

CULTURAL COMPETENCE, A CONDITION FOR SECOND-LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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Abstract: The present paper, based on the author's experience of teaching English to students of economics, sets out to verify the conclusions reached by linguistic anthropologists over the last decades about the relationship between linguistic and cultural competence. It identifies the main cultural characteristics of the UK and the US, as well as their various linguistic consequences, in an attempt to demonstrate that developing the four traditional language skills is not quite enough for effective intercultural communication in English, and that the one element that should be implicit to language learning is culture, or the culture-specific way of using language.

Keywords: "Languaculture", cultural distance, language proficiency, effective communication.

1. Second-Language Learning and Culture Learning

Any second-language teacher will agree that developing the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) is not quite enough for effective communication – at least not in all communication situations. The one element that we consider to be essential to language learning proficiency is culture (understood as a social construct), given that language itself is not only a major cultural element, but also a faithful reflection, interpreter and recorder of a national culture. Linguistic anthropologists seem to agree on the idea that "[first] language learning" and "enculturation" are, in fact, integral parts of "the same process" (Watson-Gegeo 2004: 339), which explains the inextricable relationship between linguistic and cultural competence as a condition for correct communication. The equation between language learning and culture learning, or the relationship between "learned behavior" (i.e. culture) and "language habits as part of that shared learning" (Heath 1999: 11) does not solely apply to the acquisition of one's mother tongue, in one's own cultural environment through an enculturation process initiated from early childhood, as anthropologists point out, but also to second language learning through first hand contact and various interactive practices with native speakers in their cultural setting (i.e. linguistic acculturation).

Non-native language teachers working in their own environment (which may be culturally very distant from the one associated with the target language), as well as their students, are obviously at a disadvantage, as their situation is radically different from the ones mentioned above. For a Romanian teacher of English, for instance, it is not easy to re-create, for the duration of maybe just a couple of hours a week, a cultural context that is not only physically out of reach, but also very different from his or her own, and keep it present in the minds of students so that they may be able to internalize not only foreign linguistic structures but also the foreign cultural norms underlying any real sociolinguistic competence. It is, however, such hard-earned

competence (which could otherwise be so easily acquired through immersion in the target culture) that will enable students to perform successfully in their future workplace anywhere in the world (since English is the universal language of business nowadays), and especially in the target culture (i.e., in the English-speaking countries, mainly the UK and the US). Conversely, the lack of such competence might cause anything from misunderstanding, insecurity and embarrassment to “language shock” (Agar 1994) – an expression coined by Michael Agar, a well-known American anthropologist, apparently by analogy with Kalervo Öberg’s notion of “cultural shock” (Öberg 1960), to designate a state of linguistic confusion very similar to the traumatic experience of losing the familiar points of reference normally provided one’s own culture as a result of prolonged first-hand contact with another culture, accompanied by a whole range of negative effects on one’s physical and mental health, behaviour and job/ school performance. To emphasize the language-culture relationship, the simultaneous processes of language learning and culture learning, and the importance of joint cultural-linguistic competence, M. Agar has also invented the term “languaculture” (Agar 1994).

It is therefore to be expected that the greater the difference between one’s own “languaculture” and the target one, the more difficult the entire second language learning process will be. Apart from the considerable cultural distance between Romania and the UK, teaching English poses an additional challenge: the cultural (and linguistic) incongruities that exist even among English-speaking nations, and primarily between Great Britain and the United States, even today, in our increasingly “flat” world (Friedman 2005) in which the dominant cultural influence is undoubtedly the American one. It is now common knowledge that, thanks to the Internet and the global spread of American pop culture, the majority of Romanian students are more familiar with the American variety of English and the cultural values implicitly attached to it, although the textbooks and video/ audio material predominantly used in language classes in our universities are either British, or written and created by Romanian authors from a British/ European cultural perspective.

