additional complications that arise in intercultural and international communication (Cerny, 1996).

Our paper suggests a framework based on the discourse approach to analyze intercultural communication problems in multinational organizations. We further focus on communication strategies to overcome these problems and suggest implications for designing computer-supported communication systems. Using our framework, we have diagnosed classes of problems and identified certain means of overcoming or mitigating these classes of problems, and we discuss how they can be implemented through CMC.



We demonstrate these ideas with an in-depth field study in a textile multinational that has subsidiaries in England, Israel, Egypt and Jordan and a globally distributed customer and supplier base such as in the USA as well as in Turkey.

*Discourse systems as a framework to communication in multinational organizations*

The discourse approach focuses on relevant communication systems used in a specific interaction (Van Dijk, 1997). Members of a discourse system hold a common ideological position and recognize a set of extra-discourse features that define them as a group. In an organization, one most likely would find that employees are simultaneously members of multiple discourse systems, such as the professional group and the gender and age groups (Van Dijk, 1997). In multinationals, employees also often differ culturally and are members of different cultural discourse systems. The role culture plays in relationship strategies has been explored in the context of multinational organizations in China but without specific regard to discourse systems (Hung, 2004). We approach organizations as “dialogical” cultural entities, explicitly acknowledging that an organization is comprised of multiple discourses (Eisenberg and Goodall, 1993; Grant *et al.*, 1998).

We apply the notion of discourse systems to describe how participants create shared meaning and to discuss differences and difficulties between these systems.

Our analysis examines the main discourse systems that shape the actors’ communication patterns and the difficulties that result from differences between them.

Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz (1982) proposed a model for the analysis of goal-oriented speech situations between speakers from differing social and ethnic backgrounds. This model, with some adaptations to texts, is useful for distinguishing among different discourse systems. The model focuses on three levels of language use. The first level contains the different cultural and motivational assumptions embedded in the text concerning the relationships between the participants, the purpose of a communication event, and the communication in general (e.g., is it task or relationship oriented). The middle level is the organization of the text, or the way information is structured, which includes differences in how much background information the speakers (or senders) supply, the length of paragraphs, the use of rhetorical moves, and the use of numbers. The “top” level is the style of the text, which includes differences in vocabulary, grammatical structures, and word order. Our examination of specific discourse systems and the interaction between them will build on these levels.

We begin with an examination of the main discourse systems relevant to this study. Previous research (Zaidman, 2001) and our own initial analysis of the data of interactions between English, Israeli, and Egyptian employees in the multinational we studied suggest that three major discourse systems play a role in the process of communication within the target organization: the utilitarian discourse, the *dugri* discourse, and the *musayara* discourse, all of which are defined below.

One should note that the communication between the English, Israeli and Egyptian employees was conducted primarily in English.

*Utilitarian discourse.* The utilitarian discourse is dominant in business, government, and academe, especially in the West (Scollon and Scollon, 1995). Within this communication system, clarity, brevity, and sincerity (C-B-S) are widely valued. The preferred forms of communication within the utilitarian discourse system are anti-rhetorical (i.e. one should give nothing but information with no attempt to influence the listener), positivist-empirical, deductive, individualistic (speakers and writers should avoid set phrases, metaphors, proverbs, and clichés, and strive to make

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their statements fresh and original), egalitarian (i.e. individuals must be considered as equals), and public (Scollon and Scollon, 1995).

The English, Israelis, and Egyptians differ in their level of socialization with respect to the utilitarian discourse. The English adopt most of the utilitarian discourse attributes early in childhood. Some of the ideological principles of utilitarian discourse, such as the belief in the creative, free, and equal individual, are transmitted to children in Israel in their primary socialization. Egyptians come into contact with the utilitarian ideology only through secondary socialization - i.e. mainly through high schools and universities they have attended.

*Dugri discourse.* *Dugri* discourse is considered a major style of communication among Israelis. In both Arabic and Hebrew, *dugri* speech means talk that manifests truthfulness, high information content, and clarity. Speech is associated with pragmatic orientation with its emphasis on the elemental, basic, instrumental, survival-oriented necessities of life, and its impatience with verbal polish or circumlocution. It accounts for an emphasis on a mode of human relations marked by spontaneity, immediacy, and equality (Katriel, 1986).

