

HIGH – LOW CONTEXT COMMUNICATION: VIETNAMESE STYLE

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ABSTRACT: Communication presents at all times in our daily life. In order to understand a person and the culture that person comes from, one has to look around, past and inside that person. There are deeply embedded values and thoughts which have shaped a person's behavior. Words alone cannot tell because a single word can be used in many different contexts. Basing on Edward T. Hall's concept (1959, 1966, 1976, 1983) of high-context and low-context communication, the paper illustrates the communication styles and cultural features of Vietnam.

Key words: *high-low context, Vietnamese communication style,*

GAO TIẾP NGŨ CẢNH CAO – THẤP: PHONG CÁCH GIAO TIẾP VIỆT NAM

TÓM TẮT: Giao tiếp luôn luôn hiện diện trong đời sống hàng ngày của con người. Để hiểu được một người cũng như nền văn hóa xuất thân của người đó, ta phải xem xét quá khứ, bên trong và những điều xung quanh người đó. Cách hành xử của một người gắn bó sâu sắc với những tư tưởng, giá trị khác nhau. Ngôn từ không thể diễn tả hết được bởi một từ có thể được dùng trong nhiều văn cảnh. Trên cơ sở khái niệm về giao tiếp ngữ cảnh cao và giao tiếp ngữ cảnh thấp của Edward T. Hall (1959, 1966, 1976, 1983), bài báo muốn diễn giải về phong cách giao tiếp và những đặc trưng văn hóa của Việt Nam.

Từ khóa: *ngữ cảnh Cao – Thấp, phong cách giao tiếp Việt Nam*

I. INTRODUCTION

In our daily life, communication plays an important part, as such, present at all times. However, its presence often implies simplicity and mutual understanding. Such forgone conclusions have put people around the world into numerous delicate situations. Many of these situations have provided the basis for, more or less helpful, books on cultural etiquette. It is generally acknowledged that people from different countries tend to communicate in slightly different

ways. These differences are more related to different communication cultures than other differences. Being aware of these differences usually leads to better comprehension, fewer misunderstandings and to mutual respect.

Basing on Edward T. Hall's concept (1959, 1966, 1976, 1983) of high-context and low-context communication, the paper illustrates the communication styles and cultural features of Vietnam. In order to create a common understanding, the first part of the paper will provide

information on the role of culture in communication. At this point, culturally affected areas of communication will be identified. Furthermore, the differences in communication styles, as well as some cultural issues will be described.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Culturally affected areas of communication

There are two areas of communication which are highly affected by a person's cultural background. At the beginning, it was said that communication describes a person's behavior to exchange meaning. In order to communicate, a person has to convert meaning into behavior. In other words, the message sender has to translate his information, his ideas, or his feelings into words, facial expressions, or gestures. Otherwise, the message receiver will not understand the message. After meaning has been encoded into behavior, the message receiver has to decode the behavior back into meaning. This is why communication is always dependent on the perception, interpretation, and evaluation of a person's behavior. This process is referred to as the process of encoding and decoding (Adler 1997: 68). It is highly dependent on a person's cultural background which "determines the meanings attached to particular words and behavior" (Adler 1997: 69).

2.2. Communication styles in a high – low context communication

2.2.1. Definitions of high – low context communication

First used by Hall, the expression "high-context" and "low-context" are labels denoting inherent cultural differences between societies. "High-context" and "low-context" communication refers to how

much speakers rely on things other than words to convey meaning. Hall states that in communication, individuals face many more sensory cues than they are able to fully process. In each culture, members have been supplied with specific "filters" that allow them to focus only on what society has deemed important. In general, cultures that favor low-context communication will pay more attention to the literal meanings of words than to the context surrounding them.

It is important to remember that every individual uses both high-context and low-context communication. It is not simply a matter of choosing one over the other. Often, the types of relationships we have with others and our circumstances will dictate the extent to which we rely more on literal or implied meanings (Nishimura et al, 2008).

