The English and the French at work
Contrasting language practices and Cultural Shock

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The intensifying of French-English relationships through their business dealings has not put an end to the long-lasting rivalry the two people endured across centuries. This article presents a number of examples that show that misunderstandings between the two groups involved arise from their representations of contrasting language practices as well as contrasting communicative attitudes, stressing the need for the development of intercultural competence in any foreign language communication.

La intensificación de las relaciones franco-inglesas vía sus transacciones de negocios no ha puesto fin a la rivalidad ancestral que han tenido los dos pueblos a través de los siglos. Este artículo presenta algunos ejemplos que muestran que los malentendidos entre los dos grupos involucrados surgen con base en sus representaciones de las prácticas lingüísticas contrastantes, como también de las actitudes comunicativas contrastantes, subrayando la necesidad del desarrollo de una competencia intercultural en cualquier comunicación en una lengua extranjera.

Introduction

"Cultural shock": the intensity conveyed by the expression bears evidence of the distress one individual (or group of individuals) may experience when meeting another individual from a different cultural background. Most often the occurrence of such a feeling is thought in terms of deep, intimate differences which are identified with geographical distance. Does this mean that people originating from close countries would be free from any reactions of "shock"? Would the French and the English, for instance, have acquired, with the passing centuries, a form of relationships that would save them from any defence or rejection mechanisms towards each other?

We suggest that it is precisely the closeness between the two countries, their enduring rivalry which needs to be explored because it still permeates and poisons their relationships. A review of recent books and articles published in England and France gives evidence of the reciprocal feelings of mistrust between the two groups involved: *The I hate the French Official Handbook* (Malcom Scott, 1992), *Best of Enemies* (Robert Gibson, 1995) or the article published in the French magazine *L'européen* (July 1998): *Pourquoi les Anglais nous détestent* ('Why the English hate us'). The same feelings are present and even emphasised by the competition implied in a business environment. This is frequently observed in the difficulties met by managers of binational English-French companies or multinational companies where French and English people happen to interact. The world of business then acts as a magnifying glass on the situation of communication offering opportunities to analyse interactions and build strategies to improve co-operation. Researching this particular field of interaction appears prominent to help clarify the misunderstandings between the two groups involved in the study and also explore the competence of "intercultural speakers" as defined by Byram (1997). This competence rests on the ability to communicate with a foreign partner thanks to the acquisition of linguistic as well as cultural communicative skills.

Our research survey is based on 60 interviews conducted with English and French staff in 10 different binational or multinational companies. The interviews are using semi-directive technique and follow the pattern set up by Brenner (1987) for qualitative research: the number of interviews should not exceed 100, with an average duration of one hour each. The content analysis is based on the interactionist approach of pragmatics and more generally on the ethnography of communication. Even if conversationalists have diversified their approaches (interactionism being represented in France by Kerbrat-Orecchioni who focuses on the analysis of verbal interactions in conversations), they all adhere to the principles defined by Dell Hymes and Gumperz in 1964 and 1972: a language only exists in context, a language expresses itself according to specific social norms, a language not only follows linguistic rules but also behaviour rules belonging to the people who speak it. This approach led me very quickly to consider the linguistic exchange as the site of the first encounter and the first misunderstandings. Although most exchanges took place through telephone calls, faxes or e-mails without face-to-face meetings, judgements were already passed and prejudices already showed in the dealings between the two groups.

My hypothesis from then on postulated that the exploration of language devices and strategies used by the English and French people in their business environment would allow to identify the sensitive areas of frustration and misunderstandings between the two groups. Once identified in language practices, these areas could be checked in the coinciding communicative attitudes observed in the same groups.

This paper presents the area concerned with the field of negotiation and which rests on the acceptance of conflict contrasted with the search for compromise. The first part deals with the language practices related to this opposition while the second part deals with the corresponding communicative behaviour practices. Following the *grounded theory* set up for qualitative research by Glaser and Strauss (1967), I use the representations of the actors of the interaction themselves —considering that they are the first people concerned and the best suited witnesses— to build a model of their own interaction of communication. The role of the researcher comparable to that of an ethnographer (cf. Gumperz 1982, Salins 1992, Saville-Troike 1989) consists in selecting typical instances of verbal and communicative events likely to put social and cultural differences into light.

1. Language practices

The first stage of the study requires the analysis of the acts of language likely to cause surprise, uneasiness or anger in the respective interlocutors. The interviewees themselves give the data that help to define the acts of language at stake in this specific interaction, such as forms of address, politeness markers, strategies of directness or indirectness. These acts of language have been commonly explored by linguists and especially pragmatists (Brown & Levinson, Gumperz, House & Blum-Kulka, Kerbrat-Orecchioni, Leech, Thomas, Wierzbicka).

