Title: Cross-cultural Discursive Competence for International Management

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Introduction

As the business world is becoming more and more globalised and internationalised, language and discourse is playing an increasingly important role in international business management. The following long-standing anthropological question raised by Goodenough (1976) is still pertinent today. “What do people need to know in order to operate in a manner that is acceptable to others in a society?” It is especially true when their perceived competence in their own culture is challenged in a new cultural context. To address this issue, this paper therefore proposes a theoretical model for understanding discursive competence in spoken and written cross-cultural business communication for international management. Effective cross-cultural business communication requires a relevant ‘social stock of knowledge’ (Schutz & Luckmann, 1974) about appropriate discursive competencies used in cross-cultural contexts. This paper develops a complex conceptual model to study cross-cultural discursive competence (CCDC). The model adopts a genre-based approach for analysing business communication practices. Authentic texts refer to English and Chinese business letters and emails [written] and formal and informal business meetings [spoken].

Although extensive research has been done in the area of cross-cultural competence (CC) in general, and the importance of discourse is also attracting more and more researchers’ attention (discourse and organisation), very little research has been done to study managers’ cross-cultural discursive competence (CCDC). It is imperative to develop a model for studying CCDC and there is also a practical need for this study as global managers need to build this kind of understanding of CCDC as an integral part of their knowledge.

Cross-cultural studies have relied too long on Hofstede’ cultural dimensions of polarising cultural differences. For example, competence is often characterised mainly by knowledge and skills in identifying cultural differences in communication and language use. Often these studies are highly structural, such as comparing linear/direct and circular/indirect communication patterns and rhetorical structures in contrastive rhetoric (e.g. Kaplan, 1966, Kaplan, 1989; Young, 1994); or cross-cultural
differences in beliefs, values and practices at a general level (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1991; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000).

These earlier approaches have been challenged recently by some cross-cultural researchers who call for more critical and synthesized approaches (Canagarajah, 2002; Shi-xu & Wilson, 2001). For instance, Canagarajah (2002) argues for the need to study how all participants in a cross-cultural context contribute equally to cross-cultural encounters. Connor (2002) points to the need to incorporate dual Eastern and Western perspectives for cross-cultural communication research. Towards this goal, Collier (2003) proposes that ‘intercultural alliances’ (intercultural collaboration and interdependence) are achieved through consensus and negotiation of values, identities and norms that incorporate perspectives from all cultures involved. In addition, Pan, et al. (2002) examined managers’ dual perspectives about what constitutes effective texts from both intra-cultural and intercultural perspectives. Soliciting views from Finnish, Chinese, and Hong Kong managers, they found that, although different cultural groups have different expectations about competence and effective communication, their viewpoints also do overlap.

Specifically, this paper conceptualise cross-cultural discursive competence knowledge and skills around ‘intercultural alliances’, textual space, socio-cognitive space, and social space. It will investigate the relationships among these types of knowledge to guide an analysis of texts that relate to successful and unsuccessful business communication (viewed by managers) in order to identify:

1. In what way is cross-cultural discursive competence is reflected in the written and spoken cross-cultural texts?
2. What links do managers perceive between effective texts, professional practice and business successes?
Theoretical Background

Because CCDC is a relatively new concept, this briefly explains two related concepts: discursive competence, textual space, socio-cognitive space, and social space (these are developed more fully in *Key definitions* below).

Discursive competence (DC) traditionally has meant competence and performance (Chomsky, 1965) or communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) in language learning. However, being limited to textual or social competence, it does not offer a full account of discursive competence. A fuller understanding of discursive competence derives primarily from Bhatia (2004, p. 143) who defines discursive competence as the knowledge and skills that expert professionals use in specific discourse situations of their everyday professional activities. He clearly delineates the relationship between discursive competence and *disciplinary knowledge* as an integral part of one’s professional expertise. Although his definition refers to written genres, we also apply it to spoken genres, since written and spoken texts are typical of the discourse. Thus, a text is seen as reflecting the addresser’s discursive competence (DC). DC involves textual competence, and professional and generic competencies.