2. The UK, the US and Romania: A Cultural Overview

As far as the cultural distance between Romania and the two English-speaking countries is concerned, it is enough to compare these nations’ country scores along the six major “dimensions” (or cultural variables) analyzed by Geert Hofstede, Gert Hofstede and Michael Minkov in the latest edition of *Cultures and Organizations. Software of the Mind* (Hofstede et al. 2010, Hofstede et al. 2012): Power Distance (PD, which indicates a culture’s attitude towards authority, and its tolerance of the unequal distribution of power in society), Individualism (IDV, or the way people define their identity, either as autonomous individuals, or as members of a group whose needs and interests prevail over individual ones), Masculinity (MAS, or a society’s tendency towards, and appreciation of, either competitiveness, aggressiveness, quantity and material success, or cooperation, nurturing and the quality of life, by analogy with the values attached to the two traditional gender roles), Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI, which points to a culture’s acceptance of uncertainty, ambiguity and insecurity, or its

preference for strict rules and structures as guarantees for security), Long-term orientation (LTO, a culture's focus on the future, present or past, and its interest in either long-term commitments or the immediate gratification of its needs), and Indulgence vs. Restraint (IVR, which measures a society's level of happiness and freedom of choice, unhindered by social constraints).

Following Hofstede's example, a few Romanian interculturalists (e.g. Adina Luca, Angelica Neculăesei and Maria Tătărușanu) have, over the last few years, conducted their own questionnaire-based research on the Romanian culture along the same dimensions. The table below shows the three countries' scores for each dimension, according to Hofstede (2010), as well as the estimates for Romania given by Luca (2005), and Neculăesei and Tătărușanu (2008, based on 2007 data):

Dimension	UK Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede & Michael Minkov, 2010 Cf. Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, 2005	US Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede & Michael Minkov, 2010 Cf. Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, 2005	ROMANIA	
			Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede & Michael Minkov, 2010 Cf. Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, 2005	Adina Luca + Gallup, Jan. 2005/ Gallup, March 2005 Cf. Neculăesei & Tătărușanu, March-April 2007
PD	35	40	90	29/33 cf. 82.41
IDV	89	91	30	49/49 cf. 32.3
MAS	66	62	42	39/39 cf. 45.35
UAI	35	46	90	61/61 cf. 69.38
LTO, wvs	51 Cf. 25	26 Cf. 29	52	42/42 cf. 35.93
IVR	69	68	20	-/ cf. 52.76

Table 1. Country Scores: UK, US, Romania

The scores provided by the three Romanian researchers for our country are quite similar to the latest scores estimated by Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede and Michael Minkov – with three exceptions: the PD, UAI and IVR figures. According to Adina Luca, the unrealistically low PD score based on respondents' answers to the questionnaire can be explained by a "power distance complex" which prompts many Romanians to declare a smaller PD as an expression of "a desire and not a reality" (Luca 2005: 6, 7-8). Luca insists that although Romanians "would rather have no interference" with their superiors, tend to "obey orders taken from the top", and have an emotional "need for an authoritarian leader", most of them declare their preference for a "participative management style" (Luca 2005: 7) specific to low (e.g. Anglo-Saxon) PD cultures. Neculăesei and Tătărușanu have conducted an even more detailed research study at regional, not just national level, and have also calculated Romania's score (33.6) for a new cultural variable, "Monumentalism", Michael Minkov's valuable addition to Hofstede's dimensions; it should be noted, however, that the country average (which points to low Monumentalism), is derived from three very different regional scores: 51.60 (Moldavia), which indicates moderate Monumentalism, cf. 36.15 (Wallachia) and 37 (Transylvania) – high Monumentalism. Although these 2008 scores (based on data collected in March-April 2007) do not confirm the negative LTO-

Monumentalism correlation established by Hofstede later (in 2010), they finally lead to a Monumentalism average that is not very far from to the one suggested by Hofstede's LTO score for Romania (52), i.e. a rather moderate level of Monumentalism (leaning more or less towards its opposite, which Minkov calls "Flexumility") similar to the UK one, but considerably lower than the US one (which is huge).

