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Intercultural Communication and Identity Management in International Diplomacy

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ABSTRACT

It is impossible to define diplomacy without doing so in terms of communication, for the latter is a necessary requirement for the performance of the same. Diplomats represent an entire nation and its people, and hence try to minimize misunderstandings by carefully regulating their language, actions, self-presentation and identity management so that harmony can be maintained in the intercultural communication between the involved negotiators. In this paper, I have attempted to derive connections between various concepts of human communication and their importance in the diplomatic arena, so as to view how interconnected and dependent all these concepts are. Multiple examples have also been presented in order to elucidate the concepts explored.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the performance of diplomacy is centred around communication between agents from various cultures, and how this intercultural communication influences the formation of perceptions, relations and reputations of the nations involved. It also looks at how diplomats perform self-presentation and identity management in order to control others' perception of them and build better relations between nations.

Keywords: *Intercultural communication, diplomacy, identity, management, communication.*

I. INTRODUCTION

International diplomacy involves a regulated communicative exchange of negotiations and proposals between representatives, with the end goal of arriving at an agreed understanding of a certain aspect of the relationship between the involved parties. It may be verbal or nonverbal, formal or informal, direct or indirect. The diplomats involved in such communication act as the mouthpieces of the state or people they represent (Broderick, 1924). Diplomacy aids in unfolding and maintaining communication channels and relations between nations who differ from each other in terms of their levels of power, status, and strength. It is key in maintaining national reputations, which affect others' perceptual construct of the nation, and is an important

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instrument of power. Trần's statement rings true as we see how vital communication is to the business of international relations.

Diplomacy is also a form of intercultural communication, as diplomats belonging to diverse cultural backgrounds interact with each other, and the cultural differences between them give rise to major differences in how they perceive their counterparts from other cultures. In order to prevent such clashes, diplomats often attempt to cautiously adjust their language, actions and behaviour in accordance with the opposite culture and try to create a certain perception in the eyes of others, in order to have more favourable intercultural interactions while maintaining minimum unnecessary misinterpretations (Jönsson & Hall, 2003) and consequently, advantageous national reputations and international relations.

II. IMPACT OF CULTURE ON DIPLOMATIC COMMUNICATION

The cultural lenses we adorn colours our view of reality and shapes our perceptions of the world - where the city dweller sees sand, the nomad discovers abundant clues with respect to the possibility of life, such as information about the terrain, weather, and wildlife (Cohen, 1991). Cohen (1991) rightly states that "Culture - that inbuilt system of thought, perception, belief and expectation of right conduct shared by a community - is taken in by the individual with his mother's milk and during the long years of childhood", and it pervades human behaviour and relationships without necessarily being obvious. Culture gives form to different codes and rules of communication and interaction, including negotiation, greeting and hospitality, and these often lead to clashes between different cultures with contradicting values and norms.

Cohen (1991) argued that the 'Low-Context' style of communication (followed by countries like the United States), characterized by a direct, individual-centred approach, dominates international negotiations. He warns that the universal application of the same approach creates a problem when dealing with collectivistic cultures (such as Asians), who follow a more relationship-oriented or 'High-Context' model and attach massive importance to social courtesies and indirectness. For example, American diplomats prioritize information transmission, while for Arabs, communication means the building and maintaining of relationships due to which interpersonal communication is much more appropriate and likely to be effective (Zaharna, 2003). While seating for American leaders' guests are arranged at a 90° angle, the Arabs prefer to sit alongside one's guest on a sofa. Former U.S. diplomat Henry Kissinger understood the value assigned to nonverbal communication codes of physical contact (touch) and proximity by the Arabs. His adherence to their customs and avoidance of typical

confrontation positions portrayed his diligence in nonverbal behaviour, which was rewarded with his designation as a “friend” and later, “brother”. Kissinger found this pleasing for its human warmth and knew this would be very helpful in effectively maintaining good relations (Kissinger, 1981, p. 777). These findings underline the importance of paying attention to others’ cultures in forming good relations for successful communication.

III. SELF-PRESENTATION AND IDENTITY MANAGEMENT IN DIPLOMACY

Self-presentation, or the way one presents themselves to others, is performed by the actors of diplomacy in order to influence how others perceive them. Applying Erving Goffman’s concept of the same to diplomacy, we can consider diplomats as the “actors” and diplomacy as the “performance” by which an attempt is made to form an idealized image of themselves in order to achieve their desired goals. The regulation of communication of information through such a performance, or identity management (Pearson et al, 2010) plays an important role in the maintenance of national reputation, especially in the high-context countries. Their assignment of importance to how others perceive them stems from their understanding of the loss of face or bad reputation as a humiliating fate and penalty which must be avoided (Reynolds, 2009). They remain meticulously cautious of the words, gestures, countless courtesy and respect they display, and employ fewer words to convey multiple meanings, because they are aware of the scrutiny they are under. They use small talk before requests in order to soften the blow of sudden rejections and avoid embarrassment (Cohen, 1987). They try to maintain harmony and caution by being very indirect and pleasant, which irks low-context countries who misinterpret this as underhandedness and are unaware of the cultural values of preserving harmony in interactions. Here, language is a tool not only for interest promotion and information transmission, but also to maintain and influence its reputation and perception in the eyes of others.

