
INTERCULTURAL PROBLEMS IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

A Communication Model

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ABSTRACT

The expanding world wide commerce makes aspects of intercultural communication more and more important. The aim of commerce is to earn profit which is generated through business processes which are value added processes, where the customers are required to pay for the added value created by the process. What is of value differs between different people from different cultures and it is the customer who decides when to buy, what product and from which distributor. Therefore it is very important to create an efficient communication process. There is a triad of components present in human information processing: a cognitive component, an affective component and an operational component. These components interact during human information processing. The intrapersonal activities from perception to the creation or updating of a mental model can be explained by schema theory. Every concept is assigned a schema which contains everything a person knows about the concept. There are also relations between different schemata. The perceived stimuli will be transformed to symbols which will have an impact on the schemata and their relation structure. The mental model is built from schemata. In the paper four categories of archetype intracommunication processes are identified. These processes are used as a basis of a model for intercultural business communication. The archetype processes can be divided into affective and cognitive parts. The model can enhance our understanding of this kind of communication processes.

INTRODUCTION

Meaningful communication means that the sender and the receiver must share a mutual opinion of what the message means and be aware under what conditions the message is valid [Habermas, 1984]. Large efforts are required from participants in communication processes to reach that mutual understanding, especially if they come from different cultures. With a simplified information flow over the world, communication situations that involve people from widely separated cultures will become more and more common. It is therefore of interest to focus on some of the problems that might occur in such situations.

A culture is something that unites people with some kind of common interest. According to Enmark [1990] the idea of culture can be related to concepts such as for example common sets of values, cognitive systems, conception of the world and value patterns. Miller [1995] regards a culture as a complicated patchwork of values, symbols and behaviors. For the purpose of this paper, a culture will be regarded as a patchwork of values, symbols, cognitive systems, conception of the world and behaviors acquired by a group through communication. Intercultural communication is communication between people belonging to different cultures. That means that the people involved may have substantial differences in these concepts which can lead to differences in how messages are interpreted. This kind of communication is therefore especially demanding because of the added difficulties to reach a common understanding between the participants.

An area where communication is most important is commerce. With increasing world wide commerce, the aspects of intercultural communication become more and more important. One significant characteristic of commerce is the fact that the intention of every company is to earn profit and it will enter business situations to fulfill that intention. No company will survive in the long run without a reasonable profit. The profit is generated through business processes. Such a process is a chain of activities which leads to a result which has a substantial value to the customer [Lind & Goldkuhl, 1997]. The customers are supposed to pay for the added value created by the business process. What is regarded as a value differs between different people from different cultures and the vendor must realize what is of value to the buyer. In a business process an aim of the vendor is to use communication to create a good relationship to the customer with a feeling of trust. [Lind, 1999] But a relationship is created not so much by what is said as by the expectation of behavior [Littlejohn, 1992].

It is the customer who decides when to buy, what product and from which distributor. It is therefore important for the vendors to use their communication skills in such a way that they appear to the customer as the best alternative. [Lind, 1999]

There are different theories presented within the communication area by for example Jürgen Habermas [1984], John R. Searle [1969] and Philip V. Lewis [1987]. These theories emphasize the relationship between the different actors in the communication process. Through that it will be possible to determine what information is needed for the different participants and to understand the actions they will undertake. The discussion in this text focuses mainly on intrapersonal communication and the problem of creating understanding between participants from different cultures in business communication.

COMMUNICATION THEORY

PERCEPTION

Information seeking is a primary activity of life. People seek information to deepen and broaden their understanding of the world around them. [Kulthau, 1996] Information has been defined by Blaine Goss [1982, page 23] as

any input that the person attends to for the purposes of reducing uncertainty or confirming prior knowledge.

