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Culture, Language and Business Relations: Recent Research and Practical Implications

Helen Spencer-Oatey, University of Warwick

Kevin Murray, the author of the popular book *The Language of Leaders*, argues as follows: (a) that communication is one of the top three crucial skills of leadership, and (b) that successful leaders know that relationships are the engines of success. Yet he also maintains that leaders have no schema or framework for thinking about either communication or relationships. If this is really the case, then there is a clear task for those who specialise in Business English. We need to make more people aware of appropriate frameworks. Then if we add culture into the mix, the situation is likely to be even more complex. The aim of this talk is to explore this complex interrelationship between culture, language and business relations, first drawing on recent research in the field of intercultural communication and then considering practical steps that can be taken. The talk is divided into three parts.

Part 1 focuses on models of intercultural competence. When we examine such models (e.g. Byram 1997; Ting-Toomey 1999; Gudykunst 2004; Chen & Starosta 2005; Spencer-Oatey & Stadler 2009), we find that communication is consistently identified as one of the key elements. Rather surprisingly, though, there is very little unpacking of what component skills are really needed in order to communicate effectively across cultures. Even more surprisingly, relational management is rarely identified as an element of intercultural competence. Part 1 of the talk considers a framework to address this gap.

Part 2 focuses on another challenge: understanding the impact that culture can have on language and business relations. Traditionally, culture has been interpreted as values, such as high/low power distance and individualism/collectivism. Yet recent psychological research has identified limitations to this perspective. This section of the talk considers recent empirical findings on this issue and proposes a complementary perspective.

The final section of the talk turns to practicalities: to tools for developing students' intercultural competence. It focuses on two specific tools that we have found to be particularly useful, explaining their purpose and illustrating how to use them with students.

Throughout the talk, authentic business-related data and examples are used to illustrate the points and to ground them in the reality of business life.