Question 1: How does culture affect interpretation of a message?

Answer 1: Interculturalist John Condon, a scholar in the field of intercultural communication, helped make people aware of their own cultures and their effects on the communication process in interpersonal relationships. In particular, he described the three Es of intercultural relationships (Kelly, 1999):

- **Ethnography:** The influence of anthropology and linguistics on cultural traditions
- **Ethnocentric:** The idea of in-groups (trusted members) and out-groups (people who are not trusted or considered within the circle of trust) within one's own culture
- **Equity:** How some cultures take advantage of others (imperialism and forced assimilation)

The three Es help people to develop an awareness of how culture affects the way people see and interpret their worlds and messages delivered to them. Culture affects viewpoints from political, economic, legal, social, religious, and gender roots.

Culture also helps and hinders people's natural filtering system in the communication model. Filtering is how people screen information from their own knowledge and experience to interpret a message. Sometimes, this filter creates stereotypes and further barriers to understanding a message in addition to language and other differences.

For example, in business negotiations, a Middle Eastern businessman may not want to negotiate with a European businesswoman because of the cultural issue of gender subordination. In some Middle Eastern and European countries, gender inequality exists, creating an inability to establish a larger, equitable world system or universal communication among cultures.

Question 2: Is there such a thing as universal world communication?

Answer 2: While no formal definition exists, scholars have developed theories about how different cultures communicate and interact with each other. Many theories focus on the concept of commonalities among cultures. It has been noted that learning how to adapt to differences and other cultures is a step toward developing effective business relationships and deals. It is
important to know how to communicate locally and globally and to adapt quickly between the styles.

Even though culture and behavior vary, Chomsky believed in the concept of universal human behavior (Chomsky & Smith, 2000). In this idea, Chomsky discusses the idea of generic grammar across cultures and languages. He described a universal deep structure and noted that each culture has a universal preprogrammed language in all humans.

Language exists where humans exist. Despite linguistic and semantic differences, languages have universal meanings that help people survive in their respective environments. Language changes as people change. For example, consider the word *e-mail*; this is a result of a changing environment. Within this deep, structural language, there are common meanings and understandings that are universal, which help build on a world system of communicating.

**Question 3:** What are some areas of potential conflict in intercultural negotiations?

**Answer 3:** Conflict is part of communication and may be more pronounced when diverse cultures are present. The element of culture plays an important role in interpretation and understanding in the traditional sender–receiver model. The following are some potential conflict areas:

**Cultural Constraints**

Senders and receivers use their five senses to interpret messages. Culture often defines how we use these senses. Furthermore, gender can be an issue in intercultural communication because some cultures view the roles of gender differently from other cultures.

**Individualistic and Collective Cultures**

Whereas contrasting cultures consist of several elements, individualistic versus collectivist cultural issues present conflicts. For example, in a Western culture, many issues are more individualistic versus collective; therefore, personal agendas and power plays may be at stake in the negotiation process. Individualistic effort is emphasized in the United States. Other cultures place a high value on teamwork. A collective culture, such as Japan,
may be more sensitive to issue of embarrassment as a group, intent on saving face in the personal relationship, instead of the issue at hand.

**Nonverbal Cultural Differences**

Cultural differences in nonverbal communication can also create communication conflict. Time is viewed differently by different cultures. Time-conscious cultures include Americans, Germans, Japanese, and Canadians. Arab and Latin-American cultures are more relaxed about time.

Communication conflict among employees creates problems in business and intercultural relations, reducing productivity and profits. Learning about cultural differences and practicing sound communication strategies is essential in successful business negotiations.

**Question 4:** How does gender affect intercultural communication in business negotiations?

**Answer 4:** Gender is a very important consideration in intercultural communication. Not all countries treat each gender on an equal basis. Gender roles within a particular culture are learned behaviors and often different for males and females.

Many cultures help feed preconceptions about gender that enforce powerful worldviews of expected roles of gender in various societies. Consider how American society creates perceptions of active males and supporting females. Males are often viewed as more aggressive than women because of using communication styles that show their power instead of a more feminine communication style such as building rapport. For example, in business meetings, men and women may present information differently. Although every individual is different, stereotypically, males tend to use data and information to show competence and power in their positions; likewise, females tend to establish rapport first and then present information to seek consensus.

The receivers may perceive each style as weak or strong depending on the cultural filter. Different cultures view these gender styles differently. In fact, in some cultures, women are not allowed to speak in meetings or be present at all. In other cultures, only high-ranking males are allowed to make business decisions.
Gender roles give distinct rules for how to behave in business and social settings and have a powerful impact on negotiations. Various cultures view men and women differently, with varying goals and values. It is essential to be aware of these societal preconceptions in cross-cultural communication.

**Question 5:** How does uncertainty reduction theory apply to intercultural communication?

**Answer 5:** Uncertainty reduction theory explores how people get to know each other and gain knowledge about another person. The theory believes that the beginnings of interpersonal interactions are full of uncertainties (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). It is one of the most widely used theories in intercultural communication attempting to generate understanding of methods and motivation in both interpersonal and intercultural relationships.

The uncertainty reduction theory seeks to describe how people attempt to predict how other people will interpret and perceive actions and behaviors. It states that when two people know nothing about one another, uncertainty is high. As uncertainty is reduced, people generally will become more comfortable with one another.

**Entry Stage**

The theory discusses three interactive stages in communication. The first stage is the entry stage, where people share information about their age, occupation, and other demographics. This information is often controlled by societal or cultural norms. For example, at a business meeting, when members of the group do not know each other, they are most likely uncertain of what to expect. In most cases, small talk ensues, and people will ask questions about the other to reduce that personal uncertainty. Therefore, it is common to hear the question, "So, what do you do at Company XYZ?"