Drawing from Bhatia (2004, p.19), we therefore conceptualise discursive competence as comprising *textual space* (textual knowledge), *socio-cognitive space* (genre knowledge in relation to professional practice), and *social space* (social and pragmatic knowledge).

Crucial to this research is understanding genre use in cross-cultural situations. Rather than considering it as adapting one’s culture to another culture’s genre forms, we consider how both cultures adapt, using CDCC, to build intercultural collaborations. This produces a dialectical tension between fluidity (negotiating new genre forms) and fixity (own genre conventions). Although culture plays an obvious role in this intercultural collaboration process, genre theory, so far, does not strongly focus on the role of culture in language use (exceptions include Trosborg, 2000).

The Triangulation of CCDC

CCDC is a complex process involving socio-cognitive, professional, and cross-cultural knowledge. Cross-cultural discursive competence is the repertoire of knowledge and skills which
expert professionals deploy when using various written and spoken genres in the course of cross-cultural business transactions. This paper proposes that CCDC is determined by a person’s performance in the three spaces: professional, socio-cognitive, and cultural.

**Professional Space** is related to professional expertise, and comprises professional knowledge of one’s profession and knowledge of the criteria required for membership of this particular discourse community. We define this as discipline-specific knowledge (e.g., technical knowledge among engineers) and accrued experience (e.g., awareness of successful marketing tactics for salespeople).

**Socio-cognitive Space** is primarily concerned with genre competence. Genre is defined as a type of text used in a specific context (Swales, 1990). Genre is also understood as “typified rhetorical actions” in response to recurring situations’ (Miller, 1984) or ‘typified symbolic actions in response to recognizable situation types’ (Artemeva, 2005, p. 392) such as a car sales promotion letter as a response to the market demand for buying cars.

But genres are not inflexible. For example, Schryer (2000) defines genres as ‘constellations of regulated, improvisational strategies triggered by the interaction between individual socialization ... and an organization’ (quoted in Artemeva, 2005, p. 392). Professionals maintain genres to achieve professional objectives and to maintain their professional solidarity (Bhatia, 2004, p. 21; Winsor, 1996). In professional settings, genre can be seen as a type of ‘social stock of knowledge’ (Schutz & Luckmann, 1974) or ‘institutional knowledge’ (Paltridge, 1997) shared by members of the ‘discourse community’ (Swales, 1990) or community of social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

From a genre perspective, texts are seen as highly structured and conventionalised in terms of content and form, Genre is the primary concept of socio-cognitive space because it incorporates both social and cognitive elements. The cognitive element in genre is well established (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 2004, Hyland, 1998 use social and cognitive perspectives). Cognitive structuring (Bhatia, 1993) and cognitive frames (Paltridge, 1997) are typical of the cognitive approach. As such, ‘Cognitive’ is related to the content of the text, stressing that the text reflects the writer/speaker’s knowledge rather the cognition process. Zhu (2006) further identifies the importance of applying this type of genre knowledge to enhance Chinese professional’s competence in writing English documents.
**Cultural Space** essentially refers to the people’s potential to appropriately apply cross-cultural knowledge to understand other cultures and is located in ‘intercultural alliances’. These alliances can be understood from two perspectives. First, it is important to understand cultures in terms of cross-cultural knowledge and culture-specific (indigenous) knowledge. Hofstede’s (1991) research into the dimensions of culture, and Hall’s (1976) high & low-context cultures exemplify such understanding of cultures. Culture-specific or indigenous theories, taking Chinese culture as an example, include the concepts of *guanxi* or connections (Fei, 1986), *mianzi* or face and harmony (Ge & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Second, according to Broome (quoted in Allan, et al., 2003: 307), the centrality of intercultural alliances is relational empathy, “a relational process that involves individuals and groups working together to build a collective interpretation of the situation they face and to develop a consensus for performing joined action”.

The concept of cultural space thus posits cross-cultural genres as fluid and dynamic responses to the cross-cultural context and relations. For instance, in an Australian-Chinese business meeting there will be an inherent fixity and flexibility of dialectic for such encounters.

