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INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE IN BUSINESS DISCOURSE

The realm of business is the realm of hard facts, profit and loss statements, tough competition and merciless battle for market share. The reality is that business survival is almost always at stake in our turbulent times. There is no denying that it is the competence of business people that plays a key role in business success. This paper discusses the concept of competence from the perspective of the anthropocentric theory, i.e. viewed as an inherent property of a human being. The author also presents an overview of the selected concepts of competence, discursive competence and intercultural competence in international business. The author points to potential risks related to the expansion of business activity into foreign markets, including the risks resulting from cultural differences. The selected issues of negotiation in international business are also discussed in the last section of the paper.

KEYWORDS: business, competence, discursive competence, intercultural competence, negotiation

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to share some insights into the notion of intercultural competence in business, particularly in the international arena. Since in today's globalised world business people are more often than ever in contacts and encounters with every possible culture, there is a need for them to possess essential knowledge and skills required to operate successfully in culturally different foreign markets. A considerable number of business failures have been ascribed to a lack of intercultural competence on the part of business practitioners. In this paper, therefore, an attempt is made to indicate those attributes of foreign cultures that might be distinguished as risky and failure-generating for business people in order to predict and formulate appropriate discourse practice. The discussion of different aspects of intercultural competence and discourse in business is preceded by the explanation of the notion of competence in general and of its ontological status. Then we will proceed to discussing competence in business discourse and the selected issues of negotiation in international business.

THE NOTION OF COMPETENCE

A linguist must not pass over the name of Noam Chomsky since it was this eminent scholar who introduced the notion of competence into linguistic terminology (1965: 4) as the ability of an ideal speaker-hearer to produce an unlimited string of sentences based on a limited amount of lexical items and grammatical rules. N. Chomsky distinguished *competence* and *performance*, presenting this differentiation as follows: “We thus make a fundamental distinction between competence (the speaker-hearer’s knowledge of his language) and performance (the actual use of language in concrete situations)” (ibidem).

Such a concept of competence was criticized for the assumption based on an ideal speaker-listener having perfect linguistic knowledge, and being supposedly unaffected by situational factors in the course of their linguistic performance. American sociolinguist Dell Hymes, in particular, and also Polish linguist Franciszek Grucza argued that Chomsky’s idealized speaker-listener concept entirely disregarded real-life communicative situation. According to F. Grucza (1988: 311), D. Hymes was right in pointing to the social factors of competence, and in making use of the term communicative competence, meaning not only in terms of conformity of utterances with formal linguistic rules, but also in terms of appropriateness to the situation and context of use.

It is true that the contribution of the mentioned American scholars was far from negligible; yet the fact remains that it was the Polish linguist, F. Grucza, who as early as in 1983, developed a consistent and original concept of linguistic and cultural competence within his anthropocentric theory of human languages. This theory holds, among other things, that man is in the center of anthropocentric linguistics as a language- knowledge- and culture generating human species (F. Grucza 1997: 15). People are carriers of their individually acquired language (idiolanguage), knowledge (idioknowledge) and culture (idioculture).

Based on F. Gruczaz theory, we would also view the concept of competence through the lenses of anthropocentric theory and would regard competence as an inherent human quality, as is also the case with other human properties such as culture, knowledge and language. Similarly, competence is empirically non-observable as such (cf. S. Grucza 2008: 108). This quality can only be identified by observing and analyzing its manifestations in the form of human acts, behaviors, human products and artifacts.

Any professional competence is displayed by an individual in the performance in a specific field and context (at a given place and time), which is to say that this notion is human-specific, domain-specific and context-specific as presented in Figure 1.

Before discussing intercultural competence in business discourse, it seems appropriate to identify and discuss the notion of competence in general along with its main constituent parts.

