

International & Cross-Cultural Business Research

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LANGUAGE AND THE ROLE OF THE DOMINANT CULTURE

2.0 Introduction

This chapter makes the argument that international research is by its very nature comparative for the simple reason that the researcher has a different cultural background than both the field and the informants being studied. Therefore, basic differences in cross-national research designs must be made clear as early as possible during the research process. Some of the questions that should be asked are presented in Section 2.1, which highlights the underlying assumptions of comparative international research designs: What is being compared? Across which units? Who is making the comparisons? What is the cultural origin of the theories being used? What is the reference point in the comparison process? In Section 2.2, we focus on the researcher as a central agent in the process. It emphasises the researcher's background as a central element in the comparative setting. It also discusses the diversity of intellectual styles across cultures and how these styles impact views on what appropriate research is, how it should be conducted and how it should be evaluated. Section 2.3 deals with the issue of language which is a central, and most often ignored, element in the comparison process¹: translation, although possible, is an undertaking which obscures most of the culturally obscure materials; *traduttore traditore* as the Italian saying goes (translator, betrayer). The last part explains how language can be used as a tool for the discovery of potential meaning.

It is important to make the point that even monolingual researchers can meaningfully deal with language issues in cross-cultural business research, provided that they are aware of language issues. Rather than adopting an instrumental paradigm of language, they can rely on language insiders, ask questions, use dictionaries to check for meaning differences as well as applying qualitative or quantitative methods, as described in Chapter 4. Fluency in multiple languages is not needed to be language aware.²

2.1 Research perspectives and world views

Do business researchers favour the search for differences or similarities? Personal interests and beliefs may be a source of bias, 'colonial' designs favouring the emergence of similarities. A common mindset, shared knowledge, recognised scientific approaches, anonymous reviewing, and academic journals tend to favour the similarity view, or at least favour the discovery of differences in *degree* rather than in *nature*. An identical research design may not be appropriate for the discovery of both similarities and differences across national/cultural contexts. Qualitative research designs favour the discovery of differences because they emphasise local meaning and interpretation. On the other hand, quantitative *etic* research designs favour similarities because they assume shared concepts, and use directive research instruments that channel the informants' insights into the researcher's pre-established frames. We have to take into account not only actual versus perceived similarities/differences but also differences in *nature* (incommensurable) versus differences in *degree* (commensurable). Incidentally, qualitative research may work as a magnifying glass and lead to the overestimating of differences in nature, because similarities are often far too substantial to be ignored.

Should researchers start with the search for differences or for similarities? Searching first for similarities is likely to tone down differences, most of which will remain unnoticed. Most differences are unimportant in the sense that late discovery does not impair the success of a locally implemented business policy because *ex-post* adjustment is feasible. Searching first for differences is likely to unveil key differences, sometimes with a magnifying glass effect. The next step is to take the true measure of such differences and to progressively discover that much is in fact shared.

Most researchers will argue that they look for both similarities and differences. However, in the real world, they tend to have a preconception of what they will (or even 'want' to) find at the end of the process. Those who emphasise similarities will favour the traditional search for 'cross-cultural equivalence', while those looking for differences will favour open enquiry and act deliberately

as ‘meaning explorers’. Consequently, those who search for differences and unknowingly use research strategies that favour the discovery of similarities will be deeply disappointed and discuss their findings in great detail to highlight their cherished differences. In any case, the researcher must be aware of what is predominantly being looked for because it will influence the research design, favouring the discovery of similarities or the emergence of differences. The divide in pictures of the world is partly located in the observer’s eye.

A classic distinction, emic versus etic cross-cultural research, was originated by Sapir³ and further developed by Pike.⁴ The emic approach holds that attitudinal or behavioural phenomena are expressed in a unique way in each culture. Taken to its extreme, this approach states that no comparisons are possible. The etic approach, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with identifying universals. The difference arises from linguistics where *phonetic* is universal and depicts universal sounds which are common to several languages, and *phonemic* stresses unique sound patterns in languages. In general, research approaches and instruments adapted to each national culture (the emic approach) provide data with greater internal validity than tests applicable to several cultures (the etic approach, or ‘culture-free tests’). But it is at the expense of cross-national comparability and external validity: results are not transposable to other cultural contexts. This is why many researchers try to establish cross-national or cross-cultural equivalence in a way which is inspired by the etic rather than the emic perspective.

Researchers should start with the search for differences if they want to later assess meaningful similarities. This can be done through *thick description*, which Geertz explains in his 1973 paper: ‘the essential task of theory building here is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to generalise across cases but to generalise within them.’⁵ Generalising (i.e., largely ‘forgetting’ about differences in favour of emergent similarities) from *within* cases rather than *across* cases is related to thick description. Thick description is explicitly borrowed by Geertz from the English language philosopher Gilbert Ryle (1968).⁶ The notion of thickness deals with fine-grained accounts, contextualisation, the combination of multiple perspectives, and reflexivity. Language is an instrument to put cultural experience in comparative perspective.⁷ To take a geometrical metaphor: thick description, rather than describing phenomena in a two-dimensional surface, tries to offer a description in a three-dimensional space or, even better, in a multi-dimensional hyperspace. For Geertz, the notion of ‘found in translation’, rather than ‘lost in translation’ is part of thick description.

Table 2.1 highlights different cross-cultural research perspectives that considers the universal/specific aspect of both the subject (the researcher, his/her theories), and the object being studied (the field, the firm, managers or consumers as informants, the country/culture being studied). The *global perspective* is typified by looking at phenomena with the ‘same eyes’, meaning that theories,

underlying models, concepts and views of managers and employees, their motives, and how they behave, are assumed as universal. In the *foreign/imported perspective*, the researcher travels to foreign business contexts with the same eyes and no glasses; with this perspective, there is obviously a risk of myopia. In the *ethnic perspective*, one adds glasses to the same eyes, so that part of what was previously invisible comes into light. The *cultural meaning perspective* requires 'looking with other eyes', that is changing the very instrument of vision; the metaphor suggests the difficulty of the process.

Differences can be in nature. For instance, one might argue that the concept of 'decision making' is a completely different concept (incommensurable) in certain cultures, since the word does not really exist, for example, in Japanese. Differences can also be in degree. The dimension of uncertainty avoidance in Hofstede's study, for example, assumes that national cultures can be scored on a common scaling instrument expressing the degree of tolerance to ambiguity. The researcher's practical question for such concepts is whether they are scalable, ordinaly (rankings of countries/cultures) or cardinaly (scores by countries/cultures). However, uncertainty avoidance has been shown to be the least robust in replications⁸ with national scores varying across studies; and is also the most difficult to define conceptually. Therefore, the search for differences in degree does not preclude an exploration of differences in nature.