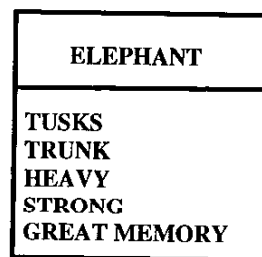
Information is thus our personal understanding acquired through *perception*. Perception is the process of observing, selecting and organizing the stimuli that are constantly received, and then making interpretations to build a mental model of the observations [Lind, 1991]. Perception therefore determines what information is allowed to enter into the brain as a part of the mental model and how this information is interpreted.

Perception is a necessity forced upon us because of our physical and mental limitations. There are more than 1000 bits of information put to our attention every minute when we are awake. [Lewis, 1987] We would go insane if we tried to take in and process all that information. Differences in perception can often have their cause in differences in conception of what is real. A person's reaction or opinion of any situation is the function of his perception. Therefore the perception of the situation, not reality, is important in communication. [Lind, 1994]

The way perception works, we will more easily accept stimuli that correspond with the person's earlier opinion and experience. New ideas are more difficult to accept. [Lind, 1991]. Too much familiarity, however can cause attention to lag and lead to boredom. Uniqueness places our system on alert. Unexpected new information startles and surprises. [Kulthau, 1996]

SCHEMA THEORY

George Kelly [1963] uses the concept *personal constructs* to describe how the information obtained through perception is organized. Personal constructs are the patterns that a human being formulates to make sense of the world around him. These patterns provide guidelines or frames of reference. Forming new constructs and reconstructing old ones are processes which continue throughout life.



Picture 1: Example of a schema for an elephant

A schema is thus used to identify a specific concept and by referring to the schema the actors in a communication process should in the ideal situation be able to form the same opinion of the concept. That however presumes that the schemata are in vital details identical for the actors. A reference to such a concept or object will identify the characteristics well enough to give the actors a mutual understanding as far as vital details are concerned. That is most important in intercultural business communication in order to avoid misunderstandings.

On the other hand, every concept in the schema for an elephant has a schema of its own. There is for example a schema for *Tusk* containing for example the concepts *White, Pointed, Ivory, Expensive*.

For participants in a communication process to form identical opinions of the

concept *Elephant*, they must also secure that they have identical opinions of every concept in the schema for *elephant*. Furthermore, every concept in the schema for *tusk* has a schema of its own ...

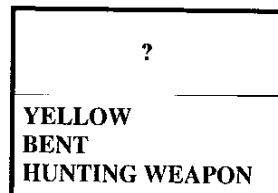
There are also conditions for successful reference in an expression [Searle, 1969 page 82]:

1. *There must exist one and only one object to which the speaker's utterance of the expression applies (a reformulation of the axiom of existence) and*
2. *The hearer must be given sufficient means to identify the object from the speaker's utterance of the expression (a reformulation of the axiom of identification).*

In schema theory terms this means that the speaker must refer to a specific schema and that the hearer must be able to identify that specific schema.

Learning more about a concept means adding information to the schema. To do so the appropriate schema must be identified. That can be done either by name or by content. If we are aware of the fact that we are learning about elephants we have named our schema and can add information into it. The added piece of information will contribute to *our* mental model of elephants regardless of if the information is correct, false or incomplete. [Lewis, 1987] We may for example have experienced elephants as domestic animals in Thailand. With that piece of information added to our elephant schema, we will regard any elephant as a domestic Thai animal.

When identifying schemata by content, the clues and symbols that are received during a communication process are compared with the set of schemata and the blanks are filled in with information from the appropriate schema. There is a risk that an inappropriate schema is identified due to lack of information or experience. Suppose that a person has the following schema:



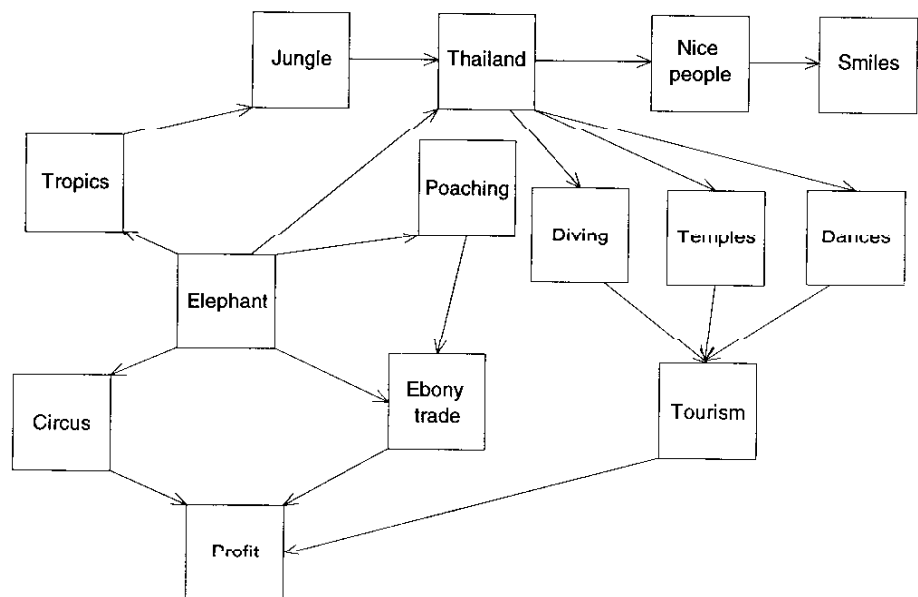
Picture 2: A schema of an unclassified concept

He doesn't know what it is called (boomerang). He then happens to see

something else that is yellow and bent. The perceptual system screens the schemata looking for *bent* and *yellow*. The schema above is found and the concept *hunting weapon* is added to the personal understanding of the banana that the person is holding. Moreover, if he learns that it is called *banana* the schema will get that label.

MENTAL MODELS

A schema is a personal understanding of a concept. Schemata of different concepts are put together to form a *mental model* of a situation. Not only the contents of the schemata are important for the mental model but also relationships between different schemata. For example the schema for *elephant* can have relationships illustrated by picture 2. As seen by that picture some of the schemas may have relations that will create a network pattern..



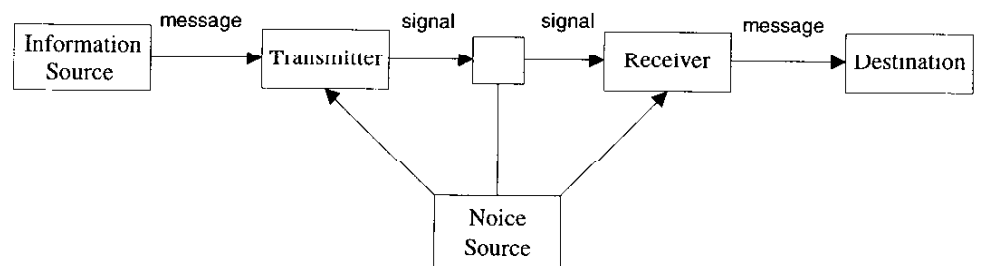
Picture 3: An example of relationships between schemata

Whether the relation pattern is “correct” or not is irrelevant. It is a personal understanding that will have a great impact on the mental model.

Different people will build different schemata since perception depends on personal qualities such as age, sex, education, nationality, culture, religion, personality, experience and organizational interests. The mental model is built from the appropriate schemata. Relationships between appropriate schemata are also added, deleted or changed. Therefore, with differences in the schemata and their relations, different persons will have differences in their mental models of the same situation and will perceive it differently. [Lewis,1987] People from different cultures may therefore develop different impressions of the same concept which may lead to communication problems and misunderstandings.

COMMUNICATION MODELS

Shannon and Weaver's model is a good introduction to the process of one-way communication. It lacks any concept of feedback or cultural influence. [Warner, 1996] The model is shown in picture 4.