Judging by Hofstede and Minkov's latest country scores for most dimensions, the UK and the US are culturally very compatible: both rank low on PD and UAI, but high on IDV, MAS and IVR, with the only culture gap located on the LTO continuum: the US is very short-term oriented (26), whereas the UK has switched from low (25) to moderate (51) LTO over the last seven years, which brings it very near to Romania (LTO 52). Compared to both UK and US, Romania is therefore a high PDI and UAI country (which means, among other things, a very hierarchical society, a considerable psychological distance between people in positions of authority and the rest of the population, and a high level of anxiety caused by ambiguous, uncertain, new, unusual situations and ideas), with significantly lower IDV, MAS and IVR scores, and moderate to low Monumentalism.

Another valuable theoretical instrument that can be used to distinguish among the three cultures is US anthropologist Edward T. Hall's classification of cultures (and messages) into "high-context" and "low-context" from the point of view of communication style (Hall 1989: 105-116). The US is a multicultural and multiracial nation whose communication style is identified by Hall as low-context (characterized by direct, detailed, explicit verbal messages meant to avoid misunderstanding, and independent of any "context" such as interlocutors' shared knowledge, past experience, age, gender, social status and relationship with each other). The opposite, high-context communication style is characteristic of nations and regions that are racially and ethnically homogeneous, where messages tend to be rather indirect, economical, allusive, with much of the meaning inferred from the cultural "context", and conveyed both verbally and non-verbally (through body language and para-verbal means). Hall insists that the labelling of cultures as high- or low-context is meant to point to their predominant communication style, which does not exclude the use of opposite manners of communication. Moreover, there are degrees of high- and low-context even among countries that are usually lumped into the same category, and this is particularly true if we compare the US (very low-context) and the UK (which is more moderately low-context). In our opinion, Romania is rather moderately high-context, but distant enough, culturally, from both English-speaking countries, even though there may be areas of activity, such as business, where the influence of Western communication style (and corporate culture) translates as a lowering of context, i.e. a more direct, precise communication style meant to avoid ambiguities and misunderstanding.

3. Culture and its Linguistic Consequences

The premise underpinning our entire argumentation is that languages, as major components, reflections and recorders of culture, cannot and should not be taught and studied independently from the cultural contexts they are shaped by. Romanian

students will bring to the lecture and seminar room their culturally determined ways of using language that differ across nations. In the absence of “languacultural” competence, this may cause problems in various areas of language learning – from the proper use of vocabulary to the correct understanding of written or spoken messages.

Since language is such an important element of culture that refers to various other cultural aspects, each of the above-mentioned cultural differences between Romania and the two English-speaking countries will emerge more or less obviously at the linguistic level as well. The language teacher’s role is exactly that of drawing attention to linguistic structures as verbal manifestations of deep-seated cultural values and patterns of thought by focusing not only on the development of the four traditional language skills, but also on those cultural uses of language that may pass unnoticed by students, but make all the difference between a mere working knowledge of a language and the in-depth understanding required by real linguistic proficiency. Out of the cultural variables we have mentioned, the ones we consider to be of utmost relevance to our topic are Hofstede’s PD (to the extent to which it can be correlated with a formal communication style), IDV, MAS and LTO (with its negative correlate, Michael Minkov’s Monumentalism), as well as Hall’s notions of high-context and low-context.

The culture gap along the Power Distance dimension (i.e. the attitude towards inequality and authority) between Romania and both English-speaking countries (both of which are less hierarchical and formal than Romania – especially the US, and, to a lesser degree, the UK) will surface linguistically in the handling of the formal/ informal communication style, e.g. in the use of honorifics. While the most widespread Romanian honorifics (*domnul, doamna, domnișoara, Excelența Voastră*) have their exact correspondents in English (*Mr., Mrs., Miss, Your Excellence/ Your Excellency* [to ambassadors and other high officials], etc.), the use of double honorifics as a mark of respect, in the case of high-status professions (*dl. profesor, dl. doctor, dl. ministru*) is, with few exceptions (*Reverend Father, Mister President, Madame Ambassador*) not common in English, where one honorific will usually suffice: *Professor X., Doctor Y.* In point of formality, Romania comes very close to the rest of Latin countries, and to such European countries as Germany (whose formality, however, cannot be explained by the country’s PD score, which is actually very low, 35, but rather by its high UAI, 65, and the corresponding need for order and precision, which also includes social hierarchy), but is less formal than Asian cultures.

