

Biting the apple of cultural diversity: When “appropriate communication” becomes a matter of perspective

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The purpose of this paper is to trigger a discussion about the consequences of working in a culturally and ethnically diverse unit. I challenge the notion that racism is manifested only in the form of overt hostility or discrimination on the basis of appearance or origin. The attempt to impose a uniform communication code that is based exclusively on the habits of the majority is also a form of institutional racism, as it can systematically disadvantage colleagues of minority or immigrant backgrounds. Modes of communication are culture-specific, and an ethnically diverse community must learn to accept diverse understandings of what is a polite, measured, and appropriate tone.

The examples given in this paper are inspired by real incidents reported to or witnessed by the author over the past few years. Names, places, event sequences, and other details have been altered, however, and so any direct resemblance to real events or persons should be regarded as purely accidental.

The University has recently identified Diversity as a “key vision for 2015”. It has pledged not only to maintain equality and the absence of discrimination, but also to actively promote participation of ethnic minorities, by increasing their representation in influential administrative positions within the institution. Ethnic diversity in key positions constitutes valuable symbolic capital toward the outside world. It is the institution’s badge of political correctness. Internally, it can help motivate colleagues of minority background to gauge their ambitions in relation to their very own, new role models. But filling top positions with people of diverse backgrounds can be more than just presentation. It can contribute to a mixture of styles at leadership level, which can then percolate down into the mainstream body of colleagues.

What good does a mixture of styles do for the institution? For a start, it makes people of diverse backgrounds feel more comfortable. They might then have more confidence to express their views and ideas and to develop their talents and ambitions – for the benefit of the institution as a whole. Feeling comfortable is more than just the absence of hostility based on appearance. It presupposes a certain amount of freedom, within reason, in the choice of modes of articulation and expression. The fact that communication is culture-specific is often overlooked in the context of large institutions. It is assumed instead that there is an objective consensus, anchored in the common law of years of institutional practice, about what constitutes appropriate communicative behaviour. In reality, this consensus derives from the norms of a group of people of a very particular background – in terms of ethnicity, culture, and often social upbringing and gender – who have dominated the institution for generations.

Even the broader consensus – established by integrating greater social and gender diversity into the institution – remains largely confined to a white English form of discourse.

This is not to say that any norm is arbitrary; it may well be universally accepted that the use of, for example, attributes such as “idiot” in interaction among colleagues is insulting and off-limits, or that, conversely, expression of intimacy in the workplace is inappropriate. Certain constraints will, to be sure, be incorporated into a formal code of practice in order to protect individuals and their freedoms and dignity; those constitute ‘objective’ norms of (communicative) behaviour. However, in between the extreme margins there exist the bulk of communicative acts, for which a ‘code of practice’ is far from universal. It is, rather, subjective and culture-bound.

Colleagues who specialise in the analysis of individuals’ writings will know from their experience what a vital role socialisation plays in shaping the styles and modes of expression of those individuals. Cultural background dominates not only our aesthetic world, but also our most practical communicative acts. The study of cross-cultural communication has a prominent position in Sociolinguistic theory, where it is represented by the works of John Gumperz, Anna Wierzbicka, Ron Scollon & Suzanne Wong Scollon, and many others. Recently, an applied, practical field has been opened and filled with hundreds of guides, consultancy agencies, and training programmes aimed at containing conflict and misunderstandings that arise through intercultural barriers of communication. They operate in institutions of various kinds, from schools to businesses. To pretend that our university is free of cross-cultural tension, of friction based on differ-

ences between communication norms, would be naïve at best.

Indeed, the university environment in Britain is not yet quite free even of the more overt and easily identifiable forms of racism. Consider that there was no protest or even uneasiness when a colleague described his office burglar – he had entered the room and confronted the intruder – as “some black guy”, nor when a group of colleagues agreed over a lunchtime chat that if it were up to them they would ban female Muslim students from covering their face while at university. The management of one of the larger units refused to intervene in the case of Dr Roshan, a young Iranian lecturer, who was asked to join the research supervision panel of a student whose work focused on the Christian minority in Iran, only to be told a few days later that his name had been removed from the panel since “it would be inappropriate for an Iranian Muslim to be involved in a thesis that might be critical toward the Iranian government”. Nobody asked Dr Roshan, or the student, whether they felt comfortable working with one another. It was simply assumed on their behalf that Dr Roshan’s background should disqualify him from serving on a professional board. When Professor Ibrahimy complained and urged the Dean to issue a statement condemning the panel’s conduct, he was invited for a chat in which he was criticised for being too “persistent” and trying to “push” colleagues in a way which they felt was “intimidating”.