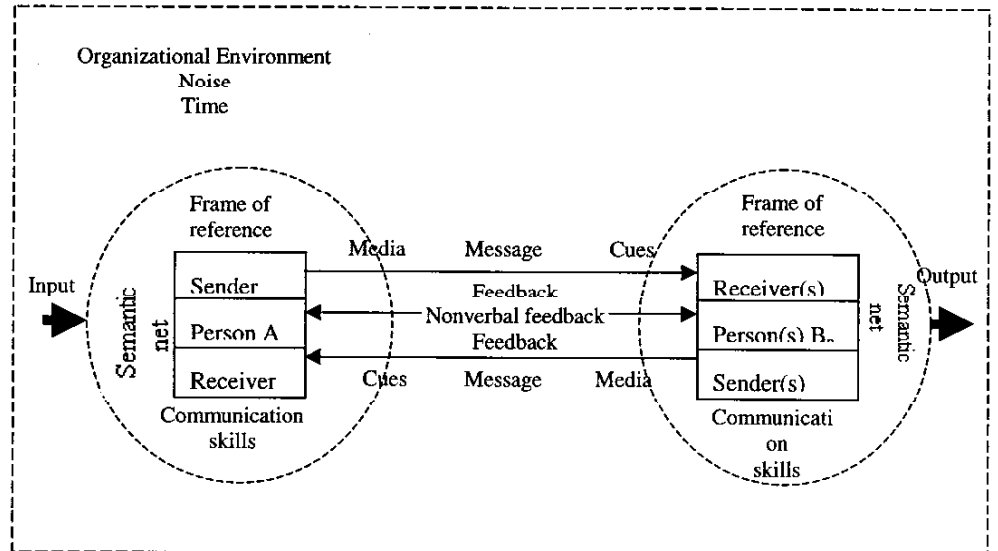
Picture 4: Shannon and Weaver's model of communication

Charles Morris has done research on signs and values. He has integrated notions of signs, behavior, values and interaction. Morris has developed a model with three stages of action for human information processing:

- *perceptual stage*: the person becomes aware of some impulse that is a sign
- *manipulatory stage*: the person interprets the sign and decides how to respond to it
- *consummatory stage*: the actual behavior. [Morris, 1964 in Littlejohn, 1992]
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Intercultural Problems in Business Communication

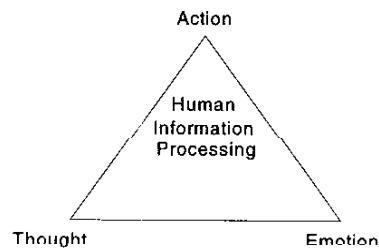
Phillip Lewis [1987] presents a communication model which involves environmental aspects as well as reactions from the receiver. This model is shown in picture 5:



Picture 5: Lewis' communication model

This model focuses on the information flow with a possibility of feedback. It also hints at the possibility of distortion depending on different background of sender and receiver.

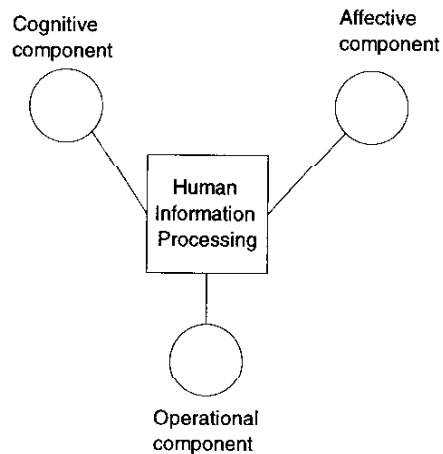
When discussing human information processing there is a classical triad of the concepts thought (cognition), action (operation) and emotion (affection) illustrated by the model below.



Picture 6: Human Information Processing

Bruner [1986] issues a warning against the habit of drawing heavy conceptual boundaries around these concepts. They can not be isolated from each other but they constitute a unified whole. Bruner also suggests five phases in the interpretation task: Perception, Selection, Inference, Prediction and Action.