This paper argues effective cross-cultural business communication is essential for successful trade relations among countries. In the case of Australia, it is currently negotiating a free trade agreement with China. Although Australia has traditionally exported resources to China and imported manufactured goods, it is likely that future trade will increasingly involve complex technical and legal issues such as intellectual property, telecommunications, mining investment and engineering, and educational services, as well as global environmental issues. In other words, the negotiations will be far more complex, requiring greater sophistication in cross-cultural communication.

Theoretically, this conceptualisation of CCDC provides an in-depth analysis to written and spoken encounters as a process for not only achieving business goals, but also establishing cultural alliances. It has made a new contribution to international management in three aspects.

First, this theoretical framework extends the existing conceptualisation of discursive competence by locating this competence within a ‘cultural space’, viewing cross-cultural business communication as a constructive process of genre negotiation operating in intercultural alliances. It is
a fluid space created by negotiations and informal interactions to which both parties bring not just their values and norms, but importantly an anticipation of the ‘other’ (Müller, 2004).

Second, incorporating ‘intercultural alliances’ into business and professional communication promotes the understanding of various levels of meaning in cross-cultural business communication, especially the role of relationship building, which is very important for communicating with the Chinese (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

Thirdly, the research framework views both written and spoken genres as repertoires of professional practice (see also Orlikowski & Yates, 1994) which constitutes part of the organisational processes (Phillips, et al., 2004).

**A Model for Analysing CCDC Applied in Cross-Cultural Texts**

This section introduces and further examines the key literatures and relevant theories that form the core theoretical principles underpinning this paper. The model is built upon my understanding of the nature of intercultural alliances, the roles of genre and prototypes, and the structures of rhetoric and semantic frames. The major contribution to this model lies in the triangulation of the three spaces which underpin the model for textual analysis.

Intercultural alliances are those relationships in which parties are responsible for each other (Collier, 2003). By recognising their cultural differences and interdependence, parties seek common goals. Thus, intercultural alliances are crucial to the success of cross-cultural collaborations that are based on effective communication. The degree of fixity and fluidity in adapting genre conventions (i.e. socio-cognitive space) should be an appropriate (and measurable) indicator of CDCC. For example, a cross-cultural negotiation conducted in English between an Australian and Chinese manager can not follow exactly the conventions of an English business meetings about when to introduce the deal (Zhu et al., 2007). The Chinese may need more time to know each other personally before the deal is introduced. However, this type of knowledge is still not sufficient for holding a successful meeting.
Using their cultural spaces, both parties can extend their professional and socio-cognitive spaces (e.g., by working out longer meeting sessions agreed to by both parties for building their interpersonal relationship and achieving intercultural alliances) towards enhancing the effectiveness of such cross-cultural business meetings. Clearly, cultural space plays an essential role in this triangulation process by highlighting what is important for cross-cultural genre reconstruction and what is to be negotiated. As both parties adapt genre rules, more effective negotiation and collaboration is achieved around the goal of forming effective and successful intercultural alliances. In this way, the professional and socio-cognitive spaces are underpinned by the cultural space.

Crucial to the model is the assumption that each interactant brings to the intercultural alliance a level of cross-cultural discursive competence that they access when using various written and spoken genres in the course of cross-cultural business transactions. Consequently, CCDC can be measured by the degree of participant flexibility exhibited in the socio-cognitive, professional and cultural spaces. This flexibility is manifested particularly in genre manipulation (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993, 2004; Pan, et al., 2002 inform this). Genre comprises the communicative purposes and textual conventions shared by professional members of a discourse community. We analyse the variation in genre construction and use to achieve non-linguistic ends in professional contexts (i.e., an intercultural alliance). Pan et al’s (2002) intercultural reflective model will clearly be useful in this integrated theorisation.

Specifically the model comprises six stages of genre analysis. The top-down sequence from text to purpose and rhetorical structure is based on Swales’ (1990) genre analysis. However, this paper proposes that the genre construction in a cross-cultural context is dynamic and fluid as shown in the six stages (see Figure 1).