High context refers to societies or groups where people have close connections over a long period of time. Many aspects of cultural behavior are not made explicit because most members know what to do and what to think from years of interaction with each other. They beat around the bush until their interlocutor decodes the message correctly. The reason for this is that their primary goal is to preserve and strengthen relationships by saving face and ensuring harmony. Hall characterises high-context communication styles as being faster and more efficient as they rely on intuitive understanding. However, they are slow to change and need time to create a common understanding between sender and receiver. It is posited that a high context culture would have strong respect for social hierarchy, bonds between people would be strong, people may be more self-contained with feelings and messages may be simple but with deep meaning (Kim et al, 1998).

Low context refers to societies where

people tend to have many connections but of shorter duration or for some specific reason. In these societies, cultural behavior and beliefs may need to be spelled out explicitly so that those coming into the cultural environment know how to behave. People say what they want to convey without beating around the bush. Their goal is to get and give information when communicating with other people. However, with less regard to context, low-context systems tend to be more complex as the spoken word has to make up for what is missing in the context. As a result, low-context communication styles show less intuitive understanding, which makes them slow and less efficient. The low context country would be a more individual culture, messages may be more overt, and bonds between people may be more fragile and breakable should they be considered to be untenable (Kim et al, 1998).

2.2.2. Commons between high – low context communication

Because context includes both the vocal and non-vocal aspects of communication

that surround a word or passage and clarify its meaning – the situational and cultural factors affecting communications, high-context or low-context refers to the amount of information that is in a given communication. The verbal aspects include:

- The rate at which one talks
- The pitch or tone of the voice
- The intensity or loudness of the voice
- The flexibility or adaptability of the voice to the situation
- The variations of rate, pitch and intensity
- The quality of the voice
- The fluency
- Expressional patterns or nuances of delivery.

The non-verbal aspects include: Eye contact, pupil contraction and dilation. Facial expression. Odor, color, hand gestures, body movement, proximity, and use of space.

2.2.3. Differences between high – low context communication

Factors	High-context	Low-context
Main types of knowledge	<p>Hall: “Most of the information is either in the physical context or initialized in the person.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge is situational, relational • Less is verbally explicit or written or formally expressed. • More internalized understandings of what is communicated (eg: in-jokes) • Often used in long term, well-established relationships. • Decisions and activities focus around personal face-to-face communication, often around a central, authoritative figure. • Strong awareness of who is accepted/belongs vs.”outside”. 	<p>Hall: “The mass of information is vested in the explicit code [message].”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rule oriented • More knowledge is public, external, and accessible. • Shorter duration of communications • Knowledge is transferable • Task-centered. Decisions and activities focus around what needs to be done and the division of responsibilities.

Association	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships depend on trust, build up slowly, and are stable. • How things get done depends on relationships with people and attention to group process. • One's identity is rooted in groups (family, culture, work). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships begin and end quickly. Many people can be inside one's circle; circle's boundary is not clear. • Things get done by following procedures and paying attention to the goal. • One's identity is rooted in oneself and one's accomplishments. • Social structure is decentralized; responsibility goes further down (is not concentrated at the top).
Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disagreement is personalized. One is sensitive to conflict expressed in another's nonverbal communication. Conflict either must be solved before work can progress or must be avoided. • Communication is seen as an art form—a way of engaging someone. • Verbal message is indirect; one talks around the point and embellishes it. • High use of nonverbal elements; voice tone, facial expression, gestures, and eye movement carry significant parts of conversation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disagreement is depersonalized. One withdraws from conflict with another and gets on with the task. Focus is on rational solutions, not personal ones. • Communication is seen as a way of exchanging information, ideas, and opinions. • Verbal message is direct; one spells things out exactly. • Message is carried more by words than by nonverbal means.
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple sources of information are used. • Thinking is deductive, proceeds from general to specific. • Learning occurs by first observing others as they model or demonstrate and then practicing. • Groups are preferred for learning and problem solving. • Accuracy is valued. How well something is learned is important. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One source of information is used to develop knowledge. • Thinking is inductive, proceeds from specific to general. Focus is on detail. • Learning occurs by following explicit directions and explanations of others. • An individual orientation is preferred for learning and problem solving. • Speed is valued. How efficiently something is learned is important.
Cultural issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stable, unified, cohesive, and slow to change. • People tend to rely on their history, their status, their relationships, and a plethora of other information, including religion, to assign meaning to an event. • Often seem too personal and even offensive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value individualism over collectivism and group harmony. Individualism is characterised by members prioritising individual needs and goals over the needs of the group. • It is thought to be polite to ask questions.