Table 2.1 should not be interpreted with the view that a particular cell corresponds to a better perspective than the others. However, each cell displays a strong contrast in researcher perspective. First, the *global perspective*, in its purest form, is rarely found, except when organisations and markets are viewed as truly global and unified. It may make sense for particular classes of business people, such those travelling worldwide, and their families ('the global nomads'). What does the global perspective mean for comparative business research practices? A single questionnaire is used, and only in English, assuming that all respondents understand English either as a native or as a second language; there is no questioning of the equivalence and comparability of the major concepts used in the research across cultural and linguistic contexts. This

Table 2.1 Comparative research strategies

Underlying theories ⇒ Informants/field ↓	Universal (<i>etic</i>)	Specific (<i>emic</i>)
Universal	(1) Global perspective No differences in nature	(2) Ethnic perspective Differences in nature
Specific	(3) Foreign/imported perspective Assumed universality biased by creolisation	(4) Cultural meaning perspective Differences both in degree and nature

may be relevant if respondents are business people who are proficient in English and for countries where English is widely used in everyday living. In this perspective, lead researcher(s) dominate the research process with local collaborators who simply administer the instrument in their own national/cultural area, rather than participate in the research design.

Kotler's *Marketing Management*, in its fifteenth edition in 2016, is a worldwide success which started in the beginning from a *global perspective* and has steadily shifted to a *foreign/imported perspective* by being adapted in many languages and to various national contexts. In the imported perspective, the examples are tailored to the local markets and marketing environments, but the basic theories do not change. It may sometimes, but is not always sufficient to, allow discovery of significant differences in behaviour that require adaptation. For instance, from a global perspective, behavioural intentions models were assumed to be universally applicable: attitudes and expectations of important others influence intentions to perform a behaviour. Some insights were gained from taking an imported perspective when the 'universal' relationships between these variables were examined at a cultural level. For instance, consumers in individualist cultures appeared to be more strongly influenced by attitudes than they were by expectations of important others, while the reverse was true in collectivist cultures.⁹ In this perspective, multiple research instruments can be used, possibly including more qualitative techniques, such as in-depth interviews. Comparability is assumed both *ex-ante* and *ex-post* (see also Chapters 4 and 5). The team of researchers design the research project together; however, the team often has a leading researcher who has a democratic approach to cross-national collaborations.

However, not all theories can be assumed universal. In this case, further insight can be gained from the emic viewpoints, namely the *ethnic perspective* or the *cultural meaning perspective*, which can uncover new constructs and new relationships between these constructs that leads to a better understanding of the behaviour in question. In the ethnic perspective, dominant theories are questioned, but the researcher still looks for similarities and strives for progressive convergence in the nature of the conceptual dimensions across cultures, while assessing differences in degree. This perspective attracts both quantitative and qualitative researchers. For instance, Hirschman¹⁰ challenged researchers' assumptions about American consumers – acting as active information seekers who make personal decisions, which lead to pragmatic goals – in her examination of the primitive aspects of consumption in specific ethnic groups (Blacks, Italians, Wasps [white anglo-saxon protestants], Jews). The ethnic perspective, often uses common instruments that are adapted to each cultural concept and carefully translated to relevant languages (see Chapter 4), while checking for possible inequivalence in concepts, data collection methods, etc.

Finally, the *cultural meaning perspective* corresponds to the view that underlying theories and concepts have to be actively challenged. It is predominantly emic in style and tries to 'stage' research in unique ways, based on unique concepts and practices. Leadership, for instance, can be treated as unique to a particular culture or a phenomenon which shares some common traits cross-culturally.¹¹ The key objective here is to derive emic meaning; singular and specific to each particular context. Local meaning is privileged, which implies that different concepts and different research instruments are used in particular contexts, at the likely expense of cross-national/cultural comparability. However, a team of emic researchers can coordinate by meeting before the research process takes place and combine their findings *ex-post* to the extent that it is possible to do so.

The emic/etic divide is, however, a simplified perspective. Most etic-oriented researchers are still looking for differences, but these differences are in degree, while emic researchers look for differences in nature. Typical questions for etic-oriented researchers are: Is it scalable? Can the constructs be operationalised? Are the differences across countries/cultures measurable on common conceptual dimensions?

Often purportedly cross-cultural research designs use nationality as a surrogate variable of culture. Many such designs are in fact not cross-cultural (see Vaiman and Holden¹² on non-cultural factors as challengers for cultural explanations), although they claim to be; they are simple cross-national designs, providing little if no theoretical indication of how culture causes such differences. Cross-cultural comparative designs are more content oriented, describing values as components of culture, whereas cross-cultural interactive designs, emphasising interaction between managers or organisations from different cultures (e.g., expatriation, culture shock or intercultural business negotiations issues) tend to explain more about the process. There is an obvious complementarity between both types of designs.

2.2 The role of the dominant culture in international business research

To conduct comparative studies, researchers must question the role of a 'dominant culture' especially when the researcher either implicitly or explicitly assumes that one's culture is superior to other cultures in ways of solving business research issues. In fact, there has long been a dominant culture in business research, that of the United States, which many (including non-US researchers) spontaneously consider superior, because it has legitimately dominated the

field over the last 70 years; however, there have been significant challenges from Europe and Asia in recent years. Vaiman and Holden¹³ phrase it as follows 'One country stands out above the rest, namely the US, as the benchmark business culture for not only good practice, but also methodologies for the scientific study of business and management worldwide'. Saying that it is dominant does not imply any negative value judgement. The American domination of management research lies much more in the latent and unavowed feeling of researchers from other countries of being inferior, rather than in the rarely expressed feeling by Americans of being superior. 'Is it because they develop second-class research? In this case, this is fuelled by their US colleagues who either do not read other languages than English or may consider that the dominant and only relevant form of scientific achievement is to publish in their own domestic journals and according to routine established criteria.'¹⁴ Being from a monolingual, English speaking culture can be a somewhat limiting factor in international business research.

Management concepts and practices, although partly originating from Europe, have been developed largely in the United States, and later enthusiastically borrowed and adopted in many countries, because these concepts appeared as powerful tools for developing and controlling businesses. In so doing, the importing cultures have often transformed management concepts and integrated them into their own culture. For instance, the success of the word 'marketing' gave a new image to trade and sales activities in many countries where it had often previously been socially and intellectually devalued. Despite the success and the seemingly general acceptance of English-based business-related vocabulary, many examples indicate that there have been some basic misconceptions,¹⁵ especially in developing countries. For instance, in many countries, business people have a clear lack of understanding as to what the word 'marketing' really means. Either managers do not understand what marketing is all about or, if they do, they tend to believe that it has little relevance to their business. In fact, marketing is still seen in most parts of the world as mere selling, or as advertising and sales promotion. Although 'marketing' has been imported as a word, and even as a sort of slogan, its former cultural roots and its precise meaning have been partly misunderstood.

Most of the books in business studies were borrowed from the United States and then translated directly without much adaptation. Moreover, survey techniques, the underlying concepts and the wording of questions, as well as questionnaire, interview and sampling techniques, were all widely imported. In reality, it was common practice to import the words rather than their whole sense and the social practices involved. The imported nature of management and business concepts and practices is clearly evidenced by the vocabulary, information and reference sources, and the origin of literature on the subject, all of which demarcate it as an area of knowledge. Data, information sources, and

professional consultancy businesses (for auditing, advertising or market consultants, etc.) are mostly of American origin, even though many are not. Last but not least, academic journals and associations are largely based in the United States. Academic journals also exist in many other places (e.g., the United Kingdom, Europe, Canada and Japan), but most of the research literature depicted in the reference section of the published papers is based on American materials. The quantity of US content in the bibliographies of British, German and French reference lists often amounts to as much as 90%.

