

The Discursive Construction of Cultural Differences - By: SOFIA MAVROPOULOS

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By understanding in depth the actual process of cultural difference creation, businessmen become equipped with a knowledgeable and erudite shield that helps them circumvent cultural misunderstandings that they might encounter in their everyday business transactions. Paying more attention to the actual wordings that the cultural actors use in these transactions could prove very advantageous for the outcome of any business interaction. Only by obtaining a deeper understanding of the origin and manifestation of the differences can the intercultural perplexities be transcended. Only through knowledge and appreciation of the differences, intercultural obstructions need not become a reality.

Globalisation Trends and Cultural Convergence

In a world characterised by globalisation trends and cultural convergence, some cultural traits still persist and the emergence of cultural differences can be witnessed. Companies do not deal with the problem of geographical distance to the same extent they did in the past. The proliferation of deregulations and technological advancements has assisted towards reaching greater target populations, achieving economies of scale and added value for the global market. Businessmen working for companies with multicultural coverage are exposed to different cultures in their everyday working environment. When dealing with other cultures and arising miscommunications in their daily interactions, with every case being unique, they need a flexible and dynamic understanding and an adaptable approach towards the issue of culture and difference. Differences are not limited to the macro-environment, incorporating geographical boundaries, national demographics, historical developments and social surroundings, but expand to the micro-level of personal traits and individual mental mechanisms.

The differences between interacting businessmen emerge through the contradistinctions in their discourses. By taking a closer look at

these discourses and comprehending the mechanisms of their creation and their manifestation, it is possible to create a handy tool that could be used by all businessmen to smooth and ease their daily intercultural dealings.

The Danish-Greek Case

This article is based on a study conducted in connection to my master thesis for the M.Sc. in Intercultural Management at Copenhagen Business School. The scientific interest of the study revolved around adding a new dimension for dealing with differences in emergence between cultural actors. The focus was put on the actual process of difference creation rather than the final manifestations and artefacts. The empirical data that the study was based on, was derived from qualitative interviews with two Danish and two Greek businessmen, both living and working in Denmark and Greece respectively. The linguistic utterances gathered by the four interviews became the material for the analysis. Wordings and other linguistic devices were put at focus, since they give useful insights to mental formations and deeper mental structures of the cultural actors. In this article, only very few examples will be mentioned for exemplification purposes.

Language and Discourse

Language is one of the means by which cultural actors come to express their meanings and thoughts, but it also has ideological and social dimensions. The term discourse is used to encapsulate these broader dimensions of language, namely ways of being, acting and representing the world. Through discourse, cultural actors construct their identities, construct social relations to others and transfer systems of knowledge and meaning. This is why personal usage of language is so important in the process of deciphering and decoding the subjective explanations of other cultural actors. People are perceived as the carriers of ideas, thoughts and understandings, which are enacted through their articulations and interactions. The compilation of individual articulations and subjective statements is, therefore, essential for understanding the construction of cultural differences.

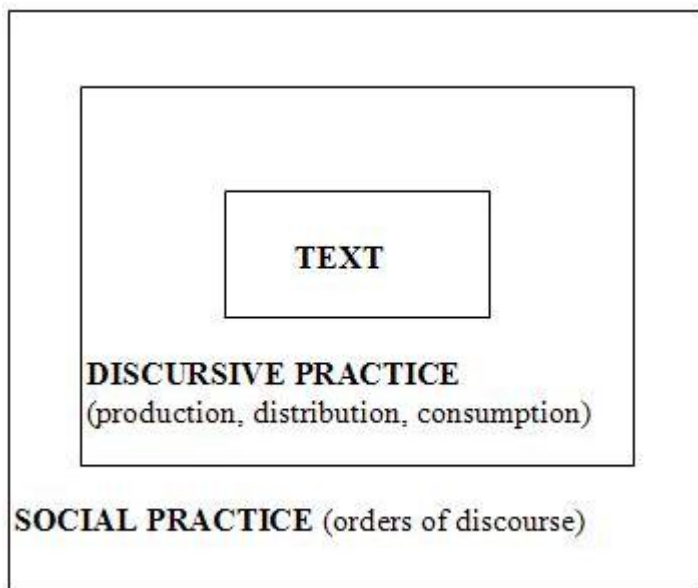
The foundations on which the whole world-view of the businessmen relies are expressed through a discourse, not to say a plethora of simultaneously intertwined acting discourses. It is through discourse, that members of cultural groups make sense of their lives and the changing social and contextual milieus. Through comparison of these discursively expressed structures - verbal expressions and articulations, which act as the source of

information in this analysis - differences become constructed between the two cultural groups.

