

Understanding the Merits and Demerits of High and Low Context Oriented  
Communication Cultures in Intercultural Business Conflict: the case of  
Fukushima and Japanese communication schema

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# Understanding the Merits and Demerits of High and Low Context Oriented Communication Cultures in Intercultural Business Conflict: the case of Fukushima and Japanese communication schema

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## 1. Introduction

In order for transnational companies to compete more effectively, a basic awareness of cultural norms and societal values that underpin behavior and decision-making is essential. It can mean the difference between success and failure. The recent tsunami caused nuclear disaster in Fukushima, Japan in March of 2011 highlighted the need for a better understanding of how Westerners and Easterners prefer to communicate when under pressure. Numerous misperceptions and misunderstandings occurred in the ensuing weeks and months of the disaster between Japanese and foreign governments and between TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company) which is responsible for operating the Dai-ichi Fukushima nuclear power plant. Most cross-cultural misunderstandings, however, are less noticeable and indeed unrecognized and of lower profile. Intercultural communication theories are a good starting point to frame how these kinds of cross-cultural conflicts arise and how to highlight the underlying norms that exist as cultural background knowledge or schema.

## 2. Intercultural Communication (IC) Theories

There are several basic Intercultural Communication (IC) theories that offer useful starting points for considering how someone from another culture prefers to communicate. Well-documented theories to aid in decoding cultural ways of meaning making include (LeBaron and Pillay, 2006, p. 32-33):

- Individualism-Communitarianism
- Universalism-Particularism
- Specificity-Diffuseness
- Low-High Power Distance
- Sequential-Synchronous Time
- High-Low Context

With regards to many Asian countries, perhaps the most influential theory is Hall's high and low context (1976) communication theory.

## 2.1 High Low Context Communication Orientation

Hall's (1976) theory of high and low context culture explains the basic types of communication speakers from collectivistic and individualistic cultures norms typically prefer. According to this theory, a high context (HC) culture, such as Japan, is characterized by nonverbal communication and meanings shared implicitly by speaker/listener that are highly dependent on the context. A high context culture orientation is one in which information is shared consistently by all members of the same group. This communication preference allows information to continually build up and be modified thereby maintaining a high level of context so that literal utterances are not needed. The emphasis of the utterance is placed on how and by whom because there is meaning already associated with the context in which it is spoken. Conversely, low context (LC) oriented cultures (e.g. US) are said to value explicit literal communication between speaker/listener; the proverb, "the squeaky wheel always gets the grease" shows the Western value of explicitly speaking what is on your mind or risk losing some advantage. Low context cultures tend to place less emphasis on context and more value on the individual's content of the message in order to "better predict listener's behavior in direct communication" (Gudykunst, et. al 1993, p. 151). High context cultures typically value good relationships to their in-group members more than low context cultures.

## 2.2 High-Low Context Criticism

From a strictly academic context of considering human knowledge and behavior, HC-LC theory is indeed limited and has been strongly criticized recently (Guest 2009, Holliday et. al 2010) for causing the opposite of what it intends to do - causing damaging stereotypes resulting in more miscommunications and misunderstandings. IC theories are essentialist theories in that they attempt to define a set of characteristics that communities of people tend to follow to make meaning in specific situations. A non-essentialist view, on the other hand, maintains that, "culture is a shifting reality anyway, people make of it what they need to live their identities in different circumstances" ((Guest, 2009), et. al, 2010, p. 15). Furthermore, an essentialist view uses prescribed information (i.e. high/low context) and