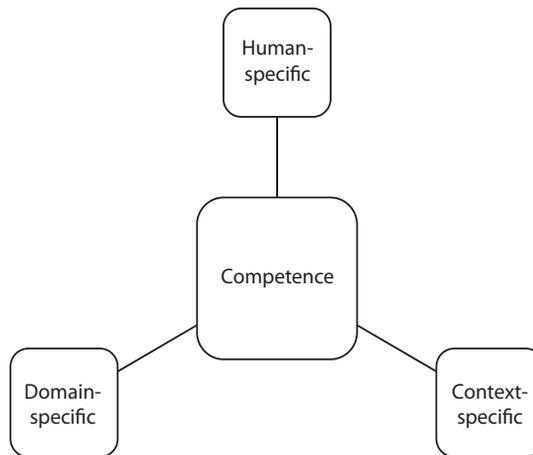


Figure 1. Competence as a human-specific, domain-specific and context-specific construct.

Competence is widely considered to be a multidimensional construct, however, a set of components making it up is still a controversial issue. Many, if not most, scholars point to its three major sets of components: knowledge, skills and behavioural factors such as attitude and personality traits, emotions or other psychological features (e.g. intelligence, concentration ability and memory). Needless to say that this list might be extended further, which would make however the whole notion of competence comparable to a bag of multiple and eclectic properties of different significance and nature. It would seem, therefore, sensible to examine this notion in its narrow or minimalistic sense before attempting to extend further the list of its components. Thus we would suggest that the point of departure in research on competence should rather be the set of its two core components, i.e. an individual's knowledge and skill in applying that knowledge in a certain professional field and context of activity. As T. Hyland rightly comments (1995: 47), there may be clearly "holistic" and "minimalistic" approaches to the issue of competence. This distinction appears to be valid for, at least, the following reasons:

- 1) Both components – knowledge and skill – are dynamic, i.e. changeable and modifiable as a result of human efforts to acquire knowledge and develop their skills. In contrast, personality traits are mainly inborn, genetically determined and relatively stable. Individuals who lack certain personality traits cannot easily acquire them (cf. L. O'Sullivan 1999). According to L. O'Sullivan, the existing research fails to distinguish between stable competencies (e.g. personality traits) and dynamic ones (ibidem).
- 2) The impact of psychological components on competence formation seems to be less significant in comparison to much greater importance of knowledge and skill.

Some scholars perceive competence as a pyramid whose foundation is made up of basic knowledge, which is becoming more advanced when moving upwards, and reaching the level of proficiency at the top. Such a pyramid is shown in Figure 2.

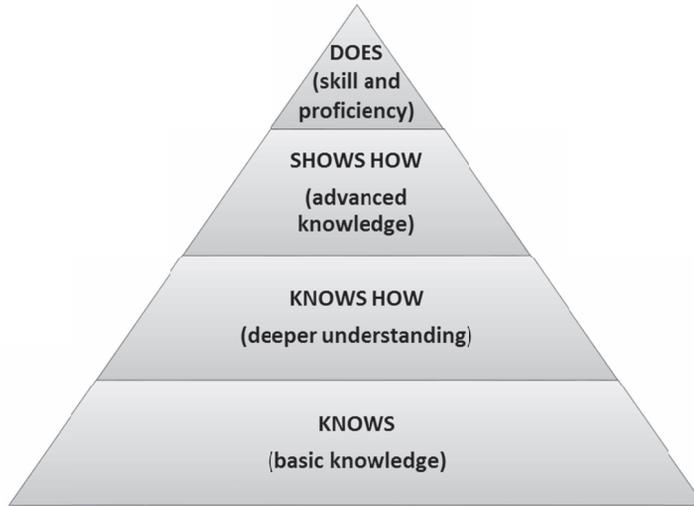


Figure 2. Miller's pyramid presenting an integrated picture of competence (cf. G.E. Miller 1990: 563ff).

In Miller's pyramid presented in Figure 2, competent individuals not only know how to act, but they are also able to demonstrate their skill and proficiency. The whole pyramid represents the ultimate competence composed of both knowledge and skill developed to the extent necessary to ensure successful performance in a given domain. Professional domains require both knowledge and skill but in some professions the significance of these two components appears to be unequal.