In order to understand the emergence of cultural differences, a deep analysis of the perceptions, preconceptions and understandings of both the Greek and the Danish businessmen, respectively, is required. These exact perceptions, understandings and ideas based on mental structures are not related in a random way, neither do they exist in a vacuum. In the process of socialization, these conceptual frameworks become an internal part of the members. In other words, the categories and concepts that people use are culturally and historically bound. This also shows that discourses vary across cultures, which in this case proclaims to support the differences between Danish and Greek discourses.

The Tools of the Trade

A practical tool kit and analytical frame for extensive investigation of discourses, and understanding of the emerging cultural differences, is provided by Fairclough through his three-dimensional conception of discourse model. With this model, Fairclough is not providing a theory but more precisely, he sketches a frame theory that outlines the boundaries but leaves the context hollow. The model is text-oriented and brings together three analytical traditions and levels of analysis. According to Fairclough, each instance of language use has three simultaneous dimensions, as the model illustrates: it is a text (speech, writing, visual image or a combination of these); it is a discursive practice (which involves the production and consumption of texts); and it is a social practice. In other words, this frame connects the micro with the macro-level, combining textual with social analysis in a schematic model.



Three-dimensional conception of discourse (Fairclough, 1992)

1. Text

One major heading borrowed from Fairclough's text analysis is "vocabulary", which refers to the identification of wordings and specific, repeated, culturally loaded words contributing to the depiction of the underlying modes of the interviewees' rationality and world construction. These words point out the matters in which the speakers attribute major significance. Having looked upon the specific vocabulary, used by the Danish and the Greek businessmen, similarities and differences were noticed.

All four interviewees express their thoughts and construct their answers with words such as "difference", "different mentality", "different culture", "different way of doing business", "different people" etc. This observation provides evidence of the stiff presupposition of all interviewees about the predetermined existence of cultural differences. Both groups not only use words such as "different/difference", but also use the personal pronouns "we/our" versus "they/them", and also nationalities as generic categories "Danes" and "Greeks". The term "foreigners" was also used by both Greek businessmen when referring to their Danish business partners. An expression as "the foreigners" indicates the austere categorisation process that is taking place within the mental structures. In general, all these strict verbal separations between the two groups, according to "national belongingness", effects towards a constructed and maintained physical separation. Referring to the "other" is a human function exercised in order to

demarcate the "own", the "familiar" contrasted to the "alien", the "xenon". These segregating compilations act as the separation device constructing the difference, while forming the cultural and national identity of the actors.

Both groups of interviewees also use negative characterisations to describe each other. Both Danish and Greek businessmen seem to ascribe to themselves favourable characteristics, sketching in this way a flattering persona and identity. By presenting an adorned and prettified portrait of themselves, they implicitly and automatically claim the right for fair judgement of others. At the same time, words such as "opportunistic", "dishonest", "corrupted", "eccentric", "ineffective" and "irrational" expressed by the Danish businessmen when describing their Greek counterparts, or the words "cold", "constrained", "stiff", "distant", "harsh" and "treat you as a number" expressed by the Greek businessmen about their Danish counterparts, can only have negative connotations. Hence, it is important to point out that the vocabulary that unfolded in the interviews, creates an invisible distance between the respective groups not only because the words express difference, but also because of the negative tag attached to some of these words. And difference is created not just between two equally "good" groups of people, but difference actually creates an unbalance between them.

The usage of categorical generalisations and of demeaning and unfavourable remarks, in other words prejudice and stereotypes, can surely not foster intercultural understanding and communication. On the contrary, the belief that a particular set of traits with negative connotations associated to hostile feelings is attributed to all members of another nation, can only create and amplify the chasm between the groups.