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attempts to “define the person before understanding the person” (Holliday, et. al, 2010, p. 11). However, this line of thinking, while noble, also serves to obfuscate IC in two areas. First, it is practically impossible, and potentially naively individualistic, to suggest that, “we should take every fact of what they do and say seriously” when communicating with someone from a different background (Holliday, et. al, 2010, p. 16). How we communicate is largely locked up in the deep culture of unrecognized background knowledge. Thus, it will be extremely difficult, nigh impossible, to modify big C cultural norms if we are not aware of them and how they are affecting our communication. We draw off of this assumed knowledge, or cultural schema, to fill-in the blanks in ambiguous situations. For example, in a contentious face-losing context, the Japanese speaker would draw off of high context oriented cultural schema to attempt to consider what impact a decision would have on others in their group and what affect it may have on in-group relationships before giving any firm or direct answer. Equivocating phrases such as, “I wonder what other’s think” or “We need to examine the matter more closely”, are HC speak for “we need to build a consensus before making a decision.” It is one thing to state that all human beings should be universally understood on a one-to-one basis but quite another in attempting to do so in any practical sense where consequential decisions are involved, lives at stake that require timely cross-cultural negotiation or billions of dollars of government and private contracts hanging in the balance. The western business sojourner is typically trying to achieve as much as possible in the least amount of time (a deep cultural LC norm) and highly values pragmatic, timely results over time consuming, consensus-making, face saving negotiations (deep HC norms) that consider the needs of each individuals within groups. Second, the definition of culture itself is concerned with group norms, values (not individuals) and how they are shared and valued in different degrees within a particular community. Finally, IC theories have lasted this long for a good reason. They are useful starting points and heuristic devices to help make intercultural interaction more understandable and approachable. Intercultural theories such as high-low context are perhaps best considered a continuum (Weaver, 2000, p. 74) that individuals fit on at different points in their lifetimes with some exhibiting more or less big cultural attributes than others depending on how well defined the context is. Divergent behavior occurs when the other speaker does not follow the commonly accepted group norms of communicating. In addition, communication can largely be context driven especially if the larger cultural norms are perceived as being met or fulfilled. For instance, Japanese communication is mostly regarded as high context, but in small-group contexts can be very low context. This is due to

the perception that social and behavioral roles have already been well threshed out and individuals have already contextualized the communicative setting (e.g. social hierarchy roles are clear) and are thus freer to exhibit low context behavior.

### 3. English as a LC Global Tool for Business Communication

English has become the medium enabling billions of people worldwide to communicate in a language outside their mother tongue and national culture. The English language is recognized as an indispensable tool for international business communication. Japanese companies that depend on doing business overseas are increasingly recruiting English capable employees and requiring English to be used within company meetings. Many large transnational Japanese companies such as Nissan, Uniqlo, Softbank and Rakuten now hold meetings in English and are requiring current and potential employees to have a high level of proficiency. Indeed, it appears to slowly be catching on that international relations are indeed the lifeblood of Japan ("Watching China Whizz," 2010). English has succeeded in becoming the international language of choice not only because of the economic prowess of the English speaking countries but also because the underpinning cultural values of the language are particularly conducive for effective communication in intercultural contexts which have a high degree of ambiguity among speakers. As a language, it is ideally suited to fill this role due to its LC orientation. In business, clarity is vital to a successful interaction and there is often little time to build context. Thus, a low context way of communicating obliges explicitness and directness as way of showing one's honesty and trustworthiness via clarity and specificity. "Americans, in particular, need and thrive on specificity because theirs is largely a low-context culture" (Donahue, 1998, p. 170). Having things spelled out or communicated presumes – via LC cultural schema- that we can avoid miscommunication with people from varied backgrounds. High context (HC) cultures, such China, Korea and Japan, strongly value interpersonal harmony, social hierarchy and consensus decision-making. This reinforces a more cooperative, indirect way of communicating. There is a higher degree of tolerance for language ambiguity in high context cultures than in low ones because the context is expected to– via HC cultural schema- fill in the blanks as opposed to language itself. We can see how the high and low context cultural norms can affect understanding in this example business meeting conversation between a native Japanese and English speaker.

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- (1) **Mr. Browning** : Since we have a few minutes left in our meeting, I'd like to bring up the subject of Yamada distributors.
- (2) **Mr. Otomo** : Yamada? What about them?
- (3) **Mr. Browning** : Well, I don't think any of us are that pleased with their services. I think we should find a new distributor. I've heard that Inoue Company is quite good.
- (4) **Mr. Otomo** : I wonder what others think. Have you discussed this with anyone else?
- (5) **Mr. Browning** : Not really. That's why I'm bringing it up now, to get your opinions.
- (6) **Mr. Otomo** : Yes, we should get other people's opinions before we decide.
- (7) **Mr. Browning** : Good. So what do you think, Otomo-san?
- (8) **Mr. Otomo** : I couldn't really say.