1.1 The direct ways of the French

On the French side, one can note the predominance of direct forms of address. Even aware of the inadequacy of their direct communicative strategies, French people seem to find it extremely difficult to soften their discourse:

(1) French speaker (FS): *Quand je veux quelque chose, je leur dis* I want. *Je sais qu 'its utilisent des expressions plus détournées, mais je ne vois pas pourquoi je ne dirais pas* I want.
'When I want something, I say I want. I do know that they use more roundabout expressions but I don't see why I wouldn't say I want.'

(2) English speaker (ES): And quite often, they (the French) will make demands, or it seems like they are making demands rather than asking a question.

(3) ES: And quite often English people would be extremely offended if somebody would just come down and say something without saying please at the end or without a softer tone to what they are saying.

I want, questions sounding like *demands,* direct statements with *a harsh tone* are associated with people of higher position as Thomas (1984: 227) states it:

> In interactions with people of equal or higher status than themselves they (the foreign speakers) are inadvertently employing pragmatic or discoursal strategies which for native speakers are typically associated with a person in position of 'power'.

This assertive way of speaking has also been analysed by the French linguist Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1987: 342) who says:

> *L'assertion abondamment utilisée dans le discours des Français, est en général considérée comme un marqueur de position haute dans l'échange.*
> 'Assertion which is abundantly used by French people in their discourse, is usually regarded as a marker of higher status in the exchange.'

One can then understand how the use of assertive models by the French confirms their English colleagues in their opinion on the arrogance and aggressiveness of the French. This will be an obstacle to the quality of the relationship as another Englishman remarks:

> (5) ES It may not be what they are actually saying, but if somebody just blurts a sentence it might be quite innocent, but you just don't connect with that person as well as you would if they actually just phrased a question in a slightly different way or even just said it in a different way.

1.2 The indirect ways of the English

Conversely, one can note the predominance of indirect forms of address on the English side. A number of devices or stategies of indirectness are to be found in the English group's discourse.

1.2.1 Tactful ways

On the English side, requests are formulated in an indirect way: *Would you mind? Could you do me a favour?* where the unaware French speaker will use *Can you?* This is what another English speaker calls the subtleties of language:

> (6) ES I mean we use subtleties as a means of asking someone to do something : Would you mind awfully doing this, blah, blah, blah, blah ?

The Englishman/woman who uses this tactful strategy in order to avoid giving offence to people in authority over him/her and intimidating people lower in hierarchy than him/herself will again find his/her French counterpart discourteous and domineering. The relationship will again be endangered.

1.2.2 Lack of assertion

Question-tags are also a cause of uneasiness or even frustration since they are felt by the French as a lack of assertion. The interrogation contained in the tag at the end of a statement (7) to (9) reinforces the French in their belief that the English are voluntarily trying to mislead them through the vagueness of their utterances. Even though, from an English point of view, the tag also serves the purpose of tactfulness, leaving symbolically open the possibility that you won't get agreement from your interlocutor, it is difficult for a French hearer to discriminate between the search for confirmation, the softening of a statement or opinion or the cover for embarrassment or aggression.

(7) ES And yet you're comfortable living in France, aren't you?

(8) ES The French culture outside of work is slightly different, isn't it?

(9) ES That's our fault, isn't it?

Some of the English people interviewed were very well aware of the fun they could derive from the use of them and the convenience of the device:

(10) ES You can ask questions in so many ways or make a suggestion or ask something and right at the last moment you twist it and you offer compromise, just in the way you twist a question at the end. So, it's fun...

One will also note the protective quality implied by a device which prevents any loss of face for either of the speakers since it systematically helps avoid disagreement.

Lack of assertion also appears in the frequent use of *hedges*. The English interviewees tend to resort to this device especially when they have to give an embarrassing opinion or express unfavourable remarks such as:

(11) ES I *sort of* feel that the French are still *kind of*...

(12) ES We sometimes are a bit *kind of* shy and *kind of* moan a lot.

Or to comment on a statement which sounds too direct:

(13) Interviewer: You said that French people seem to be slower.

(14) Interviewee: I think *sort* q/less... I am *sort of* quite hesitant to say that it's a French way of doing things.

It is remarkable that the term *hedge* has no equivalent in French which signals that the concept of hedging is typical of the English language and is most probably a value of the English culture. "Refuse to answer" directly which is the definition given by the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* has a negative connotation in French, which appears in expressions such as: *faire une réponse de normand, ménager la chèvre et le chou, tourner autour du pot.* (literally: 'give a Norman answer' = perhaps yes, perhaps no, 'spare the goat and the cabbage' = sit on the fence, 'walk round the pot' = beat about the bush)

1.2.3 Understatement: a means of softening discourse

In contrast to the emphatic speech, to the overstatement and the superlatives used by the French, understatements seem to be in favour among the English speakers. Adjectives or adverbs such as *reasonable/bly, quite* often punctuate their discourse:

(15) ES I can understand a *reasonable* amount of French.

