Beyond Language: Cultural Predispositions in Business Correspondence

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Translation covers only part of the problem of working with people of other nations and cultures. Differences in cultural background may affect business correspondence between Americans and others, and International English may be evolving a cultural style of its own. In correspondence, business people from the low-context cultures of Northern Europe and North America sometimes inadvertently offend their counterparts in high-context cultures by assuming that their correspondents share their values. Such correspondence might be more effective if writers used a rhetorical framework to conceptualize in their letters a sense of their addressees' conditions and of their own roles in relation to their addressees. This dimension of relationship may be difficult for people from low-context cultures. However, because of the increasing use of English as a lingua franca of business, correspondence standards may be changing. Using the example of rhetorical patterns in English and Chinese business letters, I suggest a way to use Western rhetorical principles to accommodate other cultural patterns.

Where Culture and Rhetoric Meet: Contrastive Rhetoric

The cultural component of communication has become the subject of study in a hybrid field called contrastive rhetoric. Scholars in this area often use Kaplan's diagram (Box 1) to explain international negotiations in business. Perhaps it is useful because paragraphing strategies reflect cultural styles. In countries whose languages derive from old German—including German, Dutch, and English—negotiation styles tend to be linear and direct.

Box 1. Styles of paragraph development (after Kaplan, 1966)

But these countries also tend to have what Edward T. Hall calls "low-context cultures." Hall sees meaning as comprising both context—i.e., stored or shared information—and transmitted or explicit information (Box 4). The more shared context there is, the less information must be transmitted, and the less shared context there is, the more information must be transmitted. Low-context cultures tend to value goals and procedures and short-term, purposive behavior; high-context cultures tend to value long-term relationships. Low-context cultures also tend to be individualist, while high-context ones tend to be more collectivist.

Box 2. The relation of context to explicit information (after Hall 1983: 61)

A Culture of Individuals

Two decades ago, the American sociologist Philip Slater, in The Pursuit of Loneliness, asserted that "The American never thinks of other Americans at all—his most characteristic trait is that he imagines himself to be alone on the continent" (1976: 145).

This somewhat hyperbolic statement is partly borne out by the work of Geert Hofstede in the IBM studies reported in Culture's Consequences (1980) and reformulated in Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind (1991). On an index ranking the countries in the study from individualist (100) to collectivist (0), only the United States and Australia ranked in the 90s (1991: 53). It ought to be paradoxical, or at least oxymoronic, our being described as a culture of individualists. But then, as the English writer D. H. Lawrence (1951) once observed about America, you're free to believe anything you want to in America, so long as it doesn't offend the mob. We do find it hard to imagine that others have different values. We want to believe that everyone else is basically just like us.

It's easier to believe that since the influence of commerce and electronic media seems all over the world to be speeding up and spreading wide the normal processes of cultural accommodation. At a conference in Germany a couple of years ago, one of the speakers raised the question, "Do we need teachers as cultural interpreters when we learn language-and-culture by watching TV?" The question serves to remind us that "culture" is perhaps like a glacier—fluid and fast-moving where it contacts the air, but frozen and slow-moving at bottom, that is, at the level Hall calls core culture or primary-level (PL) culture. "One of the principal characteristics of PL culture," Hall reminds us (1983: 7), "is that it is particularly resistant to manipulative attempts to change it from the outside."

My aims are more modest. I suggest a strategy for the point at which glaciers meet, so to speak: combining some knowledge of cultural characteristics with some concepts from Western classical rhetoric might smooth business correspondence at the interface.
All very nice, but who are you?

Let's take the ever-more-common case of the American who wants to strike up business dealings with people of another language and culture. Box 3 reproduces a letter to a delegation of Chinese who had visited the United States. They had expressed some interest in the products of Mr. Jones's company, so he wrote them a letter, presumably hoping to sell some. However, as Boiarsky (1995) informs us, his letter drew no response.

Box 3. Ineffective Cross-cultural Letter (Source: Boiarsky, 1995)

Dear Sir:

Your name and address were referred to me by the Illinois Department of Agriculture--Far East Office. They stated that you had expressed an interest in our products and requested further information.

I am therefore enclosing a brochure which itemizes our products and services. Please let me know your exact requirements. I will be happy to provide you with further details. Thank you for your participation at the Illinois Slide and Catalog Show. I look forward to your reply.

Sincerely, Peter Jones
Director of Sales Agri-Equipment Division

The letter pretty much follows the cultural conventions of English letters: blunt and businesslike, highly purposive. To trace why this letter didn't work for the Chinese, I'd like to back up a bit and examine some characteristics of the rhetorical style of Americans and Northern Europeans that may be at cross purposes with those of Asian cultures.