In *American English*, Albert H. Marckwardt admits that in spite of its practice of using honorifics as a polite form of address, American English is “a far cry from the Teutonic usage”, and “judged by either general European or Latin American standards, [...], the English-speaking American becomes almost a shrinking violet” (Marckwardt 1958: 120). Marckwardt’s remark about the difference in formality between Americans and Germans is confirmed by Edward T. Hall (Hall and Hall 1990: 48) and H.L. Mencken (Mencken 2000: 137).

In his famous book *The American Language*, Mencken also identifies a subtler difference in the level of formality between British and American English: the conservative British culture attaches more importance to well-established hierarchy, hence the “diligent” but more objective or selective use of honorifics than in America:

“Among the honorifics in everyday use in England and the United States one finds many notable divergences between the two languages. On the one hand the English are almost as diligent as the Germans in bestowing titles of honor upon their men of mark, and on the other hand they are very careful to withhold such titles from men who do not legally bear them. In America every practitioner of any branch of the healing art, even a chiropodist or an osteopath, is a doctor *ipso facto*, but in England a good many surgeons lack the title and it is not common in the lesser ranks. Even physicians may not have it, but here there is a yielding of a usual meticulous exactness, and it is customary to address a physician in the second person as *Doctor*, though his card may show that he is only *Medicinæ Baccalaureus*, a degree quite unknown in America. Thus an Englishman, when he is ill, always sends for the *doctor*, as we do. But a surgeon is usually plain *Mr.*, and prefers to be so called, even when he is an M. D. An English veterinarian or dentist or druggist or masseur is never *Dr.* Nor *Professor*. In all save a few large cities of America every male pedagogue is a professor, and so is every band leader, dancing master and medical consultant. But in England the title is very rigidly restricted to men who hold chairs in the universities, a necessarily small body” (Mencken 2000: 137).

The various degrees of formality that set Romanian wide apart from both varieties of English are best illustrated by the forms of personal pronouns. Unlike present-day British and American English, which use a single, polite form (“you”) for the personal pronoun in the second person singular and plural, and one form for each of the other pronouns, Romanian has several pronoun forms for the 2nd and 3rd person, singular and plural, which emphasize either differences in formality and social distance (based on considerations of age, professional/social status), or equality between interlocutors – e.g. *dumneavoastră* (2nd person, singular and plural: very polite, very formal), *dumneata* (2nd person singular: polite, formal); *mata* (2nd person singular: polite regionalism, or familiar way of addressing a mature or elderly person), *matale* (2nd person singular: polite regionalism, used especially in rural areas), the last two forms showing that formality is deeply ingrained in the national psyche, cf. *tu* (2nd person singular: informal, used among people of equal age or status, equivalent to the archaic English pronoun *thou*); *dumnealui* (3rd person singular, masculine: very formal and polite), *dânsul* (3rd person singular, masculine : formal, polite), *dumneaei* (3rd person singular, feminine: very formal), *dânsa* (3rd person singular, feminine: formal), *dumnealor* (3rd person plural, masculine and feminine: very polite, very formal); *dânşii* (3rd person plural, masculine: formal, polite), *dânsele* (3rd person plural, feminine: formal), cf. *el* (3rd person singular, masculine: familiar), *ea* (3rd person singular, feminine: familiar), *ei* (3rd person plural, masculine, familiar), *ele* (3rd person plural, feminine, familiar).

The huge cultural differences as regards the self-concept between Romania, the UK and the UK, as revealed by the IDV scores, also primarily emerge in the use of personal pronouns (*I, we*), and the corresponding possessive pronouns and adjectives. In collectivistic societies like the Romanian one, people tend to express both their social identity, and their sense of ownership and belonging, in relation to others. So a Romanian will usually refer to his country, or his language, or his home city, or, if he is a student, his university, as “*our country*”, “*our language*”, “*our city*”, “*our university*” –

unlike an American, who may more inclined to use the possessive adjective in the singular.