(16) ES I have got a *reasonable* hotel tonight.

(17) ES I am *quite* cruel.

(18) ES They were *quite* like that, *quite* argumentative.

(19) ES They have *got* a reputation for being *quite* relaxed.

(20) ES They have a *quite* strong sense of humour.

Here again, the aim is to soften the discourse and avoid expressing too directly one's opinion as was already underlined with the *hedges*.

The use of *reasonably* and *quite* as synonyms is not infrequent either :

(21) ES A *reasonably* accurate definition.

(22) ES I think my figures are absolutely *quite* accurate.

In these two examples the adverbs help soften an adjective which is non-gradable and would express too high a degree of the concept of accuracy if not modified.

Quite can even be combined with *hedges* to reinforce the softening of the statement:

(23) ES They can be *quite sort of* proud.

(24) ES I'm *sort of quite* thick-skinned.

We have also noted the frequent use of the adverbs *fairly* and *pretty* which function as a form of understatement in the English discourse :

(25) ES They usually are *fairly* catholic.

(26) ES I'm *fairly* direct.

(27) ES Cliff speaks *pretty* good French.

(28) ES Sometimes, you know, a bit of adapting is *pretty* much better.

1.2.4 Humour as another strategy of indirectness

Humour can also constitute another strategy of indirectness. The French who are more accustomed to verbal fight (Beal, 1994) will not even perceive the subtleties of their English

partners' humorous ways. Very few French interviewees say that they can understand English humour. This is the definition given by one of the English interviewees:

> (29) ES I mean I must say I am quite cruel with my humour because English humour is very ironic and it's not direct, it's quite indirect, it's the way you say things.

This indirectness will again help the flexibility of interpretation and avoid loss of face since there is no display of direct cruelty or aggression.

1.3 Consequences

All these strategies of indirectness nourish the French feelings of mistrust towards the English. The English attitude is severely judged: The English are too evasive, you never know what they think, they are hypocritical. The adjective *vague* is often used to describe them:

> (30) FS Other experiences I have had with the English have always been in the *vague*. I mean, you can never get the answer 'yes' or 'no', it's always in between.

> (31) FS It's very difficult to know because the international manager is extremely *vague* and unable..., well doesn't really want to say what the matter is.

Hence the accusations of manipulation and hypocrisy:

> (32) FS Nothing is fully said, so from the moment nothing is fully said, every interpretation is possible. Those that suit the strongest man will win.

> (33)FS It confirms the image one can have about the English, two-faced b., unable to tell the truth, to say what they think anyway.

> (34) FS I don't work there (in England), I had a hundred times rather work here (in France). It's much more straightforward.

> (35) FS In France decisions are clear, straight and precise. In England things are always evasive because the characters are evasive!

One will note the absence of understatement and softeners in the French discourse !

The aggressive and combative ways of the French will not only appear in their directness but also through the frequent use of adversative tum-openings. The well-known reflex or routine of the French who start their utterances with *mais* will also be an obstacle to the quality of the relationships :

> *Non mais*, 'No but'
> *Non mais oui,* 'No but yes'
> *Oui mais,* 'Yes but'
> *Oui mais justement,* 'Yes but precisely'

Oui mais d'tout'manière, 'Yes but anyway'
Mais bien sur, 'But of course'
Oui mais attends, 'Yes but wait' (cf. Vicher & Sankoff : 1989)

Lastly the apparent struggle to take one's turn in the conversation will bewilder the English who are more accustomed to the absence of interruptions or to leaving gaps in the discourse to allow one's interlocutor to take his turn.

> (36) ES Everyone seemed to be talking at the same time. It was really hard to know when I would be able to speak. Everything was going so quickly. In the end I'd rather keep silent.

By contrast the French will tend to think that the absence of interruptions or overlapping signal a lack of interest on the part of their interlocutors.

2.Communicative attitudes

The second stage of the analysis had to confirm the link between language and attitudes. Was there any coincidence between language practices and communicative practices or action? As Lakoff & Johnson (1985) put it: "Metaphor is present in our daily life, not only in language but also in thought and action."

If language bears evidence of the way we function, thought and action should follow the same patterns and guidelines.

If, to recall Lakoff & Johnson's example: "discussion is war", the lexicon and the language strategies used to discuss should be the reflection of the concept of war. This concept would also structure what we do when we discuss. If there existed a culture where discussion would be felt as a dance, the people would talk and act in a completely different way from ours.

Therefore if lexicon and language strategies on the French side resort to direct encounter without avoidance of conflict when interacting and negotiating, and to avoidance of direct encounter and disagreement on the English side, we should be able to observe the reflection of the concepts of conflict and compromise in the actions and the attitudes of the two groups involved.