III. RESULTS

3.1. Cultural categories of communication

Hall and Hall (1990) categorise different countries as follows

High Context Cultures
Japan
Arab countries
Greece
Spain
Italy
England
France
North America
Scandinavian countries
German-speaking countries
Low Context Cultures

Table 1: High/Low context by culture (Hall & Hall, 1990)

Vietnam is not expressly mentioned in Hall and Hall's table (1990), so the interpretation only lightly touches on the table categorisation. It is not until 2005 when Vietnam is mentioned in Lewis's (2005:89) division of cultural categories of communication as one of the high-context cultures. Lewis divides countries into linear-active, reactive and multi-active cultures.

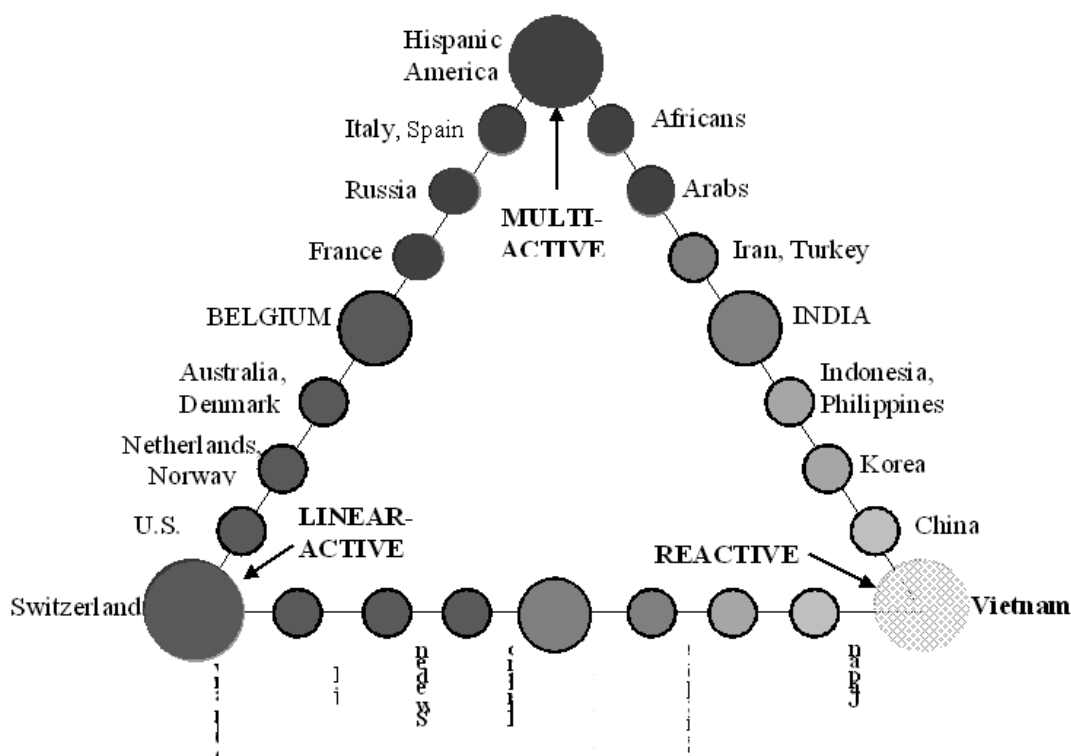


Figure 1: Cultural categories of communication (Lewis, 2005:89)

According to Lewis (2005, p. 70, p. 89), linear-active cultures are calm, factual and decisive planners. They are task-oriented, highly organised and prefer doing one thing at a time. They stick to facts and figures that they have obtained from reliable sources. They prefer straightforward, direct discussion, and they talk and listen in equal proportions.