Another observation deriving from the text analysis, is that all four interviewees use "unedited" English words, such as "Summit", "Management", "Directors", "follow-up", "plan" and "meetings", instead of translating them into their native languages. This points towards the influence of a global business discourse, and illustrates the convergent tendencies of globalisation and its presence in intercultural business discourses.

"Grammar" is another heading within textual analysis that adds to the understanding of the different construction process. Grammar focuses on linguistic devices through which speakers manage to place responsibility, make subtle accusations and moderate their speech. Once again, Greek and Danish businessmen make different usage of grammar and in this way discursively construct cultural differences.

Based on a thorough textual analysis, Danish businessmen seem to "passify" their speech, while the Greek businessmen seem to "personify" it. This means that while the Danish group tend towards agency obfuscation (omission of the agent in their clauses), detachment from the text and thus objectivity of statements, the Greek group is characterised by agency inclusion and involvement with the text and thus, personal subjective statements. An example: Danish Interviewee: "...one might catch a business partner, through 30 years, in actually trying to cheat one" (Int. 1, Ln. 270-271). This utterance expresses a negative cultural trait of Greek businessmen, however without having it applied to one's own personal experiences and partnerships, and leaves the agency and thus, responsibility vague. In many statements, the Danish interviewees also take an authoritative stance and claim objectivity. On the other hand, the Greek interviewees tend to take an emotional stance with subjective tendencies. An example from a Greek interviewee: "...because, I don't know if it is my personal impression, subjective, eh, but the more I experience them [Danish partners] and I understand them, I feel that with one of their moves, I will understand what they are trying to say" (Int. 3, Ln. 124-127). The personal sentiment is evident throughout the whole extract. The interviewee is fostering the attachment to the text, and the agents are clearly stated.

2. Discursive practices

The second level of analysis focuses on discursive practices, or in other words, how authors and consumers of texts draw on already existing discourses in producing and interpreting texts. The heading, "Interdiscursivity" is used here to show how different discourses are entangled and articulated in moments of speech.

It is rather interesting to notice that even though the questions posed in all interviews come from the same questionnaire, the two groups of interviewees manifested two widely different business discourses. The differences observed in the semantic fields and thematic ranges of the discourses lead once more to the construction of intercultural differences and miscommunications. The Danish business discourse mentioned themes such as efficiency, professionalism, rationality, transparency, honesty, tolerance, political correctness and national arrogance. Just to mention one of the numerous examples: Danish interviewee: "...we see inefficiency in many other areas, that is, in 50% of our [Greek] customers, they always know things much better than us, also when we tell them that "you have to buy today, because tomorrow it will be more expensive", we are told that he is not buying at those ridiculous prices. He is sure it [price] will fall and then next

day he calls and it has risen and then he yells and shouts and then we say "we told you so" etc. So, that is really not efficient...and it is fairly, what can you call it, transparent what we are doing. It is not something you can manipulate and hide from the customer what is going on. He can just go online and see it" (Int. 2, Ln. 174-182). In this extract only, the interviewee points out topics such as time perspective, efficiency, transparency, honesty and rationality as different parameters between the two countries.

On the other hand, the Greek business discourse mentioned topics such as propinquity and family, tradition, trust, casualness, uncertainty, national pride and arrogance. Greek Interviewee: "And I went to their [Danish partners] homes, and I played snooker, pool with them, and we went out to have fun, at office parties, all that. We even reached the point once, for me to see the Greek flag at the factory (Ln. 138-140)...I told you, the Greek flag was up there...What could be better than that?" (Int. 4, Ln. 225-226). This example not only indicates the importance of proximity and propinquity, but also of the Greek national emblem.

It is not difficult to see that two different "languages" are spoken, even though the matters at stake are, in both cases, the same. Hence, discursive practices seem to add valuable information to the understanding of intercultural differences. Not only because they point out the range of topics that are of major interest to each cultural group, but also because discrepancies constructed become clearer.