With attitudes of this kind being commonplace or even excusable, we also risk failing in our duties to protect our students from racism. A senior colleague vocally dismissed Jewish students’ claims that they fear being harassed on campus by other students if recognised as Jews on the basis of their dress, names, or articles such as necklaces. An Arab research student reported harassment by other Arab students who targeted her because her supervisor was Jewish. Her tutor’s reaction was: “Perhaps you should find another supervisor”.

These are day-to-day reactions and comments that go almost unnoticed by most members of the majority, but are causes of much anxiety to those of minority or immigrant background, or indeed to those members of the majority culture who have developed personal sensitivities against racism and discrimination. The Mac-pherson report into the police’s handling of the Stephen Lawrence murder inquiry defined ‘institutional racism’ as

“the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because

of their colour, culture or ethnic origin which can be seen or detected in processes; attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantages minority ethnic people.”

While many instances of racism are self-evident and may be identified with relative clarity, there is a grey area surrounding the notion of “attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through ignorance and thoughtlessness”. Without being overtly or outspokenly racist, indeed while genuinely and sincerely denying racism, individuals and the organisation they run may be prone to taking certain norms of behaviour for granted without even stopping to entertain the thought that these may be culture-bound and so alien to colleagues of other backgrounds. The insistence on observing such norms, and the threat of penalty for not observing them, can well constitute discriminatory behaviour.

Just how culture-bound norms of communication are, is part of your experience as a foreigner (even a fluent speaker of English) when you arrive in Britain and realise that, if you step on somebody else’s foot, they, and not just you, say: “Sorry!”. It is an amazing eye-opener for those who are used to the word ‘sorry’ as an acceptance of responsibility and admission of guilt. Not so in the British context; here, it merely signals a mutual understanding that conflict is best avoided despite the inconvenient circumstance that a physical obstacle and possibly even pain have been inflicted on one of the participants in the accidental encounter.

This, on the whole pleasant revelation, may well be offset against the realisation that the very same quest for harmony and conflict-avoidance at the discourse level will sometimes lead to extraordinarily enthusiastic replies to enquiries about road directions, by people who often haven’t a clue about the whereabouts of the object of enquiry. The immigrant or visitor to Britain is often puzzled: Why don’t people simply admit that they don’t know and send you off to ask somebody else? The answer lies in the need to maintain discourse harmony, even at the cost of later inconveniencing the interlocutor by entangling them in a search that is doomed not to get them to their destination. Or think of the behaviour of shop assistants at Curry’s who haven’t the slightest idea whether the batteries they are offering you do in fact fit your cordless phone, but will nonetheless assure you that this very product is exactly what you need.

Many an immigrant will choose to call this ‘incompetence’. But the intriguing issue is the coupling of – let’s call it more mildly – naïve goodwill, with the confidence to reassure the

interlocutor of the quality of the advice that is being given. This – the harmonious, mutual acceptance of the presentation – is in the British discourse an autonomous goal in its own right; and the presentation may be just loosely connected to the reality that is its subject matter. The critical tourist will associate this with euphemisms of English pub menus – “excellent food”, “delicious slices of fresh tomato on a bed of crispy seasonal lettuce”, or the fact that “fresh orange juice” is actually poured out of a super-market plastic container.

One of my own first experiences at this university was the Teaching Quality Assurance exercise. Newly appointed colleagues were invited to a two-day training seminar in preparation of the TQA. I had expected to be advised about methods to improve the quality of teaching ahead of the inspection. But the seminar concentrated instead on how to respond to the questions of the assessors. Presentation, not reality, was the key issue.