Reactives are courteous, outwardly amiable, accommodating, compromising, and good listeners. Their cultures are called 'listening cultures'. Reactives prefer to listen first, in order to establish both their own position and the other's. They often seem slow to react after a presentation or speech, and when they speak up, it is without clear signs of confrontation. (Lewis, 2005, pp. 70–71.)

Multi-actives are warm, emotional, loquacious and impulsive. They like to do many things at a time. They often talk in a roundabout, animated way. It is typical of them to speak and listen at the same time, leading to repeated interruptions. They are uncomfortable with silence and seldom experience it between other multi-actives. (Lewis, 2005, p. 70, p. 89.)

3.2. Communication styles of Vietnam

Vietnamese communication style is deeply rooted in the Vietnamese language. It can be considered as an agglutinating language, one that contains many separable elements - particles, auxiliary verbs, and auxiliary adjectives – attached to the words. Particles express not merely grammatical relations but also personal feelings. And, of course, the Vietnamese language is known for its system of respectful and humble forms

as well as its variety of strategies for marking politeness. Thus, one may argue that Vietnamese-language communication tends to be high-context.

Vietnamese conversation often cannot be understood without knowing the context because of the homonyms. For example, “Con ngựa đá con ngựa đá” means “a horse kicks a stone horse”. The first “đá” means “to kick”, the second means “stone”. The homonyms cannot be distinguished in oral communications without knowing the context.

Indeed, Vietnamese communication style has all the characteristics of high-context cultures, such as indirect and digressive communication, use of few words, reliance on contextual cues, avoidance of the use of personal names, respect for long silences, and waiting politely until the other person has stopped speaking before taking turns. Often, they are unable to speak frankly about some matter due to the desire to save face.

When conversing in Vietnamese, people have to listen carefully to their interlocutors to find the context and elicit the meaning beyond the words. Even the use of personal names only when they cannot be avoided has roots in this feature of the Vietnamese language. Vietnamese has a lot of second person singular pronouns, such as “cô”, “dì”, “chú”, “bác”, “ông”, “anh”... These pronouns are used according to the situational requirements. For example, “cô” is used when the listener is a woman, and she is younger than the speaker's parents.

Moreover, Vietnamese people are typically polite and even submissive in social encounters, but when a dispute

persists, they may suddenly become very hostile without providing warning signals. This happens because of the unconscious cultural conflict between low- context and high- context cultures. They used to their high-context communication and, thus, constantly “tuned” to the moods of the other conversants during interaction; expect the others to be similarly sensitive. In conversations, Vietnamese unconsciously favor verbal hesitancy and ambiguity to avoid giving offense, and they refrain from making spontaneous or critical remarks. Their body language is characterized by repeated head-nodding and lack of eye contact. They are notoriously unwilling to use the word “no” even when they actually disagree with others. When they try to translate their norm of sending indirect messages during a discussion into English, a language they have difficulty mastering, their efforts are often misunderstood or ignored.

3.3. Cultural features of Vietnam

As it can be seen from Lewis’s (2005, p. 89) linear-active–reactive scale, Vietnamese culture is closest to the reactive end of the scale, together with China, Korea and Japan. Vietnam has developed as very unique culture when compared to other countries. There are three principal factors influencing its uniqueness: its long history of isolationism, its geography, and the Vietnamese language itself.

Vietnam’s culture can be described with many distinct pursuits, vastly disparate convictions, widely divergent customs, and a veritable feast of viewpoints. Its society and culture are ambiguous in many senses. Vietnamese people pursue material well-being, appreciate success in

business, and admire creativity, especially in technology. They are introvert, dislike big talkers, emotional, and unpunctual, and they mix professional and family affairs.

Vietnamese people are very family-oriented and loyal to their group and to their employer. Vietnamese society is a hierarchical system in which all obligations and duties arise from being a member of the family, a member of a work group, an employee, or an employer. They are highly individualistic in their local group, but collectivist when dealing with outsiders.