Aristotle's Insight

The most influential of the ancient rhetorics, given the Platonic bias in the intellectual life of Europe, was Aristotle's. Aristotle's insights into the nature of persuasion hold up pretty well still, if held up to the light so they refract in particular ways.

Aristotle noted that there are two kinds of persuasion, one stemming from sources external to the persuader (atechnic proofs--witnesses, contracts, tortured, oaths; physical evidence, the sort of facts that to Westerners speak for themselves, seem to have played little role in Athenian justice) and those the speaker has to invent--entechnic proofs. "One must use the former and invent the latter" (Aristotle 1991: 37). These entechnic proofs he divided into three parts, as shown in Box 4.

Box 4. Aristotle's "communication triangle

Aristotle did not use graphics, but his differentiation of atechnic and entechnic proofs and his division of the entechnic into three parts suggests that he saw ethos, logos, and pathos as inseparable.

I'd argue that any written document always has all three elements, even though they are not equally well developed. That is, the logos represents the matter under discussion, pathos the reader's stake in that matter, and ethos the claims of the author. Even if a document is written entirely in passive voice and without reference to readers, there is still an implied ethos (objectivity, professional competence, lofty indifference) and pathos (the reader should be able to "get it" on her own).

There is some evidence that the balance of logos, pathos, and ethos has shifted within this century. John Brockmann (1989) notes that ethical exhortation in manuals around 1900 was fairly usual and served to remind readers of shared civic values, whereas manuals today shy away from ethical exhortation. Gabrielle Bock thinks management-dictated use of simplified language to facilitate translation and eliminate cultural reference has led to "Technical communication acts involving] writer and product instead of writer and reader" (1995). Mary B. Coney (1992) has shown how texts can theorize roles for their readers. I've noticed myself that computer manuals seldom theorize a role for me. That is, they seldom tell me why certain features might be helpful or why I might want to use them.

How do these rhetorical concepts apply to intercultural communication? Intercultural rhetoric is a fascinating new area of study, since cultural styles and rhetorical styles are deeply intertwined. Let me move along toward my promised goal of showing how the concept of entechnic proofs from classical rhetoric might help those of us from lower-context cultures correspond more effectively with people from higher-context cultures by looking at an example that displays another increasingly common tendency: the use of English as international lingua franca, as shown in the example that follows.

Can Chinese rhetoric survive translation?
Several years ago, a visiting scientist from China was connected with a research lab where a student of mine was working as an editor intern. The scientist had drafted a letter (Box 5), in English, to a Japanese organization and had asked the intern simply "to put the letter into good English." However, the rhetorical form of the letter was so strange to him that he asked me for advice.

Box 5. An example of Chinese rhetoric

The development of gunpowder was certainly one of the greatest achievements of the medieval world. European historians have recognized in the first salvos of the fourteenth century bombards the death-knell of the castle, and hence of Westernmilitary aristocratic feudalism. The development of modern powder and high explosive technology pushes the society ahead further, but at the mean time, it helped several strong countries to invade the weak countries and hence caused enormous sad result between the peoples.

Evidences show that there was exchange of knowledge of gunpowder and blasting bombs between Japan and China not later than the thirteenth century. The relationship between scientists in the field of explosives of these two countries is improved and becoming better since the beginning of this decade. Professor [A], Professor [B] and many other Japanese scholars visited China: and at the same time many Chinese colleagues visited Japan. I enjoyed very much the kind invitation of Professor [A] to give a guest lecture on the Academic Conference of The Industrial Explosives Society, Japan in the May of 1987. Very kind arrangement by Professor [B] made it possible for me to visit the University of Tokyo, the University of Kyoto, and many other institutions. I am very much indebted to the generosity of my hosts for their warm reception.

In these years of close relationship with Japanese colleagues, I am deeply impressed on two points. The first point is that they always put the safety problem on the first place. According to the statistics, the frequency rate of injury (FRI) of industries is keeping going down from almost 40 in the early fifties to as low as 2.22 in 1987. In 1985, the FRI of the U. S. A. is 9.90 in compared with 2.52 of Japan. The second point is that the four main islands, Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu, have been linked by bridges and tunnels completely in 1988 and reliable transportation routes inter-connecting these islands have been provided. The explosive scientists and engineers played a big role in the underwater blasting and construction work.

On the occasion of the fifty years anniversary of the Industrial Explosives Society, Japan, I would like to send my sincere congratulations for your past achievements and my best wishes for your future success. I am also looking forward to a more intimate cooperation between scientists and engineers in the field of explosive science and technology for our two great neibouring countries.