That there is a dominant culture in business is merely a fact. However, it implies that the researcher has to address the issues of who compares what/whom, for whom, using which theories, and what kind of proofs are relevant? The research design is a compromise between the respective cultures of the researcher, the research field that informs him/her and the research publics who read the report, use the results, evaluate the findings and/or finance the research (Figure 2.1).

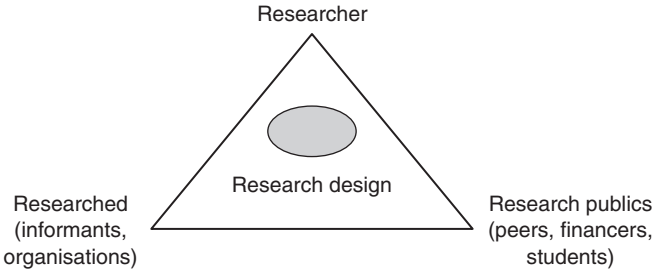


Figure 2.1 Influences on the research design

As Table 2.2 indicates, comparative designs result from the researcher’s more or less conscious choices, from opportunities and constraints related to the researched field (e.g., the cultural distance between researchers and their informants) and from the underlying theories which must fit the intellectual style of the clients in the research, that is, anonymous reviewers in a peer review process, or evaluators of a research project.

Researchers who undertake cross-national or cross-cultural comparisons are personally involved in the research and in the researched. Previous knowledge of the cultural area being studied is often a factor in the choice of a culturally familiar field of research. Researchers often want to explain their own cultural context and act as ‘cultural mediators’ in the area of academia. Such is the case of comparative management researchers who study the Arabic/Muslim style of management and leadership.¹⁶ Sympathy between researchers from different

Table 2.2 Cultural influences on research design

	Theories (World views/languages/ frames of reference/codes/ instruments)	Data (Facts/figures/ information/ evidence/ statistics)	Proofs (Hypothesis testing/ applicability)
Researcher	Home-country 'theories' versus dominant theories	Culturally accepted images of reality	Self-confirmation
Researched	Field – host country world views	Respondents' own views	Sympathy/ relationships
Research Publics	Colleagues' own knowledge, paradigms, and research methods	Research reports: theses, articles, books, reports	Reviews/peer evaluations /readers

cultures also helps them form a cross-border 'joint-venture' research project. Such relationships as those between ex-PhD students and their former advisor/supervisor who have developed a common understanding, are key assets in comparative management research.

2.3 The researcher as comparison base

The issue of ethnocentrism in international business research is an important one. Since a cultural conditioning is largely unconscious, it is important to be aware that the researcher's own background creates the real 'starting point' for the research process, implicitly or explicitly. Researchers in international business have to therefore address issues of ethnocentrism, stereotyping and prejudices and question their own motivation to research cross-nationally.

2.3.1 Researcher ethnocentrism and self-reference criteria

The concept of ethnocentrism was first introduced by Sumner¹⁷ over a century ago, to distinguish between *in-groups* (those groups with which an individual identifies) and *out-groups* (those regarded as antithetical to the *in-group*). Sumner defined ethnocentrism as a tendency for people to perceive their own group as the centre and to scale and rate out-groups with reference to their own group. In its most extreme form, ethnocentrism relates to beliefs about the superiority of ones' own culture, which may lead to disinterest in and even contempt for the culture of other groups.¹⁸ In a more mild form, ethnocentrism has been used to describe self-referencing, which is the natural tendency to spontaneously refer to the symbols, values and ways of thinking of one's own ethnic or national group; the in-group. The automatic and unconscious tendency to refer to one's own thought framework is mainly tied to national culture, which people do not

generally choose but which allows them to interpret situations, evaluate people, communicate, negotiate, or decide.

Self-referencing is somewhat inevitable. Obeying the norms of one's culture is almost unconscious and the cost of adopting the cultural demeanour of the environment in which one has been raised *seems* minimal because the costs incurred in their rearing, socialisation and education are implicitly considered by accultured adults as *sunk costs*. On the other hand, the understanding and adoption of the traits of another culture are generally perceived as costly, as evidenced by the difficulties encountered by immigrants.

Ethnocentric self-referencing is not a cognitive limitation; it is also cognitive empowerment in the source culture. Multinational companies deliberately keep cultural control by maintaining an emphasis on the home language in the overseas location. Underlying this is the tough issue of who adapts to whom when economic and intellectual dominance play a key role.

Ethnocentric self-referencing tendencies can be reduced or eliminated with some effort. Lee¹⁹ suggests the following steps in order to try to correct the decisional bias related to self-referencing, when dealing with international operations:

1. Define the problem or the objectives, as would be done according to the customs, behavioural standards and ways of thinking of the decision maker's country.
2. Similarly, define the problem or the objectives as would be done according to the customs, behavioural standards and ways of thinking of the foreign country.
3. Isolate the influence of the self-reference criterion on the problem, and identify the extent to which it complicates the decision-making problem.
4. Redefine the problem (and often the objectives) without the bias related to the self-reference criterion and then find the solutions and make decisions that fit with the cultural context of the foreign market.

The first two points are illustrated in the following situation. People are standing in line at an amusement park, such as Disneyland, where there are some very popular attractions. In the original context in the US, respect for queues is strong. They are usually well organised and there are even tangible indications for this (e.g., yellow lines on the ground indicating where people should stop to queue, tape or bars that are visible to help form queues). In the foreign context of France, where there is a developed sense of 'free-for-all' and less of a habit of organised queues (combined with a reluctance towards anything that seems too socially structured), discipline with respect to queues cannot be assumed. If Americans in France rely on their self-referencing criteria, they are likely to become rapidly frustrated. However, if they redefine the problem and objectives outside of their self-reference, they may be better placed to find an amicable solution to overcome the problem. However, this depiction of self-referencing includes some degree of naivety, as it assumes that a culture's mysteries can be easily understood.

2.3.2 Stereotypes and self shock

International, comparative business research can induce culture shocks in the researcher. A early example of such a shock is given by Clifford Geertz,²⁰ when he quotes a long passage from a nineteenth-century Danish trader, L. V. Helms, who accurately reports the ritual of the cremation of a dead man and his three (living) widows in India. Helms very carefully describes the background to the incident, which takes place in India around 1850. He is horrified by the ritual, amazed by the absence of reaction of the crowd attending the event and stunned by the lack of fear of the three women who throw themselves alive into the flames. Geertz emphasises the relations of culture to moral imagination: what is seen as barbarous by one culture is experienced as completely normal by another. Implicitly researchers always compare and confront their own views to the foreign reality they are observing. This is why traditional international business research is unknowingly comparative.

Stereotypes are important constructs in the researcher–research field relationship. Stereotypes represent a useful simplification, but their function of reducing and conserving differences can make them dangerous. Stereotypes have both a cognitive function and an emotional function of self-defence against a difference that creates anxiety. It seems easier to stick to one’s own values and to force foreigners to change their views than to decentre oneself, that is, to leave one’s system of reference and put oneself in the place of the other.