3. Cultural and Social practices

The third level of analysis ponders on the macro-level where the wider applications of the discursive events are evident. Focus is put on the greater socio-political context to which the interviewees belong. Each person has a specific spectrum of choices from where to draw the elements to construct a discourse. The network of cultural and social practices reflected in the language available in the context is socially conditioned and, therefore, similarities can be registered in the constructed discourses of persons located in the same context. Topics such as hegemony, ideology and power relations belong to this broader context. And these power relations are actually exercised and enacted in discourse.

Denmark as a strong economy belongs to the Western world of affluent and technologically advanced countries. From an in depth analysis, it can be derived that the strong economy, financial security, strong welfare system, influence by the protestant ethic, the so-called "Law of Jante" (which generally stipulates that you

should not think too highly of yourself), codes of down-to-earth conformity, spirit of egalitarianism and post-modern tendencies, have all contributed towards creating the current spectrum of discursive elements available to all citizens of this context. The two Danish interviewees have freely chosen from this spectrum of discursive elements, and the similarities and differences that were observed in their constructed discourses are reflected in this choice. Globalisation, corporatism and capitalism are also implicitly present in both Danish texts. Just to mention one example: When the interviewee was asked regarding a possible malfunctioning partnership, he answered: "That would probably not prevent us in penetrating the Greek market" (Int. 1, Ln. 181). Corporate expansion and globalisation trends make their appearance in this utterance.

Compared to Denmark, the Greek discourse elements have been influenced by a less affluent economy, a glorious history stretching back 4000 years, a past with wars and unrest, the absence of a strong welfare system, uncertainty, orthodox religion and nationalism. An example could illustrate the connection to the past: "You know, at the Second World War, we lost a lot of blood fighting at the side of the Alliance. The resistance was huge" (Int. 3, Ln. 324-325). This example shows the importance that the interviewee attributes to the historical past and the national pride associated to it. Furthermore, globalisation and capitalism also make their appearance in the Greek texts. One example: "Today there are thousands of Chinese products that completely replace the European ones" (Int. 4, Ln. 90-91).

In regards to power relations, all four interviewees seem to settle in a power scale that bends towards the Danish side. Both Danish interviewees adopt the superior and authoritative position, while the Greek interviewees adopt the subordinate position. One example from a Danish interviewee: "Now you [telling his Greek partners] have to deliver this report in a week", then you might never see it, or you perhaps see it very late, even though you have set a deadline..."It is just on the way, it is just coming, we are a bit busy, we are working on it, we are almost done and maybe already sent it". (Int. 1, Ln. 202-6). The Danish interviewee - through irony - presents Greek businessmen as pooling different excuses for not doing their job properly and himself as the one giving orders. He has the authority and power on his side and the Greek partners, who ought to follow his instructions, present excuses for their misbehaviour. In the same line, the Greek interviewees seem to adopt the subordinate position. One example: "They [Danish businessmen] want the truth. They do not want prevarications. You know, we are trying to escape with various...tricks. No, they say

"you will tell me the truth. And when I ask you whether this is feasible, you will tell me yes or no. You will not tell me "yes, we will see, maybe, perhaps, but, under those circumstances etc."" (Int. 3, Ln. 108-111). This example gives the picture of Greek subordinates, who submissively follow the demands of the Danish superiors.

The "economic capital", borrowing Bourdieu's terminology, which is the command over economic resources, is assigning the lion's share of power to the Danish businessmen in the specific interactions. This dominant-compliant, or leaders-laggards power structure, that was enacted between the two cultural groups however, not only creates intercultural differences, but also serves to maintain these.