Differing expectations of the discourse and the relation between representation and reality are a frequent trigger of friction in cross-cultural encounters. Consider Dr Hawkins’ restless observation that “every time you ask our [North American] colleague Albert how he is, he replies with a long and detailed narrative”. Well, Albert took the words “How are you?” to be a question, and not a formulaic greeting. The absence of a one-to-one correspondence between the discourse and reality is taken for granted in a British context, but is not necessarily clear to those whose socialisation took place abroad. This pertains most clearly to the famous ‘understatement’, and the expectation that it should be reciprocated. When Dr Latour joined the university as a junior colleague, she hurried to meet with Professor Aitken, a reputable expert on Mycenaean, to discuss his topic of specialisation, Linear B scripts. She then felt embarrassed and ridiculed when Aitken turned to her and said: “I’m sure you know much more about this than I do”. Aitken, in turn, was insulted when his junior colleague, overwhelmed by insecurity, remained silent and failed to emphatically declare that, no, it is definitely he, Professor Aitken, who is the expert, as is well known.

It may only take a year or two in the UK to learn that the remark “Well, this is all very interesting ...”, means that we’ve now wasted enough time and should move on to the more serious topics. Like any linguistic skill, mastering it actively is more difficult. The absence of understatement and euphemism and presence instead of directness may well be interpreted as inappropriate criticism or even aggression. When Dr

Çelik co-evaluated an MA thesis that had been supervised by Professor Wellington, he admitted that he had hesitated how to grade the thesis, since he wasn’t “quite sure what it was that the student had been asked to do”. But his English colleague understood this as euphemistically-packaged criticism that the student had not been supervised properly, an insult to the highly-regarded Wellington, who from then on became suspicious of the young colleague and his manners. On another occasion, when Dr Çelik, having been given administrative responsibility in a particular area, tried to reassure a member of the support staff that she should feel free to discuss any arising problems directly with him, he said: “If you ever think there’s a problem with the way I handle matters, please let me know directly”. The English support officer understood this as a threat not to question her foreign colleague’s judgement and decisions. Distressed by what she regarded as an unprovoked and unjustified reprimand, she complained to her line manager that the academic’s behaviour was “intimidating”.

Depending largely on their socialisation, different people have different expectations of the form adopted in discourse interaction. One side understates, and is trained to unpack subtle meanings from vague or even reversed statements. The other side may appear blunt merely by formulating things as precisely as possible. When Dr Hasselbach wrote to his head of subject area to ask for a reduction of his teaching load in the coming semester, the latter replied by saying: “I shall explore the possibilities”. Hasselbach took this as an encouraging signal that his request will be met, while his colleague, the subject head, was satisfied that his negative reply was delivered in a well-mannered and non-offensive form of discourse. However, when it became clear to Dr Hasselbach that no action would follow, he took the view that his line manager had failed to take his concerns seriously, or had even deliberately misled him. The subject head, of course, was not aware of any problem at all. In fact, he understood his colleague’s silence – Hasselbach was waiting for the possibilities to be ‘explored’ – as an indication of the latter’s understanding that no changes could be accommodated in the teaching schedule at this late stage.

A somewhat similar exchange occurred between Professor Khalifa and the Associate Dean. Khalifa had been invited to participate in a planning meeting, but the date was altered at short notice without consulting her. She wrote to the Associate Dean and asked whether the meeting might be re-arranged to accommodate her, as was originally planned. The Associate Dean’s reply, by email, was: “I’ll look into this in the next day

or so". Khalifa took this as a positive signal of the Associate Dean's willingness to re-arrange the event, and as soon as she read his message, several hours after it had been sent, she sent a one-word reply: "Thanks!". The next morning, the Associate Dean read her reply, and was quick to send another message, this time saying: "I'd like to talk this through when we meet this afternoon". When they did meet, the Associate Dean explained that no changes will be made. Khalifa would not take part. She felt misled. What happened?