Stereotypes are often used to capture the salient traits of a ‘foreign’ national character; however, they are seldom very accurate, as Soutar and colleagues²¹ found when they asked experienced Australian and Japanese international business people to estimate the most important values of their own culture, as well as those of other culture. For instance, Japanese business people reported that their relationships with others was the most important value listed, whereas Australian business people felt this was much less important to the Japanese than other values, such as being well respected, having a sense of belonging, and security.²²

Self shock extends the concept of culture shock, which is considered to be a reaction to difference, to a reaction to differences with and within the self.²³ When people from different cultures meet, such as expatriate managers meeting local executives or international sellers meeting local buyers, the interaction can create uncertainty. At first it may seem that the basic problem is simply reducing uncertainty by ‘getting to know the other’, but as Adler²⁴ describes, there is in fact a ‘progressive unfolding of the self’ in an intercultural encounter, which can be attributed to ‘a set of intensive and evocative situations in which the individual perceives and experiences other people in a distinctly new manner and, as a consequence, experiences new facets and dimensions of existence’. Experiencing how others actually are may be somewhat destabilising: identity

confusion is a typical feature of culture shock. The cross-cultural researcher is therefore constantly confronted with issues in 'self-research', that is, enquiring into one's own prejudices, mindset and reference frame, which may be a disturbing task.

2.3.3 Variation in intellectual style across cultures

Many authors have noted distinct approaches to business research. Whether they speak about different 'intellectual traditions' or different 'research approaches', they highlight differences in the way issues are addressed, the role of theory is assigned, and the role data plays in the whole process. Researchers, tend to stick spontaneously to the values and representations of their national or disciplinary cultural grouping. Those who wish to enlarge their world view by freeing themselves, at least partially, from the mental programmes brought to them by culture, risk being misunderstood. By trying to escape their cultural programming, such people may be resented as exhibiting a lack of humility in setting themselves apart from the community. Furthermore, relatively homogeneous human groups, including academics belonging to scientific associations, organising conferences and running journals, may feel threatened when members of the group overstep the threshold of non-conformism.

Indeed our relation to the real world is heavily filtered by a series of convergent factors:

- our perceptual apparatus is partly formed by our culture;
- we implicitly privilege certain categories of facts *lato sensu* (emotions, thoughts, actions and/or situations) and interpret them based on our particular cultural background;
- the truthfulness of these facts is based on a cultural consensus about their being a part of reality;
- even when facts have been established as true, there still remain different readings and interpretations of them, depending on culture-based values and social representations.

Culture, among other factors, appears to influence the investigation methods and the criteria of good management research and good researchers. People may favour either *actual/empirical* reality, that is, the ways in which we experience reality here and now (or the way it is revealed by empirical science), or *potential reality*, that is, reality based on interpretation, speculation and imagination. Galtung²⁵ uses the distinction between actual reality and potential reality to contrast what he calls the 'intellectual styles' of four important cultural groups: the 'Gallic' (prototype: the French), the 'Teutonic' (prototype: the Germans), the Saxonian (prototype: the English and the Americans) and the 'Nipponic' (prototype: the Japanese and most generally Far East Asians).

Saxons prefer to look for facts and evidence which results in factual accuracy in abundance. As Galtung states when he describes the intellectual style of Anglo-Americans:

... data unite, theories divide. There are clear, relatively explicit canons for establishing what constitutes a valid fact and what does not; the corresponding canons in connection with theories are more vague.... One might now complete the picture of the Saxon intellectual style by emphasising its weak point: not very strong on theory formation, and not on paradigm awareness.²⁶

To the 'Teutonic' and the 'Gallic', the US (Saxonic) research orientation sometimes appears excessively data driven. Galtung contrasts the Saxonic style with the Teutonic and Gallic styles, which place theoretical arguments at the centre of their intellectual process.²⁷ Data and facts are there to illustrate what is said rather than to demonstrate it. However, Teutonic and Gallic intellectual styles do differ in the role that is assigned to words and discourse. The Teutonic ideal is that of the ineluctability of true reasoning *Gedankennotwendigkeit*, that is, the perfection of concepts and the indisputability of their mental articulation. The German language is probably the richest in the world for abstract words. It favours pure conceptual thinking. The construction of *Gedankennotwendigkeit* is itself an illustration of this: *denken* means 'to think', *Gedanken* are 'thoughts'; *Not* means 'necessity', *wenden* is 'to turn', *-keit* is a suffix which abstracts the whole as 'the state of being'. As a result of this mindgame, *Gedankennotwendigkeit* is something like 'the state of being turned into necessary (unavoidable, pure) thoughts'. The Gallic style is less preoccupied with deduction and intellectual construction. It is directed more towards the use of the persuasive strength of words and speeches in an aesthetically perfect way (*élégance*). Words have an inherent power to convince. They may create *potential reality*.

Finally the Nipponic intellectual style, imbued with Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist philosophies, favours a more modest, global and provisional approach. Thinking and knowledge are conceived of as being in a temporary state, open to alteration. 'The Japanese rarely pronounce absolute, categorical statements in daily discourse; they prefer vagueness even about trivial matters ... because clear statements have a ring of immodesty, of being judgements of reality'.²⁸

2.4 The issue of language in international business research

Cross-cultural business research tends to borrow more from psychology than from language studies and linguistics,²⁹ questionnaires and instruments, clients or research evaluators. The resulting Tower of Babel is often simplified by the use of English as International Language (EIL), or by means of translation as a

cross-language comparison process supposed to lead to similar meaning, leaving aside idiosyncrasies and irreducible differences. However, the hope of doing language-free cross-cultural research is futile. Comparing across cultures, without awareness of language always results in biased and impoverished findings. At least three elements in language have an influence on the research process:

- words in as much as they signal specific meaning;
- words, as they are assembled in sentences and text through grammar and syntax, and work as codes that must in some way be 'translated' into other codes, when the researcher and the 'researched' do not share the same linguistic background;
- language, in general, provides the speaker with a particular world view.

2.4.1 The Whorfian hypothesis

Language tends to simultaneously reflect and shape our world views. It contains pre-shaped images of the real world which partly condition our experiences and perceptions. The first proponent of the idea that language has a decisive influence on culture was the linguist Edward Sapir. Language creates categories in our minds, which in turn directly influence the things we judge to be similar and those which *deserve* to be differentiated. It is our *Weltanschauung* that will be determined: our way of observing, of describing, of interacting and finally the way in which we construct our reality. Sapir writes:

The fact of the matter is that the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar as to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.³⁰

The linguist and anthropologist Benjamin Lee Whorf developed and extended Sapir's hypothesis, which contends that the structure of language has a significant influence on perception and categorisation. However, the argument that language alone is responsible for these differences is largely rejected by most linguists. For example, the gender given to words is not necessarily indicative of a particular cultural meaning (e.g., the gender of the earth, the sun and the moon, or of vices and virtues); for most it often seems to reflect an arbitrary choice. There is a growing body of research that indicates that culture, rather than language alone, is responsible for differences in categorisation. For instance, regardless of the language in which they were asked, bilingual Chinese categorised objects according to their *relationship* more often than European Americans, who more often categorised the same objects according to their category membership.³¹

The vocabulary of time reveals much about the linkage between language and cultural representations. For those who have doubts about the existence of

differences in cultural representations of time that are revealed, conveyed and reproduced by language, the example of the English (US) word 'deadline' is illustrative. A quick translation into French would give 'échéance [temporelle]' or 'délai de rigueur', but would not render the intensity of this word. Taken literally, it seems to suggest something like 'beyond this [temporal] line, you will [there is a danger of] die [dying]'. It therefore gives a genuine notion of urgency to what was originally a very abstract notion (a point which has been agreed upon on a line of time). The word deadline is used in French by many businesspeople as such (un deadline), even though it is not in the official dictionary, because it conveys a typically Anglo-American sense of urgency that French people do not find in their own language.