(Storti, 1994, p. 93)

Both speakers are using their cultural norms to interact (in English) in this business meeting. Mr. Browning uses a practical, direct LC approach while Mr. Otomo uses a high context, consensus building approach. Neither side seems to recognize their own or the others communication preference which results in confusion.

Cultural orientation and schema oblige the manner in how language is used and interpreted and hold the key to how a group of people make meaning. "When your language routinely obliges you to specify certain types of information, it forces you to be attentive to certain details in the world and to certain aspects of experience that speakers of other languages may not be required to think about all the time. And since such habits of speech are cultivated from the earliest of age, it is only natural that they can settle into habits of mind that go beyond language itself, affecting your experiences, perceptions, associations, feelings, memories and orientation in the world" (Deutscher, 2010).

### 3. 1 The TEPCO Fukushima Nuclear Misunderstanding

A high-low cultural orientation can lead to significant misunderstandings in critical cross-cultural contexts. For example, soon after the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami in March of 2011 causing the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Americans and Japanese officials differed in their approach to data interpretation and decision-making according to their HC and LC

norms. The New York Times (Tabuchi and Bradsher, 2011) reported that the Japanese were more interested in presenting, “a blizzard of facts and numbers but rarely make broader declarations about the conditions” of the nuclear crisis. The Japanese media, on the other hand, criticized the American and foreign media of exaggerating the situation, making hasty conclusions and failing to take into account all the facts. Considering theoretical framework discussed above, we can see that the US is strongly relying on (and expects) a LC approach. In other words, the US side expected the large amount nuclear data deemed most important to be pared down immediately so that only the most vital pertinent information could be used to help interpret the overall situation and make decisions expeditiously. With an LC approach, information should start from a specific point spiralling outwards to more general information. The Japanese side, on the other hand, used a classic HC style by first gathering large amounts of information, including gathering and weighing various experts’ opinions and the affect they may have on others before steadily moving on to a specific action. This HC approach can be imagined as a large spiral steadily moving inward to eventually reach a specific point in the center where a consensus has been reached requiring fast action. We can see from these two approaches to decision-making that each is following the cultural schema of their HC or LC cultural orientation. The Japanese are attempting to build a more time consuming high context approach to disseminating information so that everyone can agree on what course of action to take if any. The rationale behind this is if everyone is not on the same page, mistakes are likely to happen and the final product will be flawed. The US, side preferred a low context approach that focuses on key data, ignoring information considered irrelevant (e.g. the social role, type of agency) and made decisions based on this approach. This gets done quickly but there may be many starts and stops along the way to final implementation as other information is considered. This high-low context approach to communicative decision-making is well collaborated by the cognitive cross-cultural research (Nisbett, 2003, p. 90). For instance, Nisbett found that when Japanese and Americans look at a picture of a fish aquarium, the Americans tended to focus on the largest fish that stands out while ignoring its surrounding context. Japanese, on the other hand, tended to first select the background objects as they interacted and related to the environment as a whole. Both approaches to communication and decision-making have their strong and weak points, which we consider in more detail in the next section.

#### 4. Merits and Demerits of HC-LC in Intercultural Business Contexts

In the international business context where English is the medium for communication, a high context approach is problematic unless both low and high context oriented participants are aware of their own norms of communication that unconsciously affect how they communicate and react. While HC oriented communication cultures often see LC speakers as immature, impatient or insensitive to others, the LC oriented speakers sometimes are left with a feeling of insincerity and untrustworthiness (Akasu and Asao 1993, p. 99) when dealing with HC oriented speakers. "It's a perennial complaint in the overseas operations of Japanese companies that they don't get enough information from Japan, to the point where they begin to wonder if things are being deliberately hidden from them" (Rudlin, 2011).

These kinds of misperceptions are based on unrecognized cultural schema and were also played out fully in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Moreover, building a consensus - a highly desirable act in HC cultures like Japan - is seen in a mostly negative light by Western LC business people.