Yours very sincerely,

[Chinese scientist's signature]

It seems a strange structure to Northern Europeans as well, judging by the preferences expressed at Forum 95 (Table 1).

Table 1. Responses from Idea Market at Forum 95 (Dortmund, Germany, 13-15 November 1995)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Version</th>
<th>Native Language of Respondent</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radical</td>
<td>Danish</td>
<td>The others are &quot;pouring water out of the ears.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical</td>
<td>Norwegian</td>
<td>[Radical version is best] under the condition that they know the way westerners think. I would choose the radical if the letter were to be sent to Europe from Japan. For a China-to-Japan letter I cannot tell.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical</td>
<td>Norwegian</td>
<td>The facts were easier to get. I guess in some cultures it would be considered impolite and harsh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Necessary [constructs, constituents?] preserved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Mainly because there's no reference to ancient history and to invasions, wars, and &quot;sad results.&quot; Also, because brief information is often better = more readable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>The introductory ¶para; oriented me, the reader, to the occasion and purpose of the letter. The letter was shorter, crisp, and edited.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>The point of the [original letter], and the [minimal] revision, is unclear. The radical version prunes and discards the waffle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>More direct and explicit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Letter writing and text should be different than literature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Shorter and more to the point.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>According to me, the 3rd [radical] letter is the best, though I would not congratulate twice. But taking into account the cultures of the author and the receiver, [the original] might be best.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>The &quot;voice&quot; of the original writer can be (should be) preserved in correct English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Radical, but cut out history. Good English is not so indirect. Good Chinese is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Send in Chinese and let the Japanese translate it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>It is a bit easier to read = to get the information. The radical version seems to me a bit risky e.g. someone from Japan might feel surprised or offended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Didn't get bored after first paragraph.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Working as an English speaker in a market of non-English speakers writing documentation in English, one gets a totally fresh point of view. If the author writes in a foreign language to someone who is very close to his own culture, then the original letter's line should be kept.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The "minimal" letter referred to in the table was made idiomatic but was not restructured. The "radical" version, preferred by most respondents, gets to what Westerners believe to be the point of the letter at once (Box 6).
Box 6. A Westernized version of the letter

On the fiftieth anniversary of the Industrial Explosives Society, Japan, I send my sincere congratulations for your past achievements and my best wishes for your future success. I am also looking forward to even more intimate cooperation in explosive science and technology between scientists and engineers of our two great neighboring countries.

In the field of explosives, the relationship between Japanese and Chinese scientists has improved steadily since the beginning of this decade. Professor A, Professor B, and many other Japanese scholars visited China; many of my Chinese colleagues have visited Japan. I enjoyed very much the kind invitation of Professor A to give a guest lecture at the Academic Conference of The Industrial Explosives Society, Japan, in May 1987. Very kind arrangements by Professor B made it possible for me to visit the University of Tokyo, the University of Kyoto, and many other institutions. I am very much indebted to the generosity of my hosts for their warm reception.

In these years of close relationship with Japanese colleagues, I am deeply impressed on two points. First, they always give high priority to the problem of safety. The frequency rate of injury (FRI) of industries has continued to decrease, from almost 40 in the early 1950s to as low as 2.22 in 1987. In 1985, the FRI of the United States of America was 9.90, compared with Japan's 2.52. Second, explosive scientists and engineers played a big role in the underwater blasting and construction work in linking the four main islands by bridges and tunnels. Completed in 1988, this work has provided reliable transportation routes connecting these islands.

Again, congratulations on these achievements to the Industrial Explosives Society, Japan, with best wishes for continuing future success.

As we will see in a moment, this rewriting leaves out matters of relationship that the writer carefully develops in the original. My early readings of the letter (Campbell and Bernick, 1993) were influenced by Kaplan's characterization of cultural styles in learning (1966). It is easy to see here "an approach by indirectness," with "things [being] developed in terms of what they are not, rather than in terms of what they are." This kind of development is also characteristic of Japanese, as remarked by Joann Dennett (1988): "Not to say is better than to say." At first, to American eyes, the letter seems hopelessly indirect--it gets to the point only at the very end. But the letter does have a definite if unfamiliar rhetorical strategy, and a rather subtle one at that. The Japanese concept kishotenketsu seems to explain the descriptive but lengthy introductory remarks as well as the structure. Kishotenketsu is explained this way by a Japanese linguist quoted by Dennett (1988): "First you have the subject, ki, then you raise it, sho, next roll it, ten, and then . . . you end it beautifully, ketsu." The four paragraphs resemble that structure: the first paragraph names a subject (explosives), the second "raises" it by mentioning the professional exchanges, the third "rolls" it by acknowledging Japanese achievements, and the fourth "ends it beautifully" by offering congratulations.