Language also reflects (and pre-shapes) how people envision the future. In some African languages (Kamba and Kikuyu), there are three future tenses which express (1) action in two to six months; (2) action that will take place immediately; (3) action 'in the foreseeable future, after this or that event'. Commenting on the uses of these African tenses, M'biti demonstrates how coherence and sophistication in the accurate use of the near future, are important to African people.

You have these tenses before you: just try to imagine the tense into which you would translate passages of the New Testament concerning the Parousia of Our Lord Jesus Christ, or how you would teach eschatology... If you use tense no. 1, you are speaking about something that will take place in the next two to six months, or in any case within two years at most. If you use no. 2, you are referring to something that will take place in the immediate future, and if it does not take place you are exposed as a liar in people's eyes. Should you use no. 3 you are telling people that the event concerned will definitely take place, but when something else has happened first. In all these tenses, the event must be very near to the present moment: if, however, it lies in the far distant future – beyond the two-year limit – you are neither understood nor taken seriously.³²

Levine, researching on Brazilian versus US perceptions of time, highlights the way concepts of punctuality are reflected in the language. He takes the example of the translation from English to Portuguese in a questionnaire containing the verb 'to wait':

Several of our questions were concerned with how long the respondent would *wait* for someone to arrive versus when they *hoped* the person would arrive versus when they actually *expected* the person would come. Unfortunately for us, it turns out that the term *to wait*, *to hope* and *to expect* are all typically translated as the single verb *esperar* in Portuguese. In many ways our translation difficulties taught us more about Brazilian-Anglo differences in time conception than did the subjects' answers to the questions.³³

There is a sort of continuum across languages in the accuracy of describing the waiting phenomenon (a fundamental issue in time experience!). French, which

lies somewhere between English and Portuguese in terms of temporal accuracy, uses two words: *attendre* (to wait) and *espérer* (to hope). To expect has no direct equivalent in French and must be translated by a lengthy circumlocution (*compter sur l'arrivée de*).

2.4.2 Languages in relation to actions, thoughts, and emotions

Another example of the language–culture link is the Anglo-American way of dealing with action, especially in business. There is a rich vocabulary to be used, which is often difficult to translate into many other languages, if real equivalence of meaning is sought. The words might include, for instance: *problem solving, issue, matter of fact, down to earth, (empirical) evidence, to complete, to achieve, feedback, to perform, achievement, individual, data, to check, to plan, deadline, cognitive, emotional, successful*. Even such an elementary word as *fact* is demanding: in English it must be an *established* piece of reality; its French equivalent, *fait*, is less demanding in terms of unanimously agreed-upon reality (*les faits peuvent être discutés*, corresponding to a spirit of the facts being ‘challenged’ rather than just discussed); in German, a fact may be translated by *Tatsache, Wirklichkeit, Wahrheit*, or *Tat* – it can mean equally a *reality, a truth, or an action*.

When translating, the difficulties extend far beyond the pure lexical and grammatical issues: they are *cultural translation* difficulties, corresponding to what is often called the spirit of a language (in French, *Le génie de la langue*). Far from being merely an inter-linked chain of words, a language contains a series of stands taken on the nature of our relationship to reality. Let us compare, for instance, how the three most important western European languages express ideas, facts, and moods. One can tentatively suggest that German is stronger than English in the expression of abstractions. In German, word endings such as *-heit, -keit, -ung, -schaft, -tum, -nis*, etc. allow the ‘abstractification’ of concrete notions. English is not only less able to express pure concepts, it is also less prone to do so. English is more action- and more outward-oriented, with a view that data-orientation and facts-based approaches allow a separation between feelings (inner) and actions (directed toward the outside). French expresses inner states more accurately, with an emphasis on emotions rather than pure thoughts, describing the relationships between the self and others with an underlying view that any action is related to emotions and affectivity. Stereotypically, we could say that English is predominantly a language of action, French a language of emotions, and German a language of thoughts. The same languages can be slightly different in other nations, leading to miscommunication. For instance, the German language is slightly different in spelling in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. The same holds for Dutch in the Netherlands and in Flanders in Belgium; some similar words may have a different meaning though: in spoken language in Flanders people may use ‘tas’ for a

cup (in addition to the word 'kop'). A 'tas' in the Netherlands refers to a bag, a 'kop' is a cup; the word 'tas' is not used in two different meanings. Translations into Dutch therefore need to be checked in both the Netherlands and Flanders.

Language also reflects status, hierarchy and a vision of what constitutes appropriate social relationships. The way to address other people is another example of how language reflects social hierarchy. There is only one word used in English for addressing other people, 'you' most often with the first name; this is considered as reflecting strong assumptions about equality and a preference for informality. By contrast, the French often use the formal *vous* for people they do not know very well and people of higher status, while the informal *tu* is reserved for family and friends. Thus, the French are reputed to be more formal. The Germans use *du* (second person singular) in informal and personal settings and *Sie* (third person plural) in formal address. The Germans, like the Spaniards have three forms of address: while the second person plural (*ihr*) has been lost in practice in German, it remains in Spanish. In fact, a closer look at these forms shows that the English 'you' was not originally a second person singular, which was 'thou' in old English (as in Shakespeare's plays), but the more polite second person plural. That means that the only address kept in English is based on an assumption of respect and formality and not on the everyday and less formal form of 'thou.' In fact, the assumed informality of Anglo interaction, advocated by many native English speakers, is difficult to grasp for a Latin. In people being called by their first name and together with 'you', the Latin sees a different kind of formalism rather than true informality. Language reflects quite complex assumptions about equality between people. The French address *vous* reflects the strong emphasis on hierarchical and status differences in French society, but it can be nuanced, adding for instance *Monsieur* (formal *vous*) or simply the first name (informal *vous*). It is not simply because they have long used the polite form that the French have a fairly hierarchical society; the language context contributes to constantly reframing culture-bound assumptions about hierarchy in French society.

2.4.3 Consequences of the Whorfian hypothesis for translation

The first consequence of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis is that people from different cultures not only communicate in different ways, but also perceive, categorise, and construct their realities differently. This therefore supposes a 'state of alert' in communication, a readiness to accept that words, even when translated well, offer only an illusion of sharing in the same vision of reality. As many foreign words as possible should be kept in their original form, in order to recognise culturally unique concepts in the native language. Questioning translators, informants or foreign research associates about meaning in the local cultural context will allow areas of shared meaning to be identified. For instance, an

English term such as ‘Act of God’ can be (poorly) translated through Google Translate as ‘acte de Dieu’, when in fact the (apparent) French equivalent is *Force majeure*. *Force majeure*, a common clause in contracts essentially frees both parties from liability or obligation when an extraordinary event or circumstance beyond the control of the parties prevents one or both parties from fulfilling their obligations under the contract. However, *Force Majeure* is not a strict equivalent of *Act of God*, because its coverage is larger than *Act of God*, *Force majeure* is therefore used in French in English and US contracts.