The degree of Monumentalism may also shed light on certain linguistic preferences of British English, American English and Romanian. The contrasting UK and US Monumentalism scores (which can be inferred based on their negative correlation with the LTO scores, 51 vs. 26), as well as Romania's moderate score point to quite different patterns of the self: on the one hand, maximum self-enhancement in US culture, on the other hand moderation, or even a slight inclination to "Flexumility" (defined by Minkov as the opposite of "Monumentalism", i.e. a combination of flexibility and modesty or humility (Hofstede et al. 2012: 241-245), hence a certain measure of self-effacement, in the case of both the UK and Romania. Linguistically, this takes the form of Americans' preference for overstatement – a tendency which has been noticed by many authors (Greeley 2008: 340, Marckwardt 1958: 100) – as opposed to the use of understatement in British English, and Romanians' indulgence in self-irony (a basic rhetorical device used in Romanian humour) as a special form of self-effacement, self-minimization or even modesty. According to Emil Cioran, however, self-irony is "an expression of despair" (Cioran 1999: 143) and of a typically Romanian (and very counterproductive) attitude of passivity or complacency (Cioran 1990: 31), but even this could be interpreted as another (albeit negative) aspect of moderation!

As we have noted elsewhere (Dumitrescu 2013: 164-168) American overstatement may take the form of hyperbolic or superlative vocabulary (e.g. *perfect*, *absolute*, *fabulous*, *super*, *terrific*, *incredible*, *unique*, *stunning*, *fantastic*, etc.), whereas British understatement is mainly conveyed by meiotic or litotic expressions (like *very nice* for something brilliant, *a bit under the weather*, for "very upset", *a bit of a nuisance*, for something very annoying or unpleasant, *a scholar of no small accomplishment* for someone of remarkable merit, *not unattractive* for "very beautiful", *this is not bad at all* for "excellent", etc.) which either affirm less, or downplay the importance of something, or express an affirmative through a negation of the opposite. This makes sense if we think that linguistic expression goes hand in hand with a certain self-image: people with an inflated ego tend to have a linguistic preference for verbal enhancement, for powerful, hyperbolic vocabulary, whereas more modest individuals are expected to show the same restraint or temperance in their use of language.

Monumentalism vs. Flexumility could also be associated with the positive or negative connotation given to augmentatives and diminutives in British English, American English and Romanian. The abundant use and wide range of Romanian diminutive expressions, with variants for one and the same word – *copilaș*, *copilandru*; *puiuț*, *puișor*; *băiețaș*, *băiețel*, *băiețică* (vocative) – meant to express the idea of smallness, affection or (sometimes) triviality sets Romanian apart from both British and American English, in which diminutives formed by means of such suffixes such as *-let*, *-ling*, and *-kin* (e.g. *booklet*, *duckling*, *lambkin*) seem to be less frequently used in everyday language, and more "at home" in literary texts and in the language of children; as for augmentatives, it is interesting to note the different semantic value attached to them in Romanian, compared to the two varieties of English. In Romanian, such augmentative words as *bulgăroi*, *căsoaie*, *băiețoi*, *burdihan*, *pietroi*, etc. are used humorously, mockingly or pejoratively, but never admiringly; by contrast, in both British

and American English, augmentatives formed by means of such prefixes as *super-*, *mega-* or *over-* (some of which have been borrowed by many other languages), e.g. *superpower*, *supermarket*, *megastar*, *overseer*, *overlord*, convey a positive sense of greatness, grandeur or excellence, which is totally in line with a higher degree of Monumentalism than the one found in our culture; let us remember that the US ranks high on Monumentalism, and the UK used to rank almost equally high seven years ago, according to Hofstede's 2005 low UK score for LTO (25) which later rose spectacularly to 51 in only five years. Significantly, in addition to diminutives and augmentatives, Romanian also has an intermediate category of words expressing medium values (size, age), e.g. *baiețandru*, *copilandru*, *băiețan*, *fetișcana*, which also carry a fairly positive connotation of warm familiarity, and are also compatible with Romania's moderate degree of Monumentalism/ Flexumility.