The people of Vietnam think human nature can only be revealed in communication. First of all, looking at the communication attitude of the Vietnamese people, it can be seen that Vietnamese love communicating but are very shy at the same time. In Vietnam, communicative competence is considered to be the standard for evaluating people. For foreigners living in Vietnam it is, to some extent, necessary to be aware of some basic protocols in Vietnamese communication culture, and a number of basic communication situations. Because they pay great importance to communication, Vietnamese love communicating. This is expressed mainly in two perspectives: - From the perspective of the communication subject, Vietnamese love visiting each other. In Vietnam, even when people are very close to each other and meet each other on a daily basis, they still visit each other whenever they can. Here, visiting is not associated with work (like in the west), but rather is an expression of love, gratitude, and a glue to strengthen

relationships. Therefore, for foreigners living in Vietnam, in order to create intimacy with their Vietnamese partners (colleagues, friends, etc), it is advisable to pay occasional visits or eat out together.

- Regarding the communication object, Vietnamese people show great hospitality. Whenever a guest, either close or not so close, comes to a Vietnamese home, the host will try his best to welcome and treat the guest with the best facilities and food. An old saying goes “Treat guests with either chicken or salad, because no one is supposed to be hungry in one meal”. The level of hospitality increases especially in the remote countryside or mountainous areas. Here, it should be noted that in Vietnamese culture, communication is closely attached to eating. Vietnamese people often greet each other with a question such as “Uncle, have you had your meal?”. Eating is so important that even the Almighty has to hesitate to intervene, like the saying “ Even God avoids striking at meal times”. Eating is highly valued and has become permanent in the mind of Vietnamese people. Preliminary statistics from the Great Dictionary of Vietnamese show that there are up to 551 entries related to the word “eat”. Western philosophy views eating as a means of survival. As their saying goes, “People eat to live, not live to eat”. Unlike this western view, the Vietnamese view eating as a culture. Thus, foreigners in Vietnam should learn about this culture in order to avoid misunderstandings, and to behave appropriately.

Alongside their love for communication, Vietnamese people also have a characteristic which is almost

the opposite - being very timid. This has been observed and mentioned by many foreigners. The simultaneous existence of the two conflicting personalities is derived from the two basic characteristics of the Vietnamese village, which are community and autonomy. Vietnamese love to communicate, but only when they find themselves in a familiar range of community. On the other hand, when a Vietnamese person is outside his community and in front of strangers, he appears to be very timid. The two seemingly contradictory characteristics are, in fact, not in conflict with each other at all because they are expressed in different environments, reflecting two sides of the same nature, which is flexibility in Vietnamese communication. Talking about relationships in communication, their agricultural background culture has led the Vietnamese people to take emotion, ie love and/or hatred, as a rule of conduct. There are many sayings about emotion used as rules of conduct. For example, “When in love, love each other’s every way, when in hatred, hate each other’s relatives”, and “When in love, it’s easy to let any mistakes pass”. In everyday life, Vietnamese rely mostly on their emotions or sentiments. When Vietnamese need to consider between rationality and emotion, emotion often triumphs.

In their communication, Vietnamese people have a habit of learning, observing and evaluating their communication objects. Issues such as age, hometown, education, social status and family status (parents, spouse, and children) are the most common topics in Vietnamese communication. This habit is greatly

contradictory to western beliefs, which makes foreigners comment that Vietnamese people are curious. Actually, that's only how a Vietnamese person expresses his/her concern for others. This is one of the cultural aspects which strongly reflect the Vietnamese national identity. Foreigners often misunderstand and criticise this aspect unless a proper explanation of the meaning is provided. They would find it more acceptable once they have understood the cause and cultural meaning of this aspect. If they are not talking about age, which is a common question for a conversation starter in Vietnam, many Vietnamese often annoy foreigners with personal questions. For example, a taxi driver may ask a foreigner sitting in the car: "How long have you been in Vietnam? When are you planning to go home?". What is the purpose of such a question? Foreigners are usually surprised by these questions and they may wonder "Why do I have to report on my travel plans or discuss my travel itinerary with someone I have just met for the first time, and most likely the only time?". When being asked by friends and colleagues, foreigners may find it normal. However, when being asked by a taxi driver or a shop assistant, they find it very strange, especially when being "attacked" with the same question 6 or 7 times per day. Due to the communal characteristics of Vietnamese people, they find themselves responsible for paying attention to others, and learning about others' interests and circumstances. On the other hand, because of the strong differentiation in social status, there are many ways to address each other in a conversation. Therefore, it's necessary to first identify the appropriate way to

address each other in a conversation.