(Figure 1) is about here.

1. Text in the sociocognitive space is not simply a linguistic construct; rather it is seen as linguistic and rhetorical means of achieving communicative purposes. Text has both internal
(contextual, textual and intertextual indicators) and external structures (disciplinary culture and
discursive procedures and practices) (Bhatia, 2004, p.125). That the internal structures are interrelated
with external structures is essential for the following stages of analysis.

2. **Contexts**, also within the sociocognitive space, refer to the location of genre in the social
environment (e.g., a sales brochure written by a computer software company). Genres are “historically
and culturally specific, pre-patterned and complex solutions to recurrent communicative problems”
(Gunthner and Knoblauch, 1995, p 8). Context is thus related to Berkenkotter and Huckin’s (1995)
‘situatedness’ principle, where genre knowledge derives from our participation in the communicative
activities of daily and professional life. Contexts are seen as closely related to cultural space in this
study for the obvious reason of cross-cultural interactions. Clearly, genre adaptation is predicated on a
person’s knowledge and skills based on the contexts including professional, interpersonal and cultural.

3. **Reconstructing genre in relation to prototypes** reflects the relationship between genre and its
prototypes. Prototype theory (e.g., Rosch, 1973) derives from semantic research. It asserts that people
categorise objects based on prototypical images they build in their minds about the objects. This can
also apply to categorising a genre which should not be seen as rigid with clear boundaries and
borderlines. Rather, genres are dynamic and evolving as they respond to social change (Bazerman,
1988), and this is especially the case with cross-cultural genres. Prototype theory presents a way to
understand how genres are categorised in one’s own culture: ‘prototype theory claims that concepts
cannot be reduced to the sum of simple components: they depend, rather, on a prototype that is

The concept of prototype is useful for reconstructing genre use in cross-cultural contexts. In
the cultural space, the manner in which cultural differences such as different values and ways of
thinking are handled by ‘intercultural alliances’ can be explained by prototypical images of exemplar
texts in two ways. Interactants in these alliances can understand their own genre conventions using
prototypical images that allow fuzziness of borderline texts (Paltridge, 1997). The other is to extend
this framework to interpret texts produced by people (with no language difficulty involved) from other
cultures who may apply their own culture-specific prototypical system: e.g., a personal greeting may
not be prototypical in an English sales letter, although it usually is in Chinese business sales letters (Zhu, 2005).

4. Purposes and persuasive orientations are necessary because genres are characterised by their communicative purpose (Swales, 1990), and are relatively stable in cross-cultural contexts (e.g. an English business genre generally has clear purposes such as promoting sales). However, additional purposes such as building intercultural alliances (Zhu, 2000) can also be embedded in a business text. Persuasive orientations must, then, be considered. Different cultures resort to different types of persuasion (Lü, 1998; Zhu, 2005). In Western culture, Aristotle’s (1991) *Rhetoric*, based on his three proofs of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* has been a significant influence. The Chinese persuasive orientations, *qing* (emotion) and *li* (reason) exercise a profound influence on modern Chinese writing. The preferences of *qing* (emotion) and *li* (reason) may indicate a different stress from the concept of *logos* in English writing (Zhu, 2005), and may influence Chinese managers’ discursive styles.

5. Rhetorical, textual, intertextual tactics and cultural semantics combine rhetorical purpose, semantic-based prototype theory, and text. Rhetorical structure and their associated textual tactics are important components of ‘content’ and ‘form’ of genre, which are part of the genre convention and regularities (Bhatia, 1993). The concept of moves (Swales, 1990) to indicate the units of rhetorical structure, will be applied in the textual analysis. However, to give in-depth analysis of cross-cultural texts, two further linguistic concepts are used explain the fluidity and dynamics of genre: intertextuality and frame semantics. Intertextuality originates from Bakhtin’s (1986) where an utterance is linked to utterances in a complex organising system (Hu, 2001). Intertextual study is already an important method of genre analysis: we will extend it to cross-cultural genre use. For example, Zhu’s (2005) research on Chinese knowledge of their own culture exhibited when advertising a sales exhibition in English letters indicates contextual behaviour can also be related to prototypical images.