The emphasis on talk that manifests high information content and clarity exists in both the utilitarian and the *dugri* discourse systems, as does the emphasis on egalitarian social relationships. However, while *dugri* speech promotes close and egalitarian social relationships in the private and public sphere, the utilitarian discourse promotes egalitarian social relationships only within the contexts of socially and institutionally sanctioned public discourse. Furthermore, although both systems emphasize direct talk, speaking one's mind in a forceful and often confrontational tone is only common within the *dugri* system (Griefat and Katriel, 1989).

*Musayara discourse.* The third discourse system is the "musayara," which means in Arabic "accompanying" one's partner in conversation (Griefat and Katriel, 1989). Behavior designed to enhance commonalities rather than differences, cooperation rather than conflict, and mutuality rather than self-assertion would be interpreted as involving *musayara*. There is great emphasis on display of involvement and participation. Verbal acts of *musayara* can be marked by a sense of conversational restraint, which is displayed through strict adherence to procedural rules of deference, the avoidance of interruptions and topic shifts, and an effort to avoid topics of potential confrontation (Griefat and Katriel, 1989).

## Method

### *Study approach*

We designed our study as a case study. A case study examines a phenomenon in its natural setting, employing multiple methods of data collection to gather information from one or few entities (Benbasat *et al.*, 2002). The boundaries of the phenomenon are not clearly evident at the outset of the research and no experimental control or manipulation is used. Indeed our objective is to discover communication problems and strategies as they are used by employees with no manipulation or control of data collection.

The case-study methodology is particularly well suited for international business research where data are collected from cross-border and cross-cultural settings and the attempt is to deepen our understanding of the research phenomenon (Ghauri, 2004). Furthermore, it is argued that case study research is the most common qualitative method used in information systems because of the analysis of the phenomenon within the organizational context (Meyers and Avison, 2002 who quote others).

We used triangulation, a combination of several qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, documents, and observations to analyze data. The main

advantage of triangulation is that it can produce a more complete, holistic and contextual portrait of the object under study (Ghauri, 2004). More specifically, our main sources of data were interviews with employees and managers followed by reading the texts that they had produce in the processes of daily communication such as e-mail messages. This triangulation of methods produced a complete picture of the phenomenon under study.

#### *Participants*

Interviews were conducted with 31 employees who held different professional and managerial positions in the organization, such as quality control manager, division secretary, and economist. We conducted interviews with more than 80 percent of those employees who had extensive daily interactions with employees from other cultures.

We interviewed 16 Israelis, including nine employees based in Israel; six managers who worked in Egypt; one person who spent half of each month in Israel and the other half in Egypt or Jordan; and one person who worked in Jordan. We conducted interviews with 13 Egyptian employees, all situated in Egypt. We also conducted two interviews with British employees who were based in the UK but spent several months each year in Egypt.

#### *Documents*

We examined documents following two procedures:

- (1) We studied sixty days of electronic mail of two senior managers, one in Egypt and one in Israel. We paid special attention to those messages that included references to problems in intercultural communication.
- (2) We collected random samples of messages from the computers of six participants, Israelis and Egyptians. Each sample included approximately 10 messages to and from employees from other cultures. We also gathered selected messages from a few participants with what they themselves identified as containing communication problems.

Altogether we surveyed 200 e-mail messages, spanning seven months. Seventy three of the 200 e-mail messages contained indications of communication problems.

The authors reviewed all the documents several times in order to reveal any misunderstandings or failures in communication between the participants.

Another source of data was a report written by a research student who acted as a consultant for the Egyptian branch of the organization. The report contained a description of a workshop conducted to understand cultural differences and recommendations to improve intercultural communication and management in the plant.