"Relying on consensus means that decisions are made slowly, if at all. With so many people to please, the result is often a mediocre morass of compromises. And with so many hands involved, there is no accountability; no reason for individuals to excel; no sanction against bad decisions so that there are fewer of them in the future" ("Take a leaf," 2008).

To overcome these types of negative interpretations, it is useful to consider the assumptions and weaknesses that both HC and LC cultures make. In the tables below, the merits and demerits of both HC and LC oriented communicators are listed in regards to intercultural business interaction.



Table 1 Demerits of HC-LC orientation

HC	LC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often not as efficient or productive</li> <li>• Individuals not pushed to maximum efficiency</li> <li>• deemphasizing the individual can stifle personal development; dampen motivation</li> <li>• greater possibility of wasted talent and time if lack of interest in task</li> <li>• saving face mentality in workplace can prevent progress, negatively influence outcomes</li> <li>• past orientation can slow change for positive future growth; stagnation</li> <li>• lack of competition harms innovation, creativity</li> <li>• lack of transparency in dealing with those outside the group</li> <li>• case-by-case standard to allow for flexibility can more easily result in discrimination</li> <li>• project planning takes more time to build consensus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• poor relational harmony can make interaction less efficient, cause strained workplace relations, poor teamwork</li> <li>• overemphasis of final outcome may be harmful in long term, harm commitments to future interaction or personal development</li> <li>• personal responsibility creates more stress on individuals, can lead to decisions that are not best for group as a whole</li> <li>• difficulty in making/maintaining deeper relationships; high job mobility harms loyalty</li> <li>• lack of consideration of the past/present can cause failure in the future</li> <li>• higher relational competition can result in selfishness and/or lack of cooperative spirit</li> <li>• overly narrow job description mean less flexibility in the workplace; responsibilities are not shared; task only as good as individual</li> <li>• implementation of planning can break down more easily due to lack of consensus</li> </ul>

Table 2 Merits of HC-LC orientation

HC	LC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stronger human relationships, bonds</li> <li>• Allows future interactions to be smoother, increasing productivity</li> <li>• Holistic approach</li> <li>• The process is as important as the outcome</li> <li>• Better cooperative spirit</li> <li>• Focus on “being” and “progress” (not only outcome) is less stressful, makes goals seem more attainable</li> <li>• Implementation is often faster, efficient</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater efficiency and productivity in short term</li> <li>• Initial planning is faster</li> <li>• Risk-taking is encouraged by focusing on outcome</li> <li>• Much easier to “cut and run” when things go wrong; easier to start over</li> <li>• Future orientation encourages a pragmatic approach</li> <li>• Task outcome orientation allows individual to maximize focus, become more competent faster</li> </ul>

## 5. Discussion

Much of the world's business is done in English, which accommodates a low context orientation to communication for native English speakers. Certainly, languages have the physical capacity to be either LC or HC in their orientation. However, speakers from particular cultural orientations do not simply discard a lifetime of norms and values to communicate but rather continue to rely on and use their native cultural schema to interpret and make meaning regardless of language used (see Fisman and Miguel 2006). This means that HC and LC oriented communicators need to become consciously aware of the disadvantages and advantages of their own communication tendencies and not only the others communication differences to have a better chance of a success in cross-cultural business interaction. To begin to clarify and understand cultural differences, we need IC theories to be used as both guiding and self-reflecting lights to draw upon along the way. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of IC theories is that they serve as a heuristic device enabling cross-cultural participants to discover why communication has become strained or broken down completely.

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**Abstract.** This paper shall highlight the merits and demerits of both high and low context oriented communication cultures - particularly in cross-cultural business contexts. Intercultural Communication (IC) theories such as high – low context, universalism – particularism and monochronic – polychronic time are meant to serve as guideposts for the international sojourner to communicate effectively in the host country. We shall also briefly discuss the idea that the English language serves as a low context facilitator in critical business incidents and use the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster as a case in point of how both high and low context cultures use their cultural schema to make crucial decisions. Finally, the importance of IC theories as a starting point to better cross-cultural understanding is stressed.

**Keywords:** intercultural communication, high low context, Asia, western, business, Fukushima