In the original letter (Box 5), the allusion to the long, often troubled history of relations between China and Japan forms a dark backdrop. A Japanese, most likely, already knows that the gunpowder that ended European feudalism was invented in China. Nor is that reader likely to misinterpret the remark about stronger countries invading weaker ones, causing "enormous sad result." This somber background will contrast with the more hopeful message that is to follow. The second paragraph moves us immediately from the thirteenth to the twentieth century, and is perhaps doing several things at once: establishing the writer's credentials as a scientist, acknowledging the present enlightened attitude of the Japanese, and encouraging continuance of scientific exchanges. The third paragraph seems puzzling--why do Japanese readers need to be told the names of their four main islands, to be reminded of their interisland connectors, and to have cited back to them figures that likely came from the Explosives Society of Japan in the first place? Again, in the terms of Aristotelian rhetoric, the writer, a non-Japanese, establishes credibility (ethos) by demonstrating his knowledge (logos) and by acknowledging the accomplishments of the readers' pathos). Or, in terms of Asian rhetoric, he creates face for himself and gives face to his readers. So when in the last paragraph the writer finally delivers the message of congratulations, he has already built a relationship with his reader and the message carries some weight. The ostensible subject of the letter is achievements in explosives, but the psychological aim is relation-building.

Additional evidence that the letter represents "good writing" in the Chinese sense comes from a book just published by Li Xiao-ming, "Good Writing" in Cross-cultural Context. Li's interest is in seeing what is valued in the teaching of composition in the USA as compared to China. He quotes a Chinese teacher of writing:

"Basically we think a piece of writing should have four components: introduction, development, transition, and closure [qi3 cheng2 zhuang3 he2]. I think this basic format is still valid because they are in accord with the way we think. . . . We have three thousand years of writing history . . . Teachers have the responsibility to teach a student the successful writing experiences of our forefathers. (1996: 73-74)"

Another Chinese teacher adds:

"It is very unlikely that one would start a piece from a form; we all start from ideas or from experience in life. . . . Especially in a country like China that has a literary history of thousands of years, is arrogant to think that one can surpass his predecessors without first learning from them. (74)"

Two characteristics that contribute to good writing are the qualities qing and li. As the second teacher describes them:

"Qing has great persuasive powers. Li (reason) is inseparable from qing: qing is couched in li, and li is couched in qing. Li (reason) is different from lizhi (rational). Being rational, one is emotionally controlled, somber, composed, exercising only intellectual and reasoning faculties. Reason, however, deals with truths. Truths, though existing in objectivity, are approached and learned only through subjectivity. Truths should be learned with passion and conviction. (55)"

I wish that Li had said more about the differences the writing systems make in the way writers conceive and express the world. It is exceedingly difficult to know which of the many Chinese characters that correspond roughly to the sound qing might be meant, and in Chinese, the character is less ambiguous than the spoken word. A Chinese-American friend pointed out to me that li has the sense of both "reasoning" and "decorum"; it seems similar to the ancient Greek nomos, often translated "law" but not meaning written or codified law--closer to "the right way of being or behaving that everybody knows," or perhaps to "common sense."

So given the difficulty of conveying the sense of the Chinese into English, I will nonetheless boldly suggest that the conception of reason couched in emotion marks a difference between Chinese and Western rhetorics. While li appears roughly analogous to logos, qing seems to represent the axis of relationship between ethos and pathos. That is, Chinese rhetoric does not appear to make that Western distinction between individual and audience. Emotions are not yours or mine, but ours.
Traditional, there are two ways to express one's qing: either directly express it, or indirectly through a description of nature. And because Chinese are mostly reserved and introverted in temperament, we prefer to "couch qing in jing," suggest what one feels through the description of nature. (87)

I think we can find some qing couched in jing in the first paragraph, though most of the letter is more direct.

**Good Writing? For Whom?**

The qualities of the letter that make it seem "good writing" also seem to make it less effective for its readers, possibly because it was written in English and not Chinese, but also because the kind of writing Li studied was the personal essay. The letter to the Explosives Society does seem more like an essay than like the usual Western business letter.

The surprise for Bernick and me in our 1993 survey (Box 7) was that our Asian respondents didn't like the letter any better than the Westerners. Our Asian editors (six women and five men) also made a number of predictions about the author of the letter: he was well educated, much older (probably at least in his 70's) and was from an upper-middle- or upper-class home. These comments were motivated by the excessive politeness. Our editors also felt that if the letter had been translated directly into Japanese that it would have been more acceptable than it was in English, but that translation wouldn't make it more effective or less confusing.