In addition, these two core components of competence, i.e. knowledge and skill, differ from each other in some respects. Competence, as noted before, is a construct that is empirically non-observable as such (cf. S. Grucza 2008: 108). We can identify competence and assess individuals as competent by observing and analysing the manifestations of this competence in the form of their acts, behaviours, their products or artifacts. Competence of competent individuals may be displayed in their regular performing a specified task or a set of tasks in a particular domain to an agreed or at least satisfying standard.

What is more, neither competence nor knowledge is transferable from one individual to another. The so-called transfer of competence or knowledge from one human being to another should be regarded only as a metaphor. This conviction is in line with F. Grucza's anthropocentric theory and follows from the fact that neither of these properties may be acquired in other way than through an individual's own cognitive and practical exercise.

Skills may be demonstrated and displayed in action, while knowledge is non-observable and may be externalized in language, more precisely in externalized oral or written texts. On the other hand, a certain amount of knowledge is an important prerequisite for skill development. Considerable amount of knowledge is probably the most desired competence component in the area of science, academia and research. Furthermore, knowledge is to some extent objectively (with the exception of the so-called silent knowledge) measurable, while skill is rather not (with the exception of some sports disciplines).

American scholars, J.P. Johnson, T. Lenartowicz, S. Apud (2006), quote convincing arguments in support of this statement, by exemplifying the occupations and professions where skill is of relatively greater importance, as for instance in the profession of a surgeon or a pilot. In order to obtain a pilot's licence, one must pass two examinations: first the written one, where the candidates can demonstrate their knowledge of aviation and flying. Then the candidates have to display their skill in flying a plane. The knowledge of a candidate can be assessed in a classroom situation, but the skill requires an examiner to evaluate the candidate in the air, and if necessary, to take over the controls since crashing a plane is not an option (cf. J.P. Johnson, T. Lenartowicz, S. Apud (2006)). The conclusion suggests itself that in some areas of human activity it is the skill that is the most important constituent part of competence.

Last but not least, it seems worthy of mention here that the ontological assumption of competence, as residing in a human being, makes it incompatible with the practice of applying this notion to inanimate constructs or collective structures such as organisations, enterprises or other forms of human activity.

BUSINESS DISCOURSE AND DISCURSIVE COMPETENCE IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

“Business discourse is all about how people communicate using talk or writing in commercial organizations in order to get their work done” (Bargiela-Chiappini/Nickerson/ Planken 2007: 3). It seems, however, that the authors of this definition fail to mention at least one fundamental feature of any discourse, which is an interaction between its participants. In addition, business discourse refers to the interaction conducted not only within organizations. In today's globalised world, international business contacts and encounters are becoming increasingly common, which inevitably results in additional risks and threats.

Since an exhaustive discussion of discourse goes beyond the scope of this paper, we would refer to S. Grucza's succinct definition according to which discursive competence comprises the abilities of specialists to conduct effectively verbal interaction, i.e. dialogue, debate or polemics related to business (cf. 2008: 110).

Business discourse may be found among all the traditionally mentioned types of discourse such as argumentation, narration, description and exposition. It seems, however, that it is argumentative discourse that predominates in business encounters and also in written business texts. While it is true that effective communication and argumentation of business people plays a vital role in ensuring successful business operation, the fact remains that linguists should not limit themselves to descriptions of the existing *status quo*. As S. Grucza comments, linguists should also strive to investigate the underlying reasons for effective or ineffective communication occurring among specialists (S. Grucza 2008: 111).

Admittedly, the research in the field of argumentation, referred to as pragma-dialectics, was already undertaken by F. Hans van Eemeren in the early eighties of the 20th century. Argumentation was understood, according to pragma-dialectical definition by Frans van Eemeren, as a complex speech act aimed at justifying or refuting a standpoint in order to convince the interlocutor of the acceptability or unacceptability of that standpoint (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002: 14). In the beginning, this line of research was focused mainly on effective argumentative discourse in the legal context. It was not until the beginning of the 21st century that this school of thought attempted to engage in research on argumentative discourse in business, which was also called as a bargaining discourse. A bargaining model of discourse in business assumes that the basis for conflict is not as much a contradiction of facts or values as it is a conflict of interests (cf. Jacobs and Aakhus 2002: 30-40). The model of argumentative discourse in international business additionally comprises the component of possible cultural conflicts as is shown in Figure 3.