An unfortunate consequence of the Whorf–Sapir hypothesis is that linguistic ethnocentrism is largely inevitable. Famous anthropologists belonged to the cultures of their publishers and readers, not to the cultures they observed. The same holds true for area specialists. A cultural outsider makes more objective observations than a cultural and linguistic insider in reporting those observations; however, as provocative as it may seem, it is more important to be understood than to understand. What is said by genuine cultural insiders is often difficult to understand unless their words have in some way been recalibrated in the linguistic/cultural background of the readers, which means a lot more than simple translation.

Fortunately, international business researchers are not required to have full command of several foreign languages to be linguistically astute. What is important is the ability to catch what is unique in the structure of foreign languages and word, which does not require fluency in reading and speaking. Consulting a basic grammar book and paying attention to specific words are a good start. Very often words are also borrowed, to create hybrid languages, such as Chinglish and Japlish that combines words from both languages to create a new meaning. It is sometimes important to keep original words as they are, understand meaningful elements in the grammar (such as gender, tenses, sentence construction etc.), and try to behave as ‘explorers’ of the meanings and world views expressed by different languages.

2.4.4 Translation equivalence: questionnaires, checklists and briefings

Three metaphors related to translation have been used by Janssens, Lambert, and Steyaert³⁴ to describe language strategies in international companies, which also apply to cross-cultural business research. The first avenue, dominant in cross-cultural business research, is the ‘mechanical’ use of back-translation to ensure equivalence with a strong emphasis on the source, rather than the target, text. Most cross-cultural business research is concerned with establishing full invariance of research instruments. This is inspired by a willingness to make data fully comparable across cultures. This is a purely etic perspective. It is based on universalist assumptions, a strictly instrumental view of language, and a

mechanical approach based on back-translation.³⁵ This approach is often at the expense of unique cultural meaning. Some contributions convincingly demonstrate that the mere borrowing of research instruments with mechanical back-translation ends up masking significant cross-national differences.³⁶ As emphasised by Polsa,³⁷ conceptual non-equivalence across languages, cultures, and nations may be a source of unexpected findings leading to the discovery of new dimensions in established constructs.

The second approach, the cultural perspective on translation, builds on different underlying assumptions regarding language and culture, emphasising both language diversity and linguistic relativity. Rather than 'walking through dictionaries'³⁸ like the mechanical perspective, the cultural perspective on translation considers deviation from the source text not as a 'mistake' but rather as a 'window' opening onto the target language and culture. Translation is considered a cultural, rather than technical, message transmission process, resulting in active inscription into the new context. It is accepted that different texts may be created through each translation.³⁹

The third perspective on translation is political and considers that languages may compete against each other to express meaning. It emphasises the power games between different languages to express values, to legitimise attitudes, behaviours, and shared practices. In cross-cultural business research, the political perspective is meaningful, as it concerns the forms of cross-national research collaboration, the equality versus inequality in cross-national research teams, and the opportunity given to local researchers and informants to express their views on research instruments.

Translation equivalence may be divided into the following subcategories: lexical equivalence, idiomatic equivalence, grammatical-syntactical equivalence and experiential equivalence.⁴⁰ Lexical equivalence is provided by dictionaries. For instance, the English adjective 'warm' translates into the French '*chaud*'. The issue of idiomatic equivalence arises when translating a sentence such as 'it's warm': French has two expressions, either *il fait chaud* (literally, 'it makes warm' meaning 'it's warm (today)') or *c'est chaud* (meaning 'it (this object) is warm'). An idiom is a linguistic usage that is natural to native speakers. Idioms are most often non equivalent. For instance, the English present progressive (i.e., I am *doing*) has no equivalent in French, except *je suis en train de...* which is highly colloquial.

Grammatical-syntactical equivalence deals with how words are ordered, sentences are constructed and meaning is expressed in a language. English generally proceeds in an active way, starting by the subject followed by the verb and then the complement, avoiding abstractions, as well as convoluted sentences. Many languages, including German and French start by explaining the circumstances in relative clauses, before they proceed into the action. This results in complex sentences, which start with relative clauses based on when, where, even though,

although, and so on. The Japanese language has a quite different word order compared to western languages since verbs go at the end of the sentence.

Experiential equivalence is about what words and sentences mean for people in their everyday experience. Referring back to *chaud*, it translates into two English words 'warm' and 'hot': the French do not experience 'warmth' with two concepts as the English, the Germans and many others do. Similarly, the special experience of coldness expressed in the word 'chilly' cannot be adequately rendered in French. Translated terms must refer to real items and real experiences, which are familiar in the source as well as the target cultures. Expressions such as 'dual career couple', or 'decision making', or even 'strategic plan' may come across experiential equivalence dilemmas.

Another example of experiential non-equivalence is apparent in the Japanese numbering system which reflects a special experience of counting, where the numbers cannot be fully abstracted from the object being counted. Chinese is similar to Japanese in this respect. Most often, the Japanese add a particle indicating which objects are counted. *Nin* for instance is used to count human beings: *yo-nin* is four (persons). *Hiki* is used for counting animals, except birds for which *wa* is used (meaning 'feather'), *satsu* for books, *hon* for round and long objects, *mai* for flat things such as a sheet of paper, textiles, coins, etc., and *hai* for cups and bowls, and liquid containers in general.

2.5 Language as a tool for the discovery of potential meaning

The dominant position of the English language in business and international trade must be the starting point of a discussion about language as a tool for the discovery of cultural meaning. It is also a fantastic avenue for deconstruction. The special qualities of English – fairly simple from a grammatical point of view, precise, action and facts oriented – make it an ideal language for business, in fact the ideal language, because there is no other competitor for worldwide language leadership. It is not by chance that English has become the true universal language of business. It is built mostly on the merger of a Latin language, French, and a Germanic language, spoken by the English before the Norman Conquest. However, the constant recourse to English as *lingua franca* tends to blur differences across cultural contexts.

In considering English as the *lingua franca* for business research (EIL stands for English as an International Language), it is essential to differentiate between native and non-native Anglophones.⁴¹ Non-native English-speaking researchers often have to learn English and one or two other languages. For instance, the Swedes, Finns, Danes and Norwegians often speak three or four foreign languages: English, another Nordic language, and French, German or Spanish. The situation

is very different for native Anglophones. Taking Australia as an example, it is a vast, linguistically homogeneous country where almost everyone speaks English. Australia is also geographically remote. The major city of Melbourne is around 3200 km from the nearest major non-English-speaking population centre (in Papua New Guinea). In Australia, it is not necessary to learn foreign languages, whereas in Europe most large cities are located less than 330 km from a foreign-speaking region and learning one or more foreign languages is a real asset. Even in English speaking countries with large second language communities, such as the US, which is now the fourth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world, most Americans do not feel they have to learn Spanish. Rather, Hispanics have more need to learn English.