**Box 7. Asian editors' reactions**

- Writer's goals were unclear.
- Doesn't really read like a letter.
- Three unnecessary paragraphs.
- Needs to be shorter.
- Inappropriate way for authors to develop ethos.
- Style would be more appropriate in Japanese, or even Chinese, but for English it is clearly inappropriate.
- Length detracts from letter, and makes it ineffective and confusing.

There may be another issue mixed into the Western and Asian responses to the letter: the difference between "good"writing and effective writing. At least in China and the United States, there seems to be a tradition of teaching writing as writing, without reference to the actual needs of actual readers. The kind of writing done by the Chinese students in Li's study is part of a millennia-old tradition. The kind of writing done by the American students in his study, on the other hand, comes from a much shorter tradition. It's the tradition of the departments of English in American universities, which around 1900 lost interest in teaching rhetoric and focused instead on literature (see Stewart 1982, Berlin 1987), but still got stuck with teaching writing to several generations of bemused first-year students. This literary turn is described by W. Ross Winterowd (1996) as "the death of pathos," responsibility for which he lays at the feet of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "the essentialized Romantic Idealist whose solipsism . . . [results in] a rhetoric (or antirhetoric) that is self-expressive rather than communicative." Self-expression is what is chiefly taught in composition classes. Winterowd notes that "of the three sorts of rhetoric named by Aristotle, only epideictic is not aimed at action." Epideictic is also called ceremonial rhetoric. Its province is the present, whereas forensic rhetoric tries to establish what happened in the past and deliberative rhetoric tries to set a course for the future. In rhetorical terms, business letters are not often ceremonial; they usually try to explain why something happened or exhort someone to do something.

The "Explosives Society" letter seems ceremonial, and therefore unusual for a business context. So perhaps it should not be so surprising the Asian readers of English tended to agree with the Northern Europeans: This agreement indicates that where documents in English are concerned, they should follow the cultural conventions of English letters.

**What Can Low-context People Do?**

It does seem possible to adapt Western rhetoric's conceptual framework of entechnic proofs so as to include ethos and pathos, thereby achieving something like qing. The letter in Box 3, as Chinese writing teacher might explain, has managed to separate ethos and qing and to provide none of the latter. It does not acknowledge its recipients as humans with whom one might build a relationship, and relationship-building is important almost everywhere except in the low-context Western cultures. True, it does use the personal pronouns I and you, but a reader gets no sense of that I as a person. Even in the terms of Western rhetoric, it's a cold letter--there is little ethos, personal or corporate, to establish credibility or identification, nor is there much pathos, awareness of the reader's condition or needs.

One way to deal with this kind of problem, one also recommended by Ulijn and Strother (1995: 234), is to use people of the appropriate cultural background within your own company to do the writing, as happened when the company in Boiarsky's example. The second letter (Box 8) did receive a number of responses.

**Box 8. More effective cross-cultural letter**

Dear Mr. Yen Zen-jiu:

I hope that you have had a safe journey home and that you have found your family in good health. The midwestern part of our country where you graciously visited continues to have wet weather, but I am thankful for the rain after our two years of drought.

Ag World wishes to thank you for your participation at the state Agricultural Convention and for stopping by our booth.

Our firm is situated in Bloomington, Illinois, the heart of grain and cattle country. It has a history of 10 years' experience in selling livestock and livestock equipment. It has trade relations with more than 45 countries in the world. Our firm is well known for its excellent service and good quality products.
Though formulaic, the first paragraph of Tan's letter establishes the basis of relationship. The second paragraph gives face to the reader, and the third establishes the writer's face. Since the mode of identification is different in Chinese than in Western languages, it couches qing in jing through the imagery of weather, which, to people in agribusiness, is a subject of constant concern. Translating this opening strategy into the terms of Western rhetoric, the opening works along the ethos-pathos axis of Aristotle's triangle by establishing a "commons," or meeting ground. Pathos, acknowledging the condition of the reader, is followed by ethos, establishing the writer's organizational credibility. Only then comes the matter or logos of the letter: the offer to provide product information.

For business-letter writers in low-context cultures writing in English to readers in high-context cultures (Latin or Asian), this advice may be as simple as remembering that their cultures predispose readers to be more interested in long-term relations with reliable people than in products or profits for their own sake. Hence, letters begin with paragraphs that establish common ground and show understanding of the readers. This strategy, in my own experience, works pretty well even on readers in low-context cultures.

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