IV. CULTURAL VARIATIONS IN THE USE OF VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL CODES

The performers of diplomacy use various verbal and non-verbal codes to convey or conceal messages. Words are spoken, written, insinuated, or even left unsaid in significant silence, and every movement, action and reaction is carefully scrutinized during negotiations. All these codes are deeply influenced by one's culture, and even gestures and statements devoid of specific diplomatic intent are subject to varying cultural interpretations, which have a bearing on the diplomatic process and hinder negotiations and building of relationships further. Variations and nuances also exist in the cultural perception of issues and history, which needs to be studied carefully as they are factors influencing the position held by the involved parties

and reduces the damage brought about by errors in perceptions.

Errors in perception occur due to cultural disparities and the consequent unfamiliarity with foreign verbal and nonverbal codes. For example, Russian negotiators present a very stern facial expression in the beginning phases of a negotiation, and relax and smile more with increasing progress in the relationship development. On the other hand, Americans begin negotiations with open smiles and present a more friendly demeanour, which Russians might interpret as insincere (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 121-122). Obstacles to building and maintaining harmonious relations often arise because of conflicting suppositions which the involved parties are unaware of and unable to subdue.

Cohen (1991) describes, as an example of error in perception due to misinterpretation of non-verbal codes, the Anglo-American attempt to mediate the Kashmir dispute. Former United States Ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith was called on to convince Nehru about the idea of partitioning Kashmir. When he attempted to do so, he found that Nehru's face did not particularly light up at the idea, but he did not display anger by asking him to leave either, leading Galbraith to wrongly conclude that the Indians did not entirely rule out giving a portion of the Kashmir valley to their adversaries. Because of this misunderstanding in their communication, India felt it had no choice but to cooperate with the initiative, although such a solution was the last thing they wanted (Cohen, 1991).

Szalay (1981) rightly points out that for successful communication, the parties involved need to derive similar meanings, and this is shaped by the degree of similarity in terms of mindsets, experiences and frames of references. The process of decoding or "peeling away the outer husk" of a message, unraveling the meaning and comprehending it is a psychological process. It is code that travels, and not idea, and hence the meanings attached during the encoding and decoding process of a message are entirely dependent on the psyche and experiences of the sender and receiver. Consequently, variations in cultural experiences construct different meanings (Szalay, 1981), because meaning of language and culture are intertwined (Pearson et al, 2010). An example is the contrast between the American and Korean understanding of the term 'Corruption'. It has negative connotations but different associations in both languages. For Americans, it is immoral because the civil servant is supposed to work for everyone impartially and not be swayed by bribes. Koreans accept that officers have obligations to friends and family which are prioritized over a prescribed duty to society and do not see gift-giving to officials as morally wrong. Hence, due to differing cultural standpoints, the meaning they attach to the term is very different, which would influence the discussion on corruption between both parties (Szalay, 1981).

Hence, we can see how the inadvertent confusion caused by such differences between individualistic and collectivistic societies can be seen in both verbal and nonverbal contexts. The associated meanings are less likely to vary in discussion of more objective issues like production and distribution of petrol, but problems occur in the discussion of abstract issues (Fisher, 1997) such as questions of policies and morality of the country, which only makes negotiations more difficult, as different countries have varying intellectual as well as moral conceptions of issues. As a result of such problems in communication and errors in perceptions, diplomats have to control their verbal and non-verbal codes and how they present themselves to the other party in order to maintain harmony and standing. Hence, culture plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions, language, meaning, and reality, and this in turn affects international relations, which is after all, based on humans and are consequently affected by the same factors impacting human communication.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I aimed to explore how intercultural communication lies at the heart of diplomacy and international relations. Diplomacy is a game of communication, which requires knowledge about cultural variations if one wants to emerge victoriously. Embedded within this game are very complex interconnections of perception, self-presentation, verbal and nonverbal cues, language and meaning, all of which combine to create a very difficult challenge for diplomats, who are after all humans burdened with the responsibility of representing an entire nation and maintaining its relations with other nations. It is quite important to pay attention to how the smallest misunderstandings or ignorance of a few persons can have huge impacts on relations between nations, and how this emphasizes the importance of regulated human communication on the international arena. Another benefit of improving intercultural communication skills is that it opens up one's mind to see the world in even more diverse ways by casting new light on issues. It helps reduce ethnocentrism and stereotypes when dealing with people from different cultures.

I also explored very briefly Szalay's intercultural communication process model in the context of diplomacy, for it is fascinating how something so simple can explain the complexities that arise in the path to successful communication. The meanings attached to the messages we receive come from within us, and because our experiences shape our perceptions, the dissimilarities in meaning will increase with increasing cultural disparities. This plays an invisible but important role during negotiations, as negotiating parties tend to assume that everyone has the same conception of the issue, which is untrue and ultimately results in

everyone discussing a particular issue of importance with very, very different conceptions which they are unaware of.

With the brief discussion of these points, my broader intention was to showcase how vital communication is to international relations, and how it is centred around the use of a creative combination of various communication cues by various human elements.

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