Still following the *grounded theory* set up by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the second stage of the analysis focuses on the representations of the actors of the interaction, this time selecting instances of communicative behaviour illustrating the coincidence with the instances of acts of languages selected in the first stage of the study.

The second stage of the analysis gives the following results.

2.1 Inability to compromise

The English stress the un willingness of the French to deviate from their position. The metaphor with war is omnipresent in the lexicon used to describe the French attitude towards compromise:

(37) ES But at meetings didn't you feel that the French would state a position and fight to defend that position tooth and nail ?

(3 8) ES I do think the French tend to come with a preconceived idea and will defend that to the very limit.

(39) ES The most difficult thing I find is the stubbornness. I find them quite hard to negotiate with, to compromise with. Because it's easier with other countries.

(40) ES The French find it very difficult to compromise, once they have made their mind up, they will not deviate from that.

(41) ES The French will dig their heels in and resist right up to the end.

The English will therefore conclude that the French are unable to compromise, all the more because French people, according to the same English speakers, have a negative feeling towards compromising:

(42) ES I feel the French probably perceive the need to compromise on their behalf as some sort of defeat or failure, or loss of face.

(43) ES I have often seen French people struggling with compromise.

The English who remain convinced that compromise is the only way to negotiation will not understand these negative perceptions.

2.2 Lack of efficiency

The French in their turn do not understand their English colleagues' decision-making process and reproach the English with their lack of efficiency, precisely because of their attempt to reach a compromise :

(44) FS They are not very efficient... They seem to be tied to reaching a soft consensus rather than being efficient.

(45) FS Decision-making is the weak point of the English. French people are much better.

Mutual accusations of wasting time are passed on each side :

(46) ES When I first came to this company, one of the things I noticed at once was the duration of the meetings. Where I used to work, a meeting that went on for more than an hour was some sort of phenomenon. Here a meeting of two hours or three hours is not unusual, and I've heard of meetings going on for four hours !

(47) FS They (the English) give you the feeling that they know how to spend a long time in meetings.

Finally the attitudes observed in each group by each group reinforce the perception of the arrogant, inflexible and discourteous side of the French towards the evasiveness, overpoliteness and hypocrisy of the English. These perceptions will again lead to the failure in communication.

The French irritate the English who find they are "the most vociferous in the meeting" and " ridiculous to go into a situation expecting to be 100% winner all the time." They often prefer to back down out of tiredness:

> (48) ES We often walk out of the meetings drained and often you will give up fighting what you believe a better proposal, purely you are thinking, I can't communicate, I can't get through to this person, he or she is not open to further suggestions.

The French will find that they cannot trust the English who are too 'vague' and never do what has been decided:

> (49) FS Those people (the English) are not frank, they are not frank because they give the impression they have accepted everything. They never tell you frankly whether they agree or disagree.

> (50) FS They are polite but certainly not honest... They say something and never do what they say.

> (51) FS You leave the meeting thinking, well tomorrow I confirm in writing, they ratify and the business is done. Three weeks later, no news. You chase them every day. You are left in complete vagueness.

All these perceptions are echoing the perceptions deriving from the differing strategies of language concerning indirectness (6) and (29), avoiding disagreement through lack of assertion (7) to (14) and softening (15) to (28). As a consequence the decision-making process will be thwarted. The French will not understand the collective decisions taken by the English who "tend to throw a number of different ideas, hoping to talk through each one of them and then come up with the best one" or "the most reasonable" one while the English will feel frustrated in their dealings with the "passionate" French who need "the important man, perhaps the head of department to make the ultimate decision."

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can only note that the cross-cultural representations which have been presented in this article, illustrate rejection mechanisms and ethnocentric withdrawal related to a condition of "cultural shock". The geographical closeness, the concept of frontier symbolically abolished by the building of the Channel tunnel, do not permit to erase the differences between French and English people. Linguistic as well as cultural shock persist in language practices and communicative attitudes. They threaten the process of co-operation

and impede work partnership between the two groups. The failure in communication reinforces stereotypes leading to rejection, misunderstanding, conflict or escape.

We need to go beyond mere observation of these differences and further stress the importance of the cultural dimension in the specific field of interaction we have been observing and analysing. The following stage of the study, which cannot be developed here, suggests resorting to the examination of the cultural heritage of the two groups involved in order to trace the origins of the characteristic features identified in the first steps of the analysis. This cultural memory is brought into light with the exploration of family anthropology, ethnopsychology, religious and ideological affinities.

We firmly believe that it is the knowledge of language practices and communicative attitudes, together with the awareness of historical permeation which can lead to better interaction between the two groups involved in our study and help develop the competence of "intercultural speaker".

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