Conversation Analysis (CA), a research tradition founded by sociologist Harvey Sachs and developed further by his associates Emanuel Schegloff, Gail Jefferson, and others, offers a framework for the analysis of discourse interaction. In CA, Khalifa's request to the Associate Dean would be regarded as the initiation of a sequence of turns in communicative interaction known as an 'adjacency pair': once the first turn is initiated by the first participant, it must be followed by a second relevant turn by the second participant. But not all 'seconds' are equal. There is a distinction between 'preferred seconds' – those that satisfy the initiator of the sequence, and so result in harmony among the participants –, and 'dispreferred seconds' – those that are liable to disappoint the initiator of the sequence. Since dispreferred seconds may highlight differences in points of view, an effort is made in some cultures to avoid them

The Associate Dean avoided an overt expression of a dispreferred second turn in an initiated adjacency pair, by implying his intention to make an effort to accommodate Professor Khalifa, without actually committing himself to any change in the schedule (much like the subject-area head who "explored the possibilities"). By thanking the Associate Dean, however, Professor Khalifa acknowledged his turn as a *preferred* second and thus unintentionally and unknowingly released it from its ambiguity. The Associate Dean had to put this right and distance himself from the proposition, now in the air, that he had committed himself to initiating a change in the schedule, a move which Khalifa perceived as a setback in the negotiation process. In short, the Associate Dean's effort to handle his colleague's request in a polite and measured manner was interpreted by his colleague as indecisiveness, inconsistency, and possibly even as an attempt to create a smokescreen and deliberately confuse her.

Avoidance of overt articulation of dispreferred seconds is quite strict in (White) British discourse. In conjunction with the emphasis placed on presentation, it works to maintain an

overtly positive and harmonious representation of participants' attitudes, often seen as euphemistic or as the protection of 'face'. A case in point is the discourse of service complaints. A service complaint is an approach by a client to an agent of an institution, pointing out a deficiency in the performance of the institution. Cultural settings and cultural expectations differ in respect of the precise structure of the turn sequence of a complaint. In many western European and North American contexts, the goal of a complaint is to instigate remedial action on the part of the institution's agents. Since in most cases action cannot follow immediately – it takes time to fix things –, the *promise* by an authorised agent to initiate remedial action is normally sufficient to bring the complaint to a successful, preferred resolution.

In England, however, a complaint is often understood as an articulation of disappointment, which demands an acknowledgement of responsibility in the form of an apology. The apology itself is an extreme form of second turn in the adjacency pair. It leaves the agent responsible for it in admission of guilt, and so in loss of face. But it results in establishing agreement between the initiator (the complaining client) and the respondent (the agent, on behalf of the institution) about a state of affairs (the institution's responsibility) – albeit a negative one. The apology is thus seen as the conclusion of the speech event of complaining, which in turn is a self-contained discourse event, autonomous of any instigation of remedial action. Insistence on the part of the client that remedial action should follow, is interpreted as the client's refusal to accept a resolution of the complaint at the discourse level. It is seen as failure to acknowledge the apology, and so as a further face-threatening act, which however can no longer be resolved. It puts the addressee in a position of powerlessness, and is therefore considered impolite.

This is what happened when Miss Nawaz, a clerical research assistant, complained to the building superintendent about the fact that her office and the corridor have not been cleaned for many months. The complaint is generally perceived as a radical act, and the agent who receives it feels that he is being extremely accommodating by issuing a verbal apology. But since Miss Nawaz has no line-managerial authority over the building superintendent, she has no right to expect remedial action. And since there are differing expectations from the purpose of the speech act of complaint, Miss Nawaz's insistence on obtaining not just an apology, but an undertaking that action would follow, was seen as impolite and aggressive, and even as interference in a domain of responsibility that is not her own.