Blaine Goss [1982] uses the triad thought – emotion – action when he describes his model of intrapersonal communication:



Picture 7: Goss' intrapersonal communication model

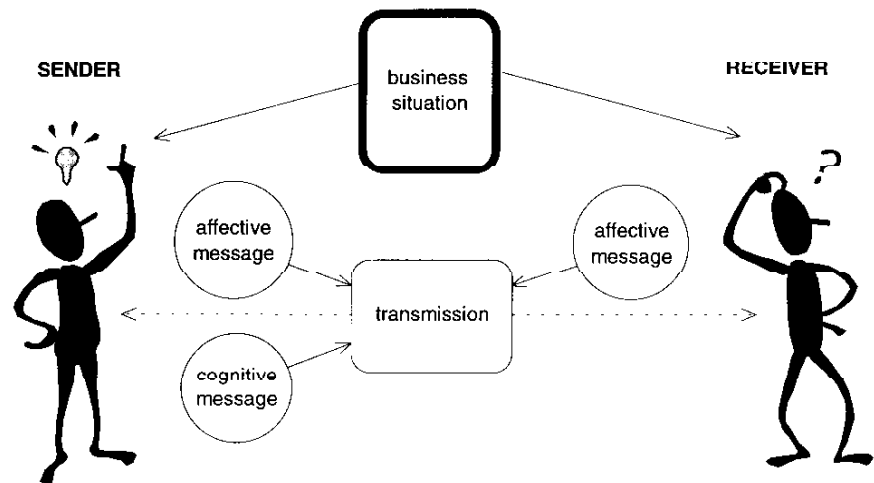
These different models will be the basis from which I will build a new model for intercultural business communication as presented in the next chapter.

A MODEL FOR INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

MODEL OVERVIEW

The model illustrates a communication situation where two participants look at the same business situation. At the moment one of them is the sender, the other is the receiver. A moment later the roles may be switched. Sender and receiver both show the three components affection, cognition and action as picture 8 shows.

The receiver starts by looking at the business situation. His opinion may be uncertainty and confusion and he displays some kind of affective message. That message is probably nonverbal, unintentional and unconscious. That message is received by the sender who can adjust his cognitive message to the reaction of the receiver. The sender will also produce an affective message. The messages from the sender will be taken care of and interpreted by the receiver in processes which contain cognitive as well as affective components.



Picture 8: General model overview

To take care of stimuli from the business situation as well as messages from the counterpart, intrapersonal communication takes place within the participants. Picture 9 shows more in detail what happens during the intrapersonal communication and the cultural influence that is of importance.