#### *Interviews*

*Data collection.* Interviews with the participants took place between April 1998 and December 1999 in Egypt and in Israel. All interviews conducted by the first author, a trained anthropologist. Interviews with Israeli participants were conducted in Hebrew, while interviews with Egyptian participants were conducted in English or in one case in Arabic with the help of a translator. The goal of each interview was to discover what the participants think about their communication with employees from other cultures; what difficulties they face, and how they solve communication problems with employees from different cultures. The semi-structured interviews included the following key questions:

- Please describe your daily work and your job responsibilities.
- Please describe communication with employees from other cultures in the context of your daily work.
- What are the difficulties you encounter when communicating with them?
- How do you face these difficulties?

*Data analysis.* The first step in the process of data analysis was to read each interview several times and arrange participants' responses according to topics. For example, all the responses to questions about communication problems were aggregated. The same procedure was followed for each of the other questions presented in the interview. The second step was to choose a representative quotation regarding the communication behavior. All quotations are copied leaving intact grammar or spelling mistakes. A few quotations were translated from Hebrew to English.

*Observations.* The authors visited the organization's subsidiaries in Israel and Egypt several times. In these visits we acquired knowledge about essential topics such as the use of information systems in the communications process, and the process of communication among employees within a subsidiary and between subsidiaries. These visits enabled us to conduct face-to-face interviews with employees in their natural work environment. During the interviews, these employees occasionally demonstrated their responses by referring to actual documents, and this procedure helped us gain a better understanding of the different aspects of the organizational context.

## Findings

### *Communication problems due to distance between discourse systems*

The following communication problems appeared to be of significance to employees in the organization.

*The first level: problems due to different assumptions about communication.* Several Israelis and English employees described situations in which coworkers from Egypt said that they would perform a task which they subsequently did not perform. An example is the following quotation:

... when I ask an employee to perform a task she would say "ok. I will do it." She will never say: "No, I cannot do it, or, I do not want to do it, or I do not understand what to do."

Communication problems also arise among Israelis and Egyptians. While Israelis viewed a particular meeting as constructive debating and learning from mistakes, the Egyptians took it as dysfunctional discord. As the Egyptian manager later described:

Here we fight in the meetings. One tells the other "You made a mistake" and the other replies "No, I didn't". Later they all smile. But I could not smile.

These communication problems are the result of the distance between the systems in the assumptions about communication. Communication within the context of the *dugri* talk, and the utilitarian discourse, is task oriented. Communication in general, and especially in the context of work, should be the exchange of clear information with little or no consideration of the addresses' feelings. On the other hand, the goal of language from the Egyptian/*musayara* side is relationship oriented. Being polite (expressed by the reluctance to say "no") is considered more important than being accurate.

*The second level: problems due to different ways of structuring information.* Another type of problems results from the distance between the systems is in the presentation and structure of information. We collected several documents showing evidence that

the English participant wants more data and explanations. The [Israeli] participant, on the other hand, prefers to stay vague. In addition, cultural differences between the discourse systems seem to play a major role in this situation: The English, who are accustomed to the utilitarian discourse more than the Israelis, require more order and details. The Israelis, who are less accustomed to the utilitarian discourse treat detailed information as unnecessary. Similarly, two Egyptians, who were exposed to the utilitarian discourse through their education and their former workplace, also showed increased expressions of requests for order and structure.

*The third level: problems due to differences in style.* When referring to differences in style we mean those differences related to the use of direct versus indirect language, the use of formal versus informal language, and the tendency toward expressive or instrumental language (Scollon and Scollon, 1995).

Our data show that there are difficulties that are the result of distance between the *dugri* and the *musayara* ways of speech. Egyptian workers said in interviews that it is hard for them to accept the Israeli style of communication, where people shout and smile. An Egyptian manager told us she would never tell a worker, "This is not right," but rather "I would do it differently." This was in stark contrast with the Israeli manager who used very direct language, which of course seemed very offensive to the Egyptian. Several examples take from written communication illustrate the Israeli style of writing:

A senior Israeli manager writes to a co-worker in London:

Dear Laura,

It is not a custom that you shall call Print directly and run your own policy. It is not Begeg factory and there are rules laid at the creation of the platform, as to act differently in a country you don't know and it's culture may not be understood by yourself, with all the respect. We are facing problems with Print and You shall not dare to interfere with something you are neither qualified nor allowed to.