Needless to say, Monumentalism is generally more likely to combine with Individualism (and, to a certain extent, Masculinity), whereas Flexumility is more compatible with Collectivism (and Femininity), which is fully proved by both American English and Romanian. However, the IDV-Monumentalism correlation is only partially illustrated at the linguistic level by the UK, if we consider the above-mentioned British English bias towards understatement. In spite of the different Monumentalism scores of the UK and US, but totally in line with their high IDV scores, we should mention that English is the only language in the world in which the first person singular pronoun is spelt with a capital letter (as a linguistic form of self-enhancement), which brings it in sharp contrast to Romanian, which exemplifies the practice of "pronoun drop" (accompanied by verbal inflections used to point to the referents) as an instance of self-effacement which is common in cultures characterized by Collectivism and Flexumility (even though it is also found in many other Indo-European languages irrespective of the IDV scores of their corresponding cultures).

The rhetorical means of understating mentioned above may be regarded not only as illustrations of a slight inclination towards Flexumility in British English and Romanian, but also as examples of indirectness which may justify Hall's classification of UK culture as only moderately low-context; for all its bias towards indirect statement, British English is, however, still very distant from the moderately high-context Romanian culture. Moreover, indirectness is present even in American English (e.g., in the use of euphemistic expressions, e.g. *rest room* for "toilet" or "bathroom", *casket* for "coffin", etc.), but it is the British that excel in oblique expression and understatement (as proved by the above-mentioned examples) that may often cause misunderstanding in situations of intercultural communication, whereas Americans distinguish themselves as masters of linguistic excess.

As far as linguistic "masculinity" is concerned, it is strange that the similarly high MAS of the two English-speaking countries should manifest itself more obviously in American English, in at least two ways: on the one hand through dynamic, sportive, action-oriented expressions using such verbs as "grab", "hit", "take", "touch" or "play" (e.g. *to grab a taxi/ an audience*, etc., *to hit the headlines/ books/ button*, etc., *to touch base*, *to play the field*, *to take a bath* – instead of the British English "have a bath", etc.), whose Romanian equivalents use less energetic verbs (e.g. "a lua un taxi", "a face baie", "a apăsa pe buton", "a capta atenția auditoriului"), as a confirmation of our

culture's opposite characteristic: moderate Femininity. On the one hand, linguistic masculinity emerges in American English as overstatement. The distinct American propensity towards superlative and hyperbolic expressions, which we have viewed as the linguistic equivalent of Monumentalism, is indeed compatible with an obsession with competitiveness, achievement, ranking success, as well as quantity or size – all of which fall into the category of “masculine” cultural biases that can be traced back to the tenacious, enterprising spirit of early Puritan colonists, as defined by Max Weber (Weber, 2003).

4. Conclusions

Language has long ceased to be the object of study of pure linguistics only, as demonstrated by the multitude of present-day interdisciplinary approaches, which justifies our own modest contribution to looking at the challenges posed by second-language acquisition and proficiency from a double, “languacultural” perspective. The above overview – which is by no means exhaustive – has identified a few cultural characteristics along some of the variables provided by Hofstede, Minkov and Hall, as well as their corresponding linguistic reflections that distinguish the two varieties of English from each other and from Romanian, starting from the premise that a language learner aiming at language proficiency should not only acquire and develop the four traditional language skills, but also become aware of the cultural patterns of thought and behaviour (and the set of values underlying them) that determine a culture-specific use of language which differs from one's own.

Our attempt was therefore meant to point to the most likely areas of languacultural conflict that Romanian learners of English should be aware of and able to deal with as a condition for affective communication, especially in a professional environment where misunderstanding and communication breakdown may sometimes turn out to be very costly. Our approach to the language-culture relationship has also sought to emphasize the importance that should be attached to some of the less obvious or frequently overlooked languaculture gaps between the two English-speaking nations that may pose at least as great a challenge to Romanian translators, learners and speakers of British and American English as the immediately noticeable differences in grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.

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