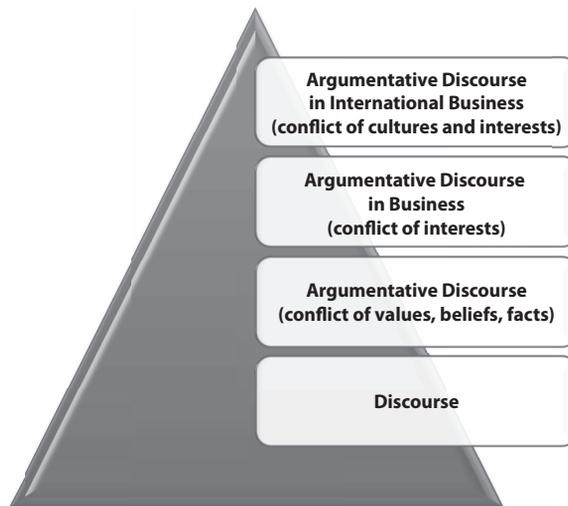


Figure 3. A pyramid of discourse indicating the passage from general to argumentative discourse in international business.

Any business discourse is composed of a sequence of speech acts performed interactively in business settings, and with the option of entering into negotiation. In fact, almost every aspect of business discourse involves a certain amount of bargaining or negotiation, the mastery of which seems to be essential to business success. But it is intercultural negotiations that pose the biggest challenge to any business enterprise seeking to enter foreign markets. Businessmen operating in an international arena have to acquire additional components of competence, i.e. knowledge and skill in dealing with foreign cultures. This aspect will be expanded on in the next section.

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE AND POTENTIAL RISKS IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Research on intercultural competence in business was motivated primarily by practical needs and concerns of business people and business organisations. Attempting to create an all-embracing definition of such an intangible thing as intercultural competence in such a variety of settings and cultures appears to be an overwhelming goal. The most comprehensive work so far on this subject, which is “The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence” (2009) edited by Darla K. Deardoff, provides the review of over twenty definitions and models of intercultural competence.

Before moving on to the discussion of the selected theories and definitions suggested by other scholars, it seems appropriate to refer to S. Grucza’s remarks in this respect. According to this scholar (S. Grucza 2013: 112ff), we should always bear in mind that culture exists exclusively in our minds, more precisely in our brains, as our inherent property, i.e. as *idioculture*. What can be deduced from this assertion is that there are as many specific cultures as there are people on our planet. What is more, some details of theories and scholarly assumptions meticulously ascribing certain cultural traits to specific regions or countries may turn out invalid for different reasons at the bargaining table (e.g. when someone is born in one culture but educated in another). Hence, these theories should be treated cautiously, and with a proverbial pinch of salt.

Among the most widely recognized theories, which are relevant to business practices, undoubtedly E.T. Hall’s theory of high- and low-context cultures should be mentioned in the first place. The American anthropologist Edward T. Hall is known for developing the concepts of high- and low-context cultures as important factors contributing to the manner of expressing and communicating ideas. The concept of cultural contexts also applies to the way and style in which people in diverse cultures express themselves in spoken and written communication, as well as it indicates the possible attitude towards the rules of the law. In low-context cultures,

communication is oriented towards a direct, clear and precise verbal message, while non-verbal messages are of significantly lesser importance. Directness in low-context cultures is considered to be a virtue, while indirectness may even be regarded as a waste of time and as trying other people's patience.

Differences in attitudes to the written word, contractual agreements and the rules of the law are also significant when comparing low-context cultures (with their strong emphasis on the written word) and high-context cultures (with relatively weak emphasis on the written word), and these differences must not be ignored by business people trading across the borders and cultures.