The response from Laura to the direct message came only 15 days later indicating the difficulties she had with it.

An Israeli professional begins an e-mail message to a London-based professional colleague with the following words:

THIS IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH

In this case, the assertive *dugri* speech implies concern for the speaker's "face" rather than for the addressee's, that is, the speaker expresses his or her arguments as they are, with no concern for the face of the addressee's or for his or her feelings. It is also associated with an attitude of spontaneity (Griefat and Katriel, 1989).

#### *Communication strategies*

Employees of the studied organization use several communication strategies to overcome some of the difficulties discussed above. We group the strategies we found in accordance with the level of discourse they seem to address.

*The first level: strategies used to bridge the gap of assumptions about communication.* Several Israelis were aware of the fact that relationships are essential when communicating with Egyptian or Jordanian counterparts. The importance of social language is expressed in the following quotation: "If you forget to say good morning or how are you, you may be offending someone severely. You won't hear about it for two weeks and then it will come out suddenly." The Israelis found a way to cope with this situation: "We are more social and much more complimentary during meetings." The

Israelis thus have adopted the strategy of *affectivity* (see Table I), in which people intentionally include affect in their messages.

Working face to face in order to improve relationships is another strategy that most of the employees mentioned. Israeli employees reported: “my attempts to get to know people personally improved communication and trust”.

*The second level: strategies used to bridge the gap of information structure.* An Israeli manager had several problems in obtaining data from his Turkish partners. He initially attempted to explain by the telephone in detail why and how he needed the information. This strategy has been defined above as contextualization, i.e. building an explicit and multi-layer interpretation of the issue as opposed to concentrating on the task-related information, the ‘bottom line’ message. The Israeli manager used another strategy to bridge the gap of information. He created new document templates, including manuals and general work plans for the stitching factories in Turkey, which were structured as tables that when properly filled in included all the information that he needed. He sent these tables to his counterparts via e-mail with the request that they fill in the tables with data on a regular basis.

Employees of the organization appear to often use attention focusing, a strategy used by the sender to affect the receiver’s information processing (Simons, 1991). It is done by such means as drawing attention to parts of the message that are highlighted and switching from small to large letters etc. An example is an exchange of e-mail messages between Israeli and Egyptian employees. In the first message the Egyptian employee asks for “the stile file (the green file).” The Israeli employee felt that the information that was included in the request was not clear. She thus responded in the following way: “Please let me understand what you need – GARMENT FILE [letters appeared in red] or STYLE FILE [letters appeared in pink].”

*The third level: strategies aimed at solving problems that result from differences in style.* We found several cases of workers who preferred to use a fax or e-mail rather than talk over the phone or meet face to face because they wanted more control in planning and editing the message before it went out (these fit the strategy of predetermination shown control in Table I). An example is two Israeli employees, who were having difficulties understanding British employees. They avoided talking by phone and asked the other side to communicate via e-mail. One of them intentionally calls when she is sure that the person being sought is not present and leaves messages on the answering machine to avoid a conversation. Another Israeli manager used a dictionary and careful editing with each and every communication.

Strategy	Description
Contextualization	Provision of explicit context in the message
Affectivity	Provision of affective components (emotion, mood) in the message
Involvement	Considering the receiver’s view and attitude
Attention focusing	Directing or manipulating the receiver’s information processing
Predetermination	Planning the pattern of communication and contingencies ahead of the process
Choice of medium	Choice of appropriate medium (FtF, email, phone)

**Table I.**  
Communication  
strategies

### **Implications for computer-mediated communications**

Based on the data we collected above, we suggest implementation of CMC mechanisms and techniques that can effectively mitigate communication problems (or reduce distance) between discourse systems.

Earlier work in reducing communication distance through CMC focused on roles, seniority, departmental affiliation, project participation, and other job-related characteristics through a knowledge-based e-mail system named kMail (Schwartz and Te'eni, 2000). We believe that, based on the importance of compatibility among discourse systems in achieving successful communications, earlier work in the automated reduction of distance can now be extended to include the discourse element.