Moreover, learning foreign languages is asymmetrical in terms of effort; a westerner learning Chinese or Japanese has to master the characters, which implies a much larger effort than for the Japanese or Chinese to learn the Roman alphabet with its 26 phonetic characters. The *gaijin* (non-Japanese) has to learn two syllabaries of about one hundred characters each (*hiragana* and *katakana*, phonetic symbols) and about 1850 *kanjis* (ideographic symbols). Lastly, Americans easily find English speakers during their travels, they can count on their foreign partners to speak English, and they are tolerant towards the mistakes of their non-native counterparts.

Understandably, therefore, the impact of language differences has been systematically underestimated in international business research because of a single bias in Anglo-American culture. Most international business literature does not include a single fully foreign reference, that is, a foreign author in a foreign language. Foreign authors, when translated, will not be read in their original linguistic context and when not translated into English will not be considered. However, this regrettable situation also results from practical reasons for maintaining language homogeneity in sources, namely that the reader would not be able either to find or read references in foreign languages.

What is unfortunate however, is that native English speakers are at a disadvantage in the long term, although it may appear to be the exact contrary over the short term. The main disadvantage for them is that they cannot grasp the features of a foreign language in terms of world view and communication style. Many native English speakers cannot imagine what it implies for their foreign respondents or research associates to express their thoughts in English with limited proficiency unless the native English researchers have themselves tried to learn and speak a foreign language. Thus native English speakers have to develop an awareness of language barriers. The message to be conveyed cannot be simply and plainly to learn foreign languages. There is a difference between understanding and speaking a foreign language and grasping the consequences of languages being different. Management researchers do not need to be multi-lingual, but rather they need to have an in-depth awareness of what language differences imply.

On the other hand, many foreign researchers or informants who are non-native English speakers, although they seem to have a good command of English, still hold the kind of world view shaped by their native language. They may be somewhat misleading people in comparisons groups; looking quite the same, while being fairly different. In addition to their different mindset, they may be more proficient in oral than written communication, which may cause problems in discussing the written details of research or when writing for publication.

2.5.1 Language: a window on world views

There is a definite need to use language beyond the simple need to reach equivalence between business concepts expressed in different languages.⁴² How languages other than English try to express responses to common problems can be contrasted by the mean of *untranslation*,⁴³ that is, avoiding translation when the meaning would be fundamentally altered by the translation process (and keeping the original word or expression in the source language) or translation when the meaning is only slightly altered (and keep note of the meaning lost or distorted). The Italian proverb *traduttore traditore* (translator traitor) contains a moral and a pragmatic message: it is better to adopt a form of sophisticated honesty and try to uncover the meaning lost in the translation process. The objective of *untranslation* is not to search for immediately applicable, practical solutions in terms of just finding the – supposedly – right translation. The benefits to be gained from *untranslation* are indirect and take time to be reaped. They consist basically in an increased understanding, a profound rather than superficial knowledge of why other people behave and interact differently in situations which are largely similar.

If we start from a metaphor of *mise en scène*, language may be seen as staging the scenario or scripts of our lives: individuals and groups, as carriers of culture, are players and they have to learn their text by heart before the dress rehearsal. Culture indicates the stage setting as well as, through language, a shared text, composed of scenes and acts, and it explains to the players the ways in which scenes begin as well as end. Culture stages people, because they have learned their roles, and people are staged by cultures because individual roles fit together in the whole theatre piece. That is why intercultural communication is not an easy task. If language was strictly about differences in words, there would be no or little differences, and in some rare cases this may be the true. We simply do not act in the same plays.

Language is especially useful to investigate conceptual and functional equivalence and hence instrument equivalence. It allows the generation of insights into possible differences which can be progressively verified. Meaning differentials can be investigated across languages for apparently similar words and utterances in the following areas:

1. Multiple meanings of a word.
2. Central, most important meaning (modal meaning).
3. Frequency of use of certain words.
4. Latent value judgements put on words, positive and/or negative, and in which context; pejorative meanings indicate a normative orientation.
5. Meaning subtleties: context of use of words and experiential aspect (for this, insert individual words in sentences which are culturally typical).
6. Idiomatic expressions.
7. Sometimes even phonology can be useful because it may be suggestive.
8. The study of grammar can be enlightening because it expresses a relationship to rules and exceptions, simplicity, and formalism, tenses and time orientations, prepositions and space orientation, active and passive modes.
9. Etymology: looking at the origins and roots of words can also provide insights.

Finally, metalinguistic aspects, such as the use of rhetoric, silence, conversational style, overlapping, body gestures accompanying language activities, are more difficult to investigate, but they are no less important. However, language proficiency is by no means a necessary condition for being able to deconstruct world views through linguistic investigation.

A practical solution for investigating world views, as they are reflected by language is to interview native speakers, local collaborators and informants, observe, discuss with them, check meaning differentials and, if possible, try to speak their language even modestly. Words often have multiple meanings and it is easy to discover in dictionaries meanings which are in fact rarely used. This testifies to the fact that world views have a large degree of intersection, especially among European languages. However, the dominant usage of a word and the special way of assembling words into specific sentences does singularise what in pure dictionary terms seemed at first much alike.

Glen Fisher,⁴⁴ a distinguished scholar in the field of intercultural relations, recounted a conversation with a Latin American friend about the words used in English and Spanish for business relations. His friend first remarked that in English the word 'business' is positive. It connotes the fact of being 'busy' and emphasises doing things. Expressions such as 'getting down to business' denote people who have a responsible concern for their work. Fisher further explains that:

In Spanish the word is 'negocio' ... The key is the 'ocio' part of the word, which connotes leisure, serenity, time to enjoy and contemplate as the preferred human condition and circumstance. But when harsh reality forces one from one's 'ocio,' when it is negated, then one has to attend to 'negocio.' The subjective meaning is obviously much less positive than in English ... It is the subjective meaning of words

and expressions that needs to be captured. Time spent exploring why a given utterance does not translate well may be more productive for the one who is actually trying to communicate than concentration on technical excellence.⁴⁵

A translator can be technically skilled enough to find the very nearest equivalent in the target language. This requires a high level of linguistic competence and a profound knowledge of both source and target language. However, the whole process may blur meaning differences because lexically equivalent words do not have exactly the same experiential meaning in the target as in the source language. If hidden, the meaning differential cannot be understood by the researcher, who loses valuable insights. Language both shapes and reflects our world views. Words and expressions reflect unique experiences and patterns of thought and action that are shared by members of a particular culture when they have a common language. The meaning of these words and expressions informs us about differences, whereas translation tries to find a similar meaning across languages, or in some way to rebuild it. When translation fails to establish meaning equivalence, we are in front of something unique, worth being understood. That is why it is worth exploring why a given utterance does not translate well and it may be dangerous to hide it by 'technical excellence'. Let us now turn to some examples.