Therefore, in the light of Hall's theory, when doing business across cultures, it is very important to pay attention to high- and low-context cultures that are manifested through the actions of our business partners. The distinction between these two contextual dimensions is central to understanding the significant part of cultural differences in the world. E.T. Hall examined these differences according to the levels of context in several countries and ranked these countries as presented in Figure 4 below.

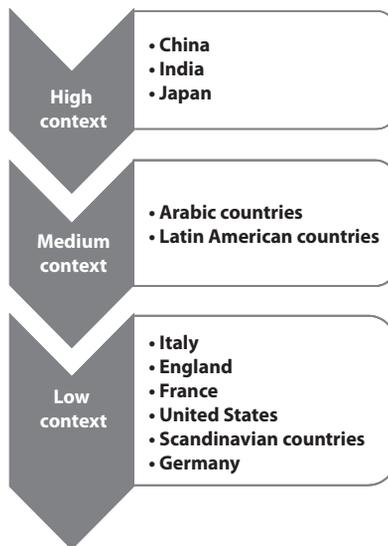


Figure 4. Ranking of the selected countries according to the level of cultural context (adapted from M.B. Goodman 2013: 30).

As to the definitions of international competence that have certainly gained wide recognition, let me quote the following three definitions:

1. "Knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others' values, beliefs, and behaviors; and relativizing one's self. Linguistic competence plays a key role" (Byram 1997: 34).

2. “World knowledge, foreign language proficiency, cultural empathy, approval of foreign people and cultures, ability to practice one’s profession in an international setting” (Lambert 1994, as cited in Deardorff 2006: 247).
3. “The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts” (Bennett 2007, as cited in M. Moodian 2009: 127-128).

Several scholars have developed definitions of intercultural competence that are more general and lengthy, but contain some important additional elements. These definitions included such components as the cultural awareness, valuing and understanding cultural differences; experiencing other cultures and self-awareness of one’s own culture. These elements highlight the underlying importance of cultural awareness, both of one’s own as well as others’ cultures, which is an additional contributory factor to business peoples’ success. Irrespective of three dimensions of risk (financial, commercial and country risk) that businesses always face while developing sales in the domestic market, there is an additional risk for businesses trying to conquer foreign markets. The point is that potential business risks may obviously be higher when dealing and negotiating with representatives of unfamiliar cultures. In Figure 5, these four dimensions of risk are presented, indicating the main sources of risk for each dimension.

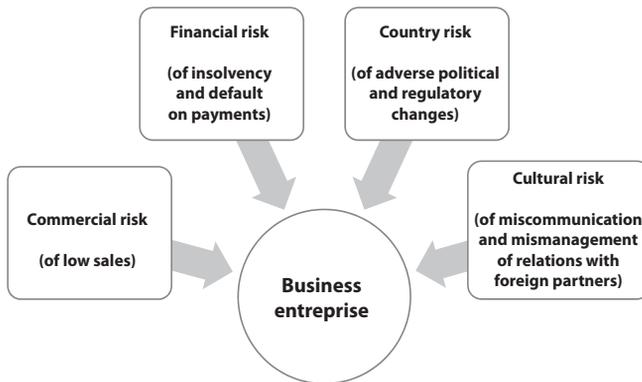


Figure 5. Potential risks borne by enterprises entering foreign markets.

As is shown in Figure 5, culture risk involves miscommunication and mismanagement of relations with foreign business partners, which may be attributed to the lack of knowledge and skill in dealing with foreign culture. Therefore, there is a necessity for risk and opportunity assessment before embarking on any business expansion into foreign markets. Such an expansion requires an in-depth preparation of business activities that should be appropriately adapted to the foreign market culture, to say nothing of foreign customs, rules and business regulations.

In a wide spectrum of possible business activities and encounters with the representatives of foreign cultures there are, however, quite specific types of discourse that pose tough challenge for business people, namely business negotiations.