The functionality and operation of such a CMC extension is envisioned to include a discourse analysis tool similar to a grammar checker, which, given a pre-established discourse style of the sender, will identify discourse-specific constructs in an e-mail message and suggest modifications that are compatible with a selected target discourse system.

We suggest that the first step toward an intercultural CMC system accepts the message sender role identification as an input parameter and focuses on the message recipient role (bridging distance). Thus a *musayara*-oriented sender can write in his customary style and be informed of a suggested modification to a target style. This extension to a CMC enhancement system such as kMail requires the development of specific grammars for each of the discourse systems to be supported. Pattern-matching can be used to identify discourse-system sequences and, initially at least, suggested alternatives can be presented as a list for the user to select from.

The communication strategies shown in Table I are all candidates for computer support, although we demonstrate only those easier to implement. The most obvious candidate is contextualization. Greater contextualization reduces the chance of a communication failure but only when the discourse distance warrants it (Katz and Te'eni, 2007). Moreover, the adoption of contextualization may depend on the level at which the discourse systems differ; i.e. coping with differences in style may require an explanation of these stylistic differences by the sender (contextualization), while a difference in the tendency to shorter rather than longer messages may require an awareness and sensitivity to the diversity with little adaptation.

Contextualization-based communication strategies can be implemented through the introduction of CMC tools that support shared meaning and lessen the distance between sender and recipient by bridging the systems of discourse (Schwartz, 1999; Te'eni, 2001). Previous work, however, has been limited to semantic distance without considering cultural influences, which would require knowledge of the discourse systems embedded in the CMC.

Predetermination of communication can be enhanced by several techniques. CMC generally provides more control than other interactive media because it can also store information to allow non-simultaneity. Control through planning cannot guarantee perfect implementation of the plan of communication, but it can provide interactive functions that guide the communicator when the situation arises. Such interactive functions are infeasible in a printed message or in unaided face-to-face dialog. These functions could include online language and style editors, prompts to impose courtesy responses (e.g., addressing unanswered questions) and reminders of planned reactions at predetermined milestones. All this could be done in the context of additional knowledge of the culture and discourse, of which an illustrative example already implemented in many calendars is the inclusion of local holidays and greetings that adapt to the particular parties communicating.



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Information technology supports focusing attention through formatting effects, multi-modal messages that include synchronized voice and motion, and pointing by remote control. When such focusing is limited to text-based CMC, the strategy depends on the level of style and must be sensitive to the differences of style in different discourse systems. Clearly what may be acceptable in one culture (such as highlighting a text in red) may be very offensive in another.

When video conferencing is used, focusing attention depends on a much wider variety of techniques. In particular, gestures and facial expressions have proven effective in focusing attention or at least creating an awareness of low attention (Daly-Jones *et al.*, 1998). Video conferencing might be perceived as a preferable way of communication for employees who hold to a relationship oriented discourse (such as the *musayara*). Here again, differences of meaning in different discourse systems may go beyond the intention of one speaker and be understood by another listener as a rude interruption. For example, consider the difference between the meaning of silence or of nodding from side to side in Western versus Eastern cultures.

Since the completion of this research there has been, and continues to be, tremendous strides taken in the development of inter and intra-organizational electronic communication tools. What began as a question related to the efficacy of email communications has now extended to multiple modes of instant messaging that occur in organizations, and is migrating to mobile devices which now include messaging functionality. As the ubiquity of communication devices continues to grow, multinational organizations will find new challenges and even greater importance in facilitating the discourse across its various populations and cultures.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, the three potential levels of conflict identified in this study, namely different communicative assumptions; different structuring of information; and differences in style; were shown to be related to fundamental differences in discourse systems. These differences were then shown to be addressed by employees of the target multinational organization through the adoption of appropriate mitigating communication strategies, specifically contextualization, affectivity, attention focusing, and predetermination.

Computer-mediated Communications can encompass a wide range of functions to support strategies that overcome communication problems and help culturally diverse members of the same organization apply effective communication strategies that they might otherwise not be familiar with. While one may consider behavioral intervention among the communicating parties as an alternative to CMC automation, we believe that our approach can be both complementary and a viable alternative to costly behavioral interventions.

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