Complaints themselves are dispreferred first turns, since they violate the principle of non-intervention in others' affairs, which in turn is a safeguard against allowing discourse to become a channel of conflict rather than an instrument that serves the presentation of harmony. But in some cultures, intensive discourse *is* a way to carry out, and resolve, conflict. Professor Cichocki was not permitted to raise the issue of upgrading the School's computer cluster at the Planning Committee meeting. And so instead, he wrote a long letter to the IT Director, which he copied to the members of the Committee. In his institutional experience in central Europe, addressing a problem in writing and giving it contained but adequate dissemination was a legitimate way of drawing attention to an issue of concern to him and other colleagues. The Director, however, was upset. Unable to find any specific rule in the university's Policies and Procedures which Cichocki had actually violated, and unable to deny the claim that some remedy was needed in the IT domain, the Director asked Cichocki for an apology for his "unmeasured tone". In response, Cichocki insisted that clarification be provided as to which of his phrases was, allegedly, inappropriate. Of course, "tone" here is not to be taken literally, as Cichocki did, but as a reference to the entire choice of a mode of communication – the use of written discourse to initiate debate – which was considered by the Director as an inappropriate way to resolve the issue of the IT cluster. The parties could have spent hours going through texts in search of examples of "bad tone", without even approaching a consensus on the proper way of communicating their differences.

Absence of sensitivity toward difficulties of intercultural communication can in this way result in penalising individuals for following their own communication norms, thereby putting them at a disadvantage within the institution. Dr Brainstorm directed the attention of his colleague, the MA tutor, to Hatem, a Jordanian student who attended Dr Brainstorm's course unit and came to consult with him every single week during his office hours with a long list of questions. Dr Brainstorm's impression was that Hatem was a "weak student, who doesn't understand much, and should be discouraged from taking the more challenging course units in the programme". In fact, Hatem's behaviour might be seen simply as an attempt to get full value out of the £8.5k that his extended family has saved for one year's tuition fees. Hatem was determined to make the investment worthwhile for his family and not to disappoint them. He also read the note in the course handbook about it being the student's

responsibility to seek advice, and took it quite literally. English students know, of course, that this instruction is to some extent at least intended to serve as the university's insurance policy in the event that a student failed the course and decided to seek compensation from the institution, and that it is therefore not to be taken quite literally. Hatem, by contrast, ended up graduating with a distinction.

A line manager who sets out to ensure that appropriate tone is maintained within a unit will usually assume a default consensus on what is and what is not appropriate, without taking into consideration differences that are culture-bound. Mild forms of sarcasm, for instance, are often seen as threatening and insulting, because they create a caricature of discourse itself, quite the opposite of the presentation of inter-personal harmony that is the goal of most (educated middle-class and institution-oriented) English forms of discourse. Sarcasm is often perceived by English colleagues as aggressive, while many non-English colleagues regard it simply as a light alternative to problem depiction. In quick email interaction, a request followed by three dots [...] – such as "if you could forward that file to me ..." – might indicate, from the point of view of an immigrant writer: "I'd love to take some time to rephrase this and include all the appropriate politeness formulae, but I'm in such a hurry, so please excuse me for using a kind of telegraphic shorthand". The English decoder will read: "Out of mere politeness I am choosing to avoid overt expression of my discontent and impatience with you, and am merely hinting at those by failing to complete the sentence". Does this writer really deserve to be told off by his/her line manager for using inappropriate tone in an email?

The thing to remember is that there are no absolute rights or wrongs here. Nobody is challenging British-English norms of communication and asking for them to be shelved. Conversely, against the claim that "immigrants and minorities ought to integrate" I can assure any reader that few immigrants behave in Britain exactly as they do or did in their country of origin. We all change, we all adapt, we all accommodate. But some differences remain, and the only way for us to reduce the potential conflicts and friction that these differences may cause is to raise awareness of the fact that along with ethnic and cultural diversity comes pluralism of modes and fashions of communication.

The pitfalls of overlooking the problem are clear: Staff of different backgrounds may misunderstand one another and be unable to work effectively as a team. Differences in style and presentation may be misinterpreted as absence of

mutual respect and cause hostility and suspicion. Creativity and initiative can be blocked, and morale and motivation can be destroyed, by reprimanding or penalising staff for merely following norms of which they are usually not even conscious, but which form an integral part of their individual identities. There used to be a

time when cross-cultural encounters in the British education system were limited to the sons of Sheikhs and Maharajas who were sent to Eaton and Oxford in order to become English gentlemen. Those times are gone. "Equality and diversity" should be taken to mean that accommodation is no longer a one-way street.