Regarding communication style, Vietnamese people prefer delicacy, consideration and harmony. The delicate way of communicating shapes the Vietnamese habit of beating about the bush, never talking directly or speaking their mind. According to Vietnamese tradition, a communication should be started with a question asking about the home, work, and so on. It is also necessary to create an atmosphere that a former Vietnamese tradition states - "betel is the beginning of a conversation". Nowadays, the opening element, betel, has been replaced by a cup of tea, a cigarette, or a glass of beer. In order to know about the parents of the communication objects, Vietnamese people often ask "How are the elderly?". In order to know whether the woman to whom they are talking is married, Vietnamese will delicately ask "Will your husband complain if you come home this late?". In the south, Vietnamese are known to be more straightforward, as expressed in a love confession "The boat is laying its fishing net, across the sand dunes, close to your home, I know you live with your mother, I want to support you in taking care of her, will it be appropriate?" (folk song). The communication style of beating about the bush, combined with their interest in learning about the communication objects, have created a habit in Vietnamese people that a greeting has a question attached. For example, instead of saying "Hello", Vietnamese often greet by asking "Where are you going?", or "What are you doing?". Initially, this act of asking is for getting information, however it has gradually

become a habit that asking is just for the sake of asking. The askers are easily satisfied by ambiguous answers such as “I have to go to that place”. Some even answer by asking back “Yes. How about you?”. The delicate communication style also creates a habit in Vietnamese to think twice or hesitate before speaking. It is this hesitation that makes Vietnamese people lack decisiveness. Therefore, in a communication, Vietnamese tend to avoid being decisive and at the same time try not to offend anyone. Instead, they just smile or laugh to keep the peace. A smile is an important part of Vietnamese communication. It is said that one can expect a smile from Vietnamese people in the least expected situations. In Vietnam, there is a rich system of how to address each other in a communication. This system has the following characteristics:

- Firstly, because of the intimate nature of Vietnamese people, everyone in the community is considered as a relative or family.
- Secondly, the Vietnamese nature of community prevents any general “I” in the addressing protocol. How to address other people in a communication depends on their age, social status, time, and space. For the same two people, the way of addressing each other differs from time to time, depending on their situations and intimacy. It is also possible to address someone by their birth order in the family (Mr First, Miss Second, Ms Third), or by their husband’s name, their child’s name, and so on.
- Thirdly, the way of addressing someone shows a hierarchy in communication. Vietnamese often refer to themselves as humble, but address others with high respect. When two people converse with each other, they

sometimes address each other as elder sister, other times as younger sister. The respect shown in communication leads to the habit of avoiding calling each other by their real names. Real names are used only to insult each other. In the family, the child is named so as to avoid identical names of elders or ancestors. Therefore, it is customary to ask the homeowner’s name when visiting someone’s house. The protocol in polite communication is also very rich. Because of the strong tradition of emotion and flexibility, Vietnamese people do not have general terms for thanking or apologising. For example, one may say “You’re very thoughtful” instead of saying a simple “Thank you”. These are some of the communication protocols in Vietnam which foreigners may find useful when communicating with Vietnamese, and thus help increase their understanding of Vietnamese people and culture.

IV. CONCLUSION

A high or low context culture is portrayed through communication. The differences lie in the use of either a digital or an analogous language, verbal or nonverbal behaviors, emotional expressions and relationship-building, and directness or indirectness when communicating. Individuals from a high-context culture would particularly emphasize another’s feeling in the communication process and so care to be less direct, use more analogous language, be more personal, and prefer nonverbal to verbal communication.

From what is mentioned above, it can be seen that Vietnam is classified as a “high-context society”. That means, relationships between individuals are

relatively long lasting and individuals feel deep personal involvement with each other. People place great importance on personal relationships. Members of Vietnamese culture are programmed from birth to depend heavily upon covert clues given within the context of the message delivered verbally. In spoken language, subtlety is valued and much meaning is conveyed by inference.

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