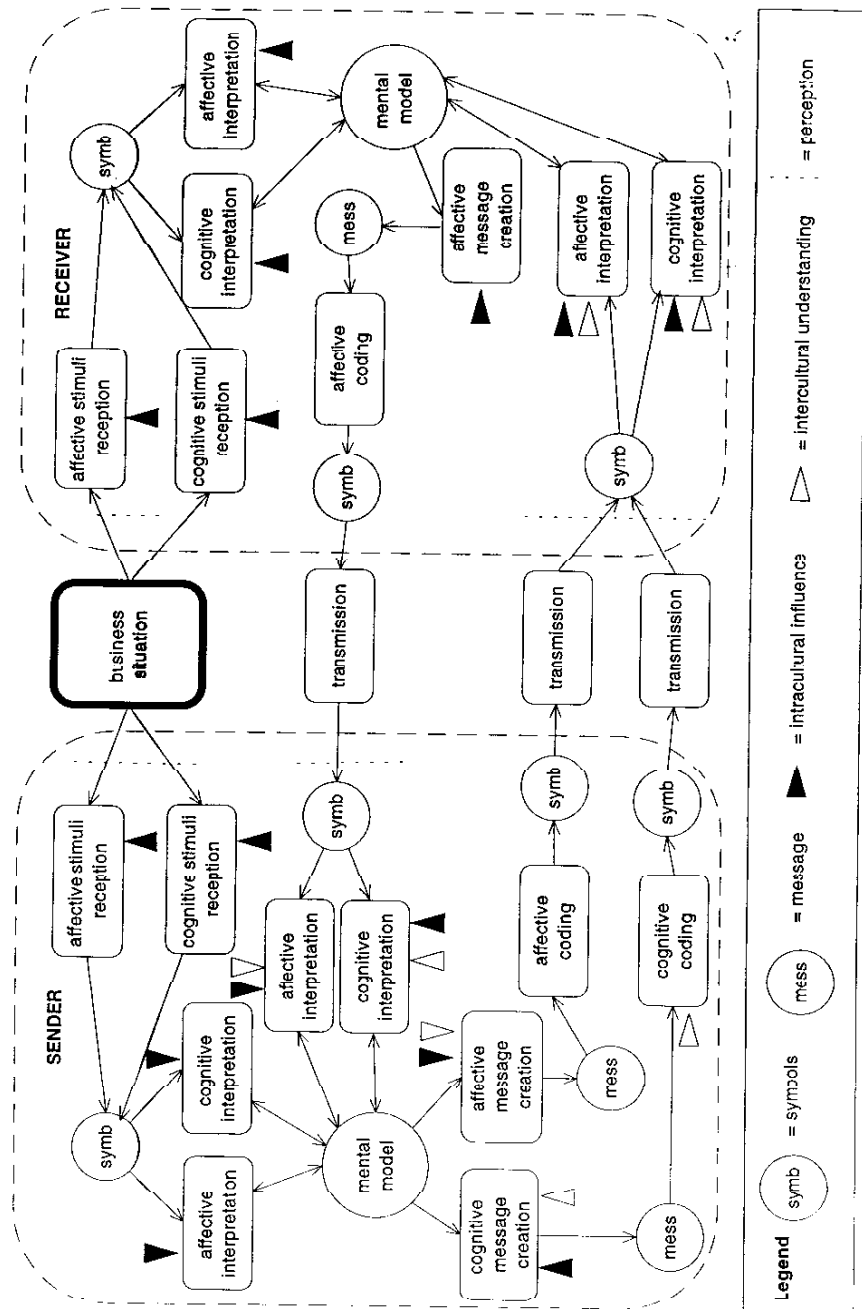


Figure 9: Intrapersonal communication processes

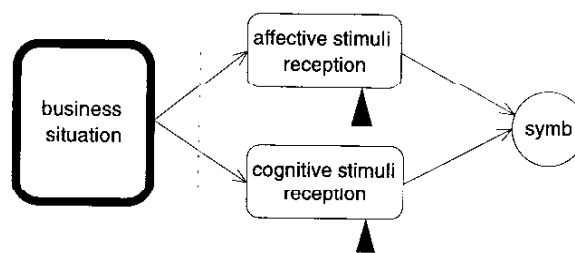
INTRACOMMUNICATION MODEL PROCESSES

There are four categories of archetype intracommunication processes in the model: stimuli reception, interpretation, message creation and coding. These processes are grouped in a way that will allow a person to

- update or create new schemata and schemata relations
- use schemata to update or create mental models
- use the mental model to create and code messages

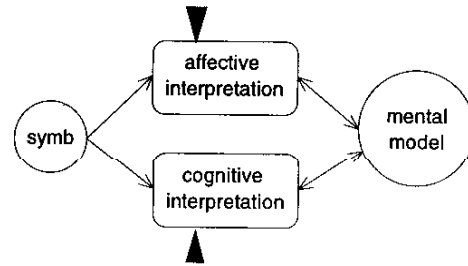
The processes are divided into two different types: affective and cognitive.

Affective and cognitive stimuli reception



The stimuli that reach the processes from the business situation have passed a perceptual filter. As previously said, perception depends on which culture the person who receives the stimuli belongs to as well as his previous experience, that is his set of schemata. Stimuli reception is therefore a pattern recognition process where personal symbol set used in the schemata are used to match received stimuli. Some stimuli will relate to affective components and others will relate to cognitive components in schemata. I call them affective respectively cognitive stimuli. In the model the different kinds of stimuli are separated into two processes. The result of the processes is a set of symbols representing the stimuli from the business situation.