**Personal Stage**

The second stage is the personal stage, when people discuss their beliefs, attitudes, and more personal information. During this stage, it is common to hear: "Really? I have three children that age, too," or "We go to that same club as well."
Exit Stage

The last stage is known as the exit stage, where future plans to interact again are made, allowing the relationship to grow. An example of what you might hear at this stage includes, "OK. I'd love to catch up with you next time I'm in town. Let's schedule a meeting then."

The theory can also be applied to attempting to understand how other cultures will react to a particular stimulus, message, culture, or behavior pattern. People attempt to find out more about another person or culture through a variety of communication means, including interrogation or questioning, self-disclosure, and nonverbal immediacy. Berger (1987) noted that self-disclosure creates reciprocity between the two communicators.

Uncertainty decreases when people understand what is happening in the communication interaction and confidence in the other person increases. When the comfort level between two people increases, their interaction allows for communication that is more open and a higher level of nonverbal immediacy.

When applied to intercultural communication, Gudykunst (1986) found that African-Americans disclosed more than European-Americans in intraethnic relationships. Further studies show that different cultures use a variety of communication methods, both verbal and nonverbal, to find out more about the other culture.

**Question 6:** How do different cultures view the negotiation process?

**Answer 6:** Culture defines rules for social and business environments. To be successful in international business, consider how different cultures negotiate and make deals.

The following list shows how culture affects the business negotiation process (Numprasertchai & Swierczek, 2006):

- **Goal:** Long-term relationships are valued by Chinese, Japanese, and Thai cultures. Western cultures are more concerned with signing the contract.
- **Protocol:** Formality in negotiations varies among cultures. German and British business negotiators are very formal.
- **Communication:** Asian cultures prefer an indirect communication
style with minimal gesturing. Americans are direct and prefer a straightforward presentation.

- **Time:** Japanese are very strict about conforming to rules; Thais are more flexible and willing to change. Americans view time as a commodity that should not be wasted.
- **Individuals versus groups:** Thai culture is more group oriented or collective in decision making, with decisions made by top managers. Japanese build consensus in decision making.
- **Contract agreements:** Germans prefer specific contractual provisions and are very detail-oriented; Thais are more personal but still respect contractual agreements.

**Question 7:** What is cultural competence?

**Answer 7:** Intercultural competence is the degree to which a person is aware of cultural differences and able to successfully interact and communicate with other cultures. The term is broad enough to include how a person thinks of other cultures, interacts with them, and adapts to them.

Intercultural competence is important in business negotiations. Beyond cultural language differences, cultural competence allows a person to have a situational awareness and sensitivity toward other cultures in the overall negotiation process. Negotiations and team-building are more likely to be done when people trust one another. Having intercultural competence is a great strategy to build rapport and trust.

Cultural competence reaches beyond an understanding of other cultures; it also includes being able to adapt to cultural differences through knowledge and behavior.

**Question 8:** What is emotional intelligence, and how does it affect intercultural business communication?

**Answer 8:** Salovey and Meyer (1990) defined the term *emotional intelligence* (EI) and later coined it as EQ (emotional quotient). They identified the importance of emotional intelligence over intellectual quotient (IQ) because emotional intelligence allows people to adapt to the emotions of people and groups around them. People with a high EQ are people who can sense tension, apprehension, happiness, and other emotions and respond to them immediately. In intercultural situations, EQ helps a person to make negotiations because a person can get a better pulse of or feeling about a
situation. Salovey and Meyer noted that emotionally intelligent people learn to solve problems by adapting to the emotional considerations of a situation or relationship quickly.

These ideas have been used to train and develop cross-cultural communication to help understand cultural differences and influences in business. By being culturally aware, one can empathize and use the social skills necessary to become more culturally competent. These emotionally intelligent skills can be learned and applied to intercultural interactions. By being culturally aware, a business negotiator can understand issues of proxemics or personal space.

**Question 9:** What does the term *adaptation* mean in the intercultural communication process?

**Answer 9:** In the field of communication, adaptation refers to how a message is tailored to reach an intended audience. Humans communicate and interpret differently, so messages do not always have the same meaning for all people. To help solve this problem, communicators learn to adapt or fit the message to specific audiences.

For example, if a negotiator were working on a business deal in China, the messages would be geared toward information that a Chinese audience would understand. The words and symbols would be tailored in a way that sends the same message to a Chinese audience.

Messages that are not adapted for different audiences run the risk of being offensive, unsuccessful, and financially troublesome for businesses and customers. For example, an American car company marketed a car named Nova in Spanish-speaking countries without much success. The company could have more effectively adapted the name of the car; *Nova* translates to mean *no go* in Spanish. It is not a surprise that customers did not buy the car that had a name, which implied troubles running and operating.

**Question 10:** What are some strategies to communicate in a world communication system?

**Answer 10:** The following are some strategies to consider when communicating in an international context:
FAQ: Thinking Globally, Communicating Locally

- **Respect for diversity:** Diversity brings universal knowledge in all areas of business. Treat all members of an organization with respect and dignity.

- **Ethnicity issues:** It is important to be aware and sensitive to ethnicity. For example, there are different names for groups—some groups prefer to be called Hispanic, Black, White, or Asian—and these names are subject to change. Always refer to ethnicity based on what the culture, individual, or group designates.

- **Gender issues:** Learn to understand a culture's treatment of gender roles then seek to adapt and understand those differences in all interactions.

- **Be aware of collective and individualistic behaviors in group settings:** Different cultures place higher values on both behaviors. By understanding those values, business negotiations will run smoother.

- **Understand the business etiquette of a particular culture:** Depending on the culture, politeness, manner, dining habits, and gift-giving are important in positive, cross-cultural interactions and personal character.

**References**