2.5.2 Flexibility vs. structure and rules in organisational life

A French word, *se débrouiller*, is quite often used to explain that people 'manage' as in 'you will have to manage it on your own'; in French, *se débrouiller* refers to a form of personal flexibility. This emphasis on flexibility refers to quite typical situations in a high power distance and fairly bureaucratic society where people, more often than not, have to achieve while facing multiple obstacles and being given poor resources. *Se débrouiller*, and the alternative terms often used (*débrouillardise, système D, s'en sortir, faire avec*) are in general fairly positive. There is, at least, no negative value judgement. The German equivalent is a colloquial word, *sich durchwursteln*, something like to 'sausage (*wurst*) oneself through', which is negatively loaded, while the official translation (*sich zu helfen wissen*, 'to know how to help oneself') is very rarely used. Some English-German dictionaries do not even mention the word *durchwursteln*, because, although both the English and German speaking cultures know this kind of opportunistic behaviour it is neither familiar enough nor positively valued by either culture.

In the German society the rules are made to be respected, whereas in French society they are made to be explored. The French often explore the rule in order to test whether it is meant seriously. A questionnaire devised by Geert Hofstede to investigate 'business goals', was translated and administered in France by

Jean-Claude. He proposed translating 'staying within the law' to *ne pas enfreindre la loi* (that is, 'not trespass the law'). This kind of double negative expresses the dynamic of the respect of rules for the French much better than the simple positive expression used in the original English questionnaire.

2.5.3 Communication styles in intercultural business interactions

Much cross-cultural and intercultural literature mentions and sometimes investigates communication misunderstandings across cultures. A framework for explaining these misunderstandings is that of Edward Hall,⁴⁶ contrasting high context/implicit messages (prototypes: Japanese or Middle Eastern cultures) and low context/explicit messages cultures (prototypes: US or Northern European cultures). However, this framework is language free: *it works as if language never mattered*. A quick look at a book of Japanese grammar reveals that in Japanese there are no articles either definite or indefinite. *Hon*, for instance, means either 'the book', 'a book', 'the books' or 'books'. When the Japanese want to express their thoughts, they cannot communicate without taking cues from the context: *what is said explicitly is simply not enough*. The correspondence between high context communication and the general structure of a language is a feature of the Japanese language. For instance, in Japanese:

1. A predicate always comes at the end of a sentence (meaning that if I say 'I study Japanese at the College of Arts of the University of Nagoya', 'study' will come at the very end of the Japanese sentence).
2. A verb has no ending to indicate person or number.
3. There is no article used with nouns in most cases.
4. One and the same form of a noun may mean both the singular and the plural form.
5. The grammatical case of a noun or pronoun is indicated by means of various particles occurring after the noun or pronoun.
6. Subject and object are often omitted if they are understood from the context.

If we add that there are several plain and polite styles in Japanese and that, in daily conversation, either of them may be used depending on the situation, the role of the context in Japanese appears to be considerable. The language basically 'under-signifies' what the speakers are willing to say, providing insufficient linguistic cues for the listener to understand the message only on a purely digital basis. The listener must therefore 'reconstruct' the relevant meaning by searching for additional explanatory cues such as: Who speaks? What did he say previously? How does s/he say it? Where is it said?

Watashi no hon (my book) will be interpreted as the book authored by the speaker (if s/he has already published books) or the book that somebody has in

his hands if it takes place in a library, etc. When the Japanese want to express their thoughts they refer constantly to the context to interpret the inexplicit aspect of messages. As a consequence, they are accustomed to guessing what others say in a fairly sophisticated mental process where they constantly have to search for meaning rather than find it nicely packaged in a full phrase. This high context sophistication exists to a certain extent in most languages when they are spoken in their colloquial form whereby people 'save' words and use contextual cues. This may explain also why Japanese are good 'listeners' compared to most westerners.

2.5.4 Specific words revealing unique concepts

A good example of such unique words is the Japanese word *ningensei*, the importance of which is emphasised by Goldman.⁴⁷ *Ningensei* literally translates into an all encompassing and overriding concern and prioritising of 'humanity' or *human beingness*. According to Japanese specialists of international marketing negotiations:

The North American and UK negotiators failed to communicate *ningensei* at the first table meeting. Rushing into bottom lines and demanding quick decisions on the pending contract they also overlooked the crucial need for *ningensei* in developing good will ... Hard business facts alone are not enough ... *Ningensei* is critical in getting Japanese to comply or in persuading Japanese negotiating partners. (Nippon Inc. Consultation quoted in Goldman⁴⁸)

Ningensei exemplifies four interrelated principles of Confucian philosophy: *jen*, *shu*, *i* and *li*. Based on active listening, *Jen* is a form of humanism that translates into empathetic interaction and caring for the feelings of negotiating associates, and seeking out the other's views, sentiments and true intentions. *Shu* emphasises the importance of reciprocity in establishing human relationships and the cultivation of 'like-heartedness'. According to Matsumoto's (1988)⁴⁹ it is 'belly communication', a means of coding messages within negotiating social and corporate channels that is highly contingent upon affective, intuitive and nonverbal channels. The *i*, also termed *amae*, is the dimension which is concerned with the welfare of the collectivity, directing human relationships to the betterment of the common good. 'The *i* component of *ningensei* surfaces in Japanese negotiators' commitment to the organisation, group agendas and a reciprocity (*shu*) and humanism (*jen*) that is long-term, consistent, and looks beyond personal motivation.'⁵⁰ Finally, *li* refers to the codes, corresponding to precise and formal manners, that facilitate the outer manifestation and social expression of *jen*, *shu*, and *i*. The Japanese *meishi* ritual of exchanging business cards is typical of *li* coded etiquette.⁵¹

2.6 Conclusion

Language barriers, and differences in intellectual styles and academic systems are major deterrents for cross-cultural business research. True international research, which is still quite rare, should always be the product of collaboration between native researchers coming from diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. The purely instrumental view of language in business studies, that is, seeing language as a neutral vehicle for conveying representations, ideas, and concepts⁵² has helped develop an artificially homogeneous body of knowledge. Such assumptions have underlain the practices of both global business and global academia in business for several decades, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Non-English speakers have been obliged to adjust their words and their mindsets and to adopt a world view, which is highly impregnated by Anglophone concepts. Actively ignoring the world views present in other languages was, and still is, a way to avoid challenging dominant business theories and knowledge by foreign concepts. Very few foreign concepts have been imported by the US, except some key Japanese words because of the impressive achievements of Japanese companies in the world market.⁵³

However, the deep impact of ideographic East-Asian writing systems (i.e., Chinese and Japanese) on knowledge creation has rarely been addressed. This suggests that the philosophical issue of whether language is a neutral instrument of communication or whether we are also instrumented by language deeply intermingles with ideological interests.⁵⁴ Comparing across cultures, without being aware of language differences may result in biased and impoverished findings. Any cross-cultural study in business should include a preliminary phase of conceptual equivalence assessment based on linguistic cues. Core etic meanings and key emic meanings should be explored before the cross-border transfer of research instruments. The conceptual equivalence of some key concepts should systematically be investigated across major linguistic contexts and the findings shared among researchers (see Chapters 4 and 5). Part of the cross-cultural research agenda should focus on the progressive emergence of a set of etic and emic meanings for key concepts across major linguistic areas as suggested by Holden.⁵⁵

Notes

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