Overall Points

An overall point that has to be made is that all four interviewees had an extreme functionalistic approach towards culture and cultural differences. In other words, the concept of culture was inflexible, while differences were ascribed to essentialistic reasons. One Danish example "...and it can be a bit hard, I believe, in any case for Danish companies to accept [bureaucracy], if they don't know about the culture that exists in the country in question" (Int. 1, Ln. 286-287). One Greek example: "First of all, people's mentality is different, right? From their nature. That is also the case for business dexterity. A Greek's temper is different from that of a Dane's...The differences will exist anyway, because the genes are different..." (Int. 3, Ln. 304-305). In both examples, culture is portrayed as something that one can know about, something that exists. The fact that all businessmen believe in the fixed nature of cultural characteristics ascribed to national groups makes the creation of differences between the groups unavoidable. Genes were considered the main cause for creating cultural differences and national identity, and belongingness was used as a generic categorisation tool. By adopting such a rigid stance and having the belief in an inescapable difference creation, an impenetrable gap is constructed.

Furthermore, all four interviewees demonstrate through their speeches their acceptance of specific cultural characteristics attributed to their business partners. And through their interactions, these pre-judgements become real, reinforcing the first perceptions. This could be said to put into force circles of self-fulfilling prophecies explaining how an expectation, whether correct or not, affects the outcome of a situation or the way a person (or group) will behave. Thus, the self-fulfilling prophecies are discursively perpetuating a range of stereotypes that serve to maintain intercultural differences.

The creation of cultural differences is enhanced and accrued through the claim by all interviewees to have high moral standards. Danish interviewee: "And perhaps there are a lot more bad people [in Greece], than there are in a small country like Denmark. After all, Danes are as a whole, very real and honest" (Int. 2, Ln. 95-97). All four interviewees, in various degrees, make judgements about their business partners taking a stance of high morality and judgemental lucidity. For instance, while the Danish interviewees claim that Greek businessmen are immoral and dishonest due to the corruption involved in their business practices, the Greek interviewees assert that the Danish businessmen are immoral due to their lack of emotion. A Greek example: "They [Danish management] are harsh. Very harsh...everyone of them. The ones I met 30 years ago, from the old school, they were completely different. Now they have changed and they see us as a number" (Int. 4, Ln. 52-54). The belief by all interviewees that they have the morally right criteria to judge, constitutes a difference between the two groups, since the criteria are different.

By taking a step further and reaching a meta-analytical level of analysis, it could be said that the grounds for judgement and argumentation are different between the two cultural groups. While the Danish businessmen judge through an ethical and economic prism in most cases, the Greek businessmen judge through an emotional prism. The references of both Danish businessmen to bureaucracy, inefficiency, corruption and instability etc. originate in ethical and economic interests and standards. The references of both Greek businessmen to stiffness, coldness, formality, professionalism etc. direct towards emotional understandings. More specifically, the different emergence between Danish and Greek businessmen is not merely a product of different geography, history or economic and social structures, but actually derives from mental structures expressed as differences in judgemental criteria, argumentative constructions and critical senses. By employing different lenses and angles to explain and portray the world, differences emerge between the two groups of people. Awareness of such a finding can be used by businessmen to deter and avert cultural miscommunications. Being observant at the micro-level of grasping culturally loaded words, interpreting syntax and grammar, combined with a general knowledge of the macro-socio-political context to which a business partner belongs will, provide businessmen with a handy and flexible tool for overcoming intercultural misunderstandings, promoting intercultural tolerance and smoothing the way business is conducted.

Closing Remark

The focus of this article has been the construction of intercultural differences between Danish and Greek businessmen. And even though differences continuously emerge and are maintained discursively, business is still conducted. How is that possible?

Global movements and converging trends also influences all members of societies. The global scenery is characterised by accelerating globalisation inducing geographical proximity, free flow of goods, progress and freedom, which in turn is strengthening the dominance of a world capitalist economic system. Prevailing global ideologies are widely included in contemporary conversations and all four businessmen have not escaped this influence, as was noticed in the discursive analysis of the interviews. These ideologies act to converge geographically dispersed nations and cultures by highlighting the importance and necessity of business transactions. In other words, these homogeneous powers enable the continuation of business transactions.

The business discourse, or more correctly the hybrid of discourses by the four interviewees simultaneously constructed the differences between them and created the conditions for future business relationships. It could be said that the discourse has both constraining and enabling powers. It could also be said that cultural or national discourses contrast with global convergence tendencies. The juxtaposition of cultural discourses constructs the differences, while the presence of a global business discourse underplays these differences.

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