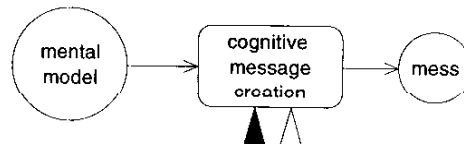
Affective and cognitive interpretation



The symbols can be interpreted in two different ways: affective or cognitive. The symbols created are compared with schemata content and schemata structures.

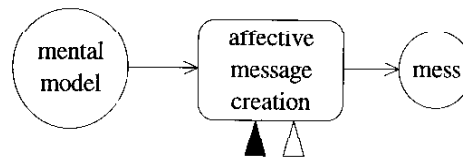
Some schemata will be selected to form or update the mental model representing the business situation at the same time as some of the schemata may be changed or new schemata may be added. Affective interpretation means that our feelings are involved and that we have little or no control over that process. In the cognitive interpretation process we should use our minds to analyze and evaluate the symbols. Sometimes the affective interpretation process has such a great influence on the mental model that it reflects on the cognitive process. Also the cognitive process may detect schemata or schemata relations that will arise strong emotions and thus influence the affective process. Therefore there is an interaction between the two processes through the mental model.

Cognitive message creation



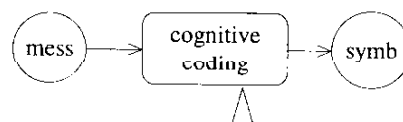
Cognitive message creation is an intentional and conscious process to create a message to the receiver. The sender has his opinion of the business situation in his mental model. The message represents what the sender would like to communicate to the receiver. The process to create this message is under heavy influence of the sender's own culture as well as his understanding of the foreign culture that his counterpart belongs to. The better his understanding of the foreign culture is, the easier it is for him to create a message that will create an impression with the receiver that resembles what he wants to communicate of his own mental model.

Affective message creation



Affective message creation is probably an unintentional and unconscious process. It will produce a message to the receiver which may reveal the intentions of the sender more clearly to the receiver than a cognitive message. It can be especially confusing if the two messages create symbols which contradict each other. In such a situation the communication process can be most confusing. Body language is certainly most revealing for people who have learned how to read it. People saying something else than is expressed through their body language are therefore not regarded as trustworthy.

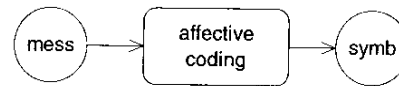
Cognitive coding



This process is also mostly an intentional and conscious process which aims at producing a code that represents the message. The code could consist of any kind of symbols suitable to express the message to the receiver.

If the sender has some knowledge of the culture of the receiver it is easier for him to choose symbols that will reveal the content of the message to the receiver. To reach a true mutual understanding, it is important that the participants in the communication process share an apprehension of the meaning of the symbols. The choice of symbols also depends on the transmission media.

Affective coding



Affective coding is mostly an unintentional and unconscious process. It codes the affective message into symbols which are mainly nonverbal. Such symbols can for example be vocal pitch, gestures, postures, eye movements and skin condition.

CONCLUSION

A business process consists of a number of activities that create a value which the customer is willing to pay for. What is regarded as a value differs between different people from different cultures and a successful business process requires that the vendor and the customer have the same understanding of certain critical concepts. Intercultural knowledge can enhance the understanding of the values of other cultures. In that way a seller can focus his communication around concepts that he knows is of value to the counterpart. The discussion in this paper shows that the intrapersonal communication that precedes interpersonal communication consists of a limited number of archetype processes. The presented model illustrates the relation between these processes and how intercultural influence and intracultural understanding may affect these processes. The model can enhance the conceptual understanding of intercultural business communication processes and be used as a theoretical tool for analysis of such processes.

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