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## Cultural Differences and Barriers in Communication and Functioning of an International Organisation

### Summary

Cultural determinants constitute an essential factor shaping the system of values professed by a given group. It is this system that is largely responsible for determining behaviour, communication or approach to cooperation. Cultural differences in international organisations often generate barriers to communication with the environment as well as management problems. The article presents the discussion on the subject of culture and its basic concepts as well as their influence on the activity of international enterprises to be found in literature. The paper presents and discusses findings from recent studies into communication and management problems related to cultural differences faced by international organisations which operate in the territory of Poland. The article is of the research nature.

**Key words:** culture, cultural barriers, international organisations.

**JEL codes:** D23, M14

### Introduction

According to one of the most frequently quoted definitions, culture is the aggregate of the achievements of the society, spiritual and symbolic, material and non-material creations of people, their thought patterns, customs and beliefs, system of values, way of perceiving the surrounding realities, people or style of behaviour. What makes up the core of culture are traditional ideas and values related to them as well as a number of patterns of behaviour characteristic of a given group, i.e. elements of human behaviour which have been acquired and learned, historically selected, not biologically conditioned or inherited (Zenderowski and Koziński 2016). Culture builds and shapes behaviours, communication between people as well as determines, to a certain extent, the decisions and, as a consequence also actions undertaken by them. According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2012, p. 12), in every culture behaviour patterns and system of values are like an invisible hand which governs man's actions. The definition of culture assumes the existence of certain common features in representatives of a given community or nationality, features which condition the perception of phenomena, events, circumstances or people, system of values or behaviour which is, to a considerable degree, adopted to the needs or expectations of one's immedi-

ate social group. The common features are largely responsible for determining behaviours, motivations and activities of the community.

Cultural differences often constitute the principal cause of the existence of barriers to intercultural management affecting the performance of enterprises with the participation of foreign capital (Gatingnon 1988; Gomes-Casseres 1989; Kogut, Singh 1988). They can generate mental discomfort related to the feeling of uncertainty in certain situations which would not have place in a culturally uniform environment. Some of the values, beliefs and assumptions which are of crucial influence on the culture and operation of an organization are often invisible, difficult to spot. Frequently they are concepts or behaviours which are deemed obvious by people proceeding from the same culture; they are taken for granted, and thus not debatable or subject to any changes and negotiations (Hammerich and Lewis 2013). It is these concepts and behaviours that affect motivations and direct our actions in a way which we are not fully aware of. The otherness of behaviour of people proceeding from different cultural circles is referred to as cultural dissonance. It can be a source of cognitive dissonances as the overall perception is not objective but culturally conditioned and determined. This causes the perception of the reality in a slightly distorted form resulting, on the one hand, from observation blockades, mistakes in understanding and interpreting, while, on the other, from the creation of incorrect concepts and simplifications compliant with own cultural patterns. Due to the combination of the organizational culture of the head-office and the culture of the host market, enterprises with the share of foreign capital are particularly exposed to cultural dissonance (Sikorski 2002, pp. 45-46). That is why such factors as communication and verbal and nonverbal behaviours, proper interpretation, understanding, way of communicating and motivations deserve being given particular attention in an intercultural environment as they may constitute the principal source of misunderstandings of cultural background origin (Adler, Gundersen 2008, pp. 90-91).

Representatives of cultures which manifest opposite values and features, can have difficulties in communication due to completely different expectations with respect to communication or relationship-building. As emphasized by Budzyński (2014, p. 165), cultural otherness and the resultant specificity of conducting trade talks should be taken into account in negotiations with a foreign partner. Talks on subjects unrelated to the transaction negotiated can be perceived as a behaviour devoid of professionalism. In turn, for a representative a pro-partnership culture concentration solely on cooperation or contract-related issues will be perceived as cold and reserved. The dissonance created by a person focusing solely on transactions will make further cooperation impossible. Lack of punctuality can be perceived by representatives of another culture as lack of respect or neglect while for others it can be of no importance as schedules and deadlines for the performance of tasks are of secondary importance for them. Also, a direct form of addressing people with a higher status in the social or professional hierarchy can be perceived by some as improper while by others as natural. Gestures, touch or intensive eye contact will also be natural for some while seen as violation of personal space by others because they come from a culture characterized by a greater need for physical distance.

## Cultural barriers in an international organization

The numerous factors which decide whether cultural barriers will have an adverse effect on the process of management and functioning of an enterprise can be divided into three groups. The first is strictly linked to the biological and cultural determinants of a given man. The factors which are the main determinants of the emergence of cultural dissonance are perception errors resulting from the tendency to apply selectivity (selection of the convenient and rejection of the inconvenient information), the so-called Pygmalion effect (a self-fulfilling prophecy), stereotype thinking, appearance of attribution (explaining the causes of behaviour of a given person with the help of one's own cultural filter) (Kurkliński 2016, pp. 51-52).

What should be mentioned when speaking about biological and cultural determinants is cultural intelligence understood as the ability to adjust to distinct determinants through the ability to read and interpret cultural differences as well as the use of the thus obtained information in practice. Cultural intelligence leads to effective use of the knowledge of culture in the international environment which leads to reducing the problem of barriers in spite of cultural differences (Kurkliński 2016, pp. 51-52). International experience developed in result of contacts with other people proceeding from other cultures constitutes another factor affecting the level of cultural intelligence which favours overcoming cultural barriers (Barkema, Bell, Pennings 1996; Rozkwitalska 2011).

The second group of factors contributing to the emergence of intercultural barriers comprises factors of organizational character. Barkema, Bell and Pennings specify three main ones:

- features of the head-office of the foreign firm and in particular its level of institutional ethnocentrism, strategic approach to the role of the branch office, limited international experience, practices applied in the so-called soft areas of management, for instance in HR policies, communication techniques;
- features of the local branch related to its level of ethnocentrism, xenophilia, autostereotypes, absence or poor international experience,
- size of the cultural gap between the head-office and branch offices.

What should also be mentioned here are such aspects as human resources management in a way adjusted to the local cultural and market conditions as well as the system of motivation or personnel appraisal (prizes, bonuses, promotions). The imposition of rules functioning in the head-office which will be incompatible with local employment practices and conditions may generate staff discomfort which reflects on the functioning of the enterprise. Another crucial factor of organizational character is fluent command of a language understandable to all parties. Communication with the head-office, co-workers, clients, work with the firm's internal documents, correct interpretation of tasks assigned is the everyday reality of employees who do not, as a rule, have a native speaker's command of the first language of the organization. Language gaps (gaps in the knowledge of words, idioms, colloquial language) cause that the parties involved cannot fully understand one another along with lack of the ease to present their own arguments, views and, consequently, limitation of contacts between employees, partners and clients (Kurkliński 2016, pp. 54-56).

The third group of factors is linked to national culture. What should be mentioned here is first of all the already referred to cultural dissonance but also cultural stereotypes and prejudices, cultural shocks and social ethnocentrism. The latter can be defined as ‘... a cognitive filter anchored in the values and practices of one’s own culture, through the prism of which the cultural practices of people treated as alien or different are perceived, interpreted and assessed’ (Brewer, Crano 1994, p. 494). Affirmation and absolutisation of one’s own culture and one’s own point of view with simultaneous depreciation of other cultures and views contribute to the emergence of a negative attitude to everything that is alien and other (Posern-Zieliński 1987; Adorno et al. 1968). Ethnocentrism contributes to the growth of distance towards other nationalities, isolation and closure to external influences, problems with communication, appearance