Cultural semantics refer to specific lexicons to indicate essential actions of genre and they are also related to semantic frames, which are the conceptual structures that underlie language usage (Fillmore, 1976). Semantic frames in the framework serve as a type of cognitive structuring device that provides the background knowledge about how words in a certain language are used in discourse.
(Fillmore, 1982): e.g., using verbs of *buy*, *sell*, *spend* or *charge* or using adjectives of *cheap* or *expensive* for a commercial transaction. These lexical choices reveal a particular perspective from which the transaction is viewed. ‘Semantic frames’ offers some relevance to analysing cross-cultural texts. However, instead of studying these semantic frames in a general sense, this study views cultural semantics as culturally defined and shared by members of a certain culture. More importantly, the two parties communicating with each others can then interpret cross-cultural genre forms as meaningful cultural semantics in relation to building intercultural alliances while extending their own prototypical images. For example, specific forms stressing collaborations in initial Chinese sales letters (Zhu, 2000) may resurface in the English letter written by a Chinese manager and can be interpreted as such using appropriate cultural space.

6. Managers’ reflective views will be vital for validating the interpretive analysis in the empirical study of discourse analysis. Managers’ intra-cultural and cross-cultural reflective views (Pan, et al., 2002) will be used in at least two ways. One is to consider their overall reflections on effective cross-cultural English genres (letters, emails or meetings). The other is to solicit their views about the cross-cultural texts relating to successful and unsuccessful deals (more details in research method section) and to interpret them from both their own cultural views as well as their counterparts’ views. Particular attention will be given to how they adapt their prototypical images of genre, such as how to take turns in a business meeting, for genre reconstruction in order to achieve intercultural alliances. Their views are crucial for illustrating CCDC involving specific types of knowledge for business genre use the managers have been equipped with.

This kind of reflection can be seen as a type of cultural metacognition which is a higher-order of thinking about thinking (Thomas & Inkson, 2004). It is extremely important for understanding and enhancing cultural competence (Ang, et al., 2007; Earley & Young, 2003; Thomas & Inkson, 2004).

**Summaries and Conclusion**

In sum, this paper proposed a new model which offers a sophisticated framework for understanding the mutual adaptations that business managers engage in as they conduct their
businesses in cross-cultural contexts. By understanding genres as stable, but adaptable, textual products in given situations, and by understanding the reflexivity of participants in their encounters, the model more accurately reflects actual behaviours. More important, this model incorporates views or about the possible link between effective cross-cultural texts and expressing clear business objectives, which may lead to business successes. Their cultural metacognitive reflections will also help to further enhance their cross-cultural discursive competence. This paper has also shown that it is possible to develop an effective methodology base on the theoretical framework with a focus on textual and discourse analysis.

This study has practical implications for international management as it points to an important need for managers to communicate effectively across cultures. The simple reality is that international managers have to communicate with people from different cultures either in written or spoken forms. The use of cultural metacognition also has implications for enhancing cross-cultural competence in general and its use can be extended to everyday situations in international management.

The study also has implications for future research. Although it has developed a complex and appropriate model of cross-cultural discursive competence (CCDC), further research is needed to explore the dynamics of genre and solicit expert members’ cultural metacognitive reflections. For example, future research can address the tension between fluidity and fixity of texts relating to cross-cultural exchanges and interactions in more depth. Different cultural contexts may pose all kinds of challenges for analysing CCDC in cross-cultural communication. Future research, therefore, should extend the model to a wide range of international management contexts and should also further test out the validity and generalisability of the proposed model.
REFERENCES


Figure 1: A Model for Analysing CCDC Applied in Cross-Cultural Texts

1. Text
2. Contexts
3. Reconstructing genre in relation to prototypes
4. Purposes and persuasive orientations
5. Rhetorical, textual, intertextual tactics and semantic frames
6. Managers’ reflective views: intracultural vs. intercultural

CCDC

Professional Space