NEGOTIATIONS ACROSS CULTURES

People from different cultures place a different emphasis or attribute different meaning to the negotiation process and style. Negotiation is considered in some cultures to be a sign of weakness. Even the level of aversion to negotiation is indicative of specific culture. In the United Kingdom, for example, 97% of people accept the buyer's first offer; in the United States, it is down as low as 17% in some commodity groups and in Australia, it is around 30% (Kennedy 2009).

Richard D. Louis (2006: 165ff) highlights the importance of the social setting in certain cultures, which he describes as follows:

- The French, most Latin Americans and the Japanese regard a negotiation as a social ceremony to which important consideration of venue, participants, hospitality protocol time scale, courtesy of discussion and the ultimate significance of the session are attached. The Japanese also view the session as an occasion to ratify ceremonially decisions that have previously been reached.
- Americans, Australians, Britons and Scandinavians have a much more pragmatic view and are less concerned about the social aspects of business meetings. They generally want to get the session over as quickly as possible, with entertaining and protocol kept to a minimum.
- The Germans and Swiss are somewhere in between.

There is vast literature about negotiation, but only a small fraction is focused on its process. Most books and studies are goal-oriented, and discuss primarily the possible outcome of negotiation. It was not until the nineties of the 20th century that a growing number of researchers started to investigate business negotiation as a process and a subtype of business discourse.

A pioneering study and arguably one of the most comprehensive to date works in the field is "The Discourse of Business Negotiation" edited by K. Ehlich and J. Wagner (1995). The authors of papers contained in this book also attempt to draw on the linguistic pragmatics, but unlike F. Hans van Eemeren, they investigate the concept of *face* in the sense elaborated by P. Brown and S. Levinson (cf. Villemoes 1995: 291-312). As in pragma-dialectical model of a bargaining discourse, business negotiation is viewed as a potentially conflictive situation, but instead of logical and rational approach typical of Western argumentation theories, Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is suggested here as a possible theoretical framework for the analysis of business interactions during the negotiation process (ibidem: 302ff).

A. Villemoes and other authors remind us that according to Brown and Levinson, the factor regulating all interaction is *face* in its two aspects, namely *positive face* meaning the positive consistent self-image that people have and their desire to be appreciated and approved of by at least some other people, and *negative face*, i.e. a person's need not to be intruded upon in her or his privacy.

This approach seems particularly useful in investigating different aspects of intercultural negotiations in international business where the representatives of two cultures sitting at the bargaining table make attempts to achieve their contradictory goals driven by different backgrounds and different cultural motives. In such situations there is indeed great potential for losing the *face* and triggering strong emotions often leading to failure.

In Brown and Levinson's theory, even everyday communication is potentially antagonistic and face threatening, to say nothing of negotiations. In point of fact, observations of businessmen during negotiations suggest that representatives of some cultures are more concerned about face needs than representatives of other cultures (cf. Wijst and Ulijn 1995: 313).

P. Wijst and J. Ulijn also conclude that Brown and Levinson's theory may provide a promising tool to analyse the linguistic behaviours of negotiators coming from different cultures (ibidem: 347). In addition, these authors draw another and important conclusion from their observations, namely the significance of language proficiency. The fluency in the language of negotiations contributes significantly to the successful outcome and the factor of language proficiency has to be taken into account in further analyses of intercultural negotiations (ibidem: 346).

Already ancient rhetoricians – predecessors of today's negotiators – strongly believed that language was a potent means of persuasion provided that the speaker had ready supply of lexical items and expressions appropriate in a given situation. A lack of language proficiency may render even knowledgeable negotiator ineffective in intercultural business negotiation and discourse.

CONCLUDING THOUGHT

The analysis of unresolved problems and dilemmas should always be the focus of scientific research. The challenging and unresolved problems that humans now face seem to be multiplying faster than our ability to manage them. At the global arena we are witnessing diverse, often unfortunate effects of globalization, accelerated technological progress, mismanaged multiculturalism, cultural clashes and massive migrations that may pose unprecedented threats and are likely to undermine European and not only European security. These and many other unresolved problems provoke reflection on the scarcity of still another type of competence, namely supranational competence to manage world affairs and global risks in order to ensure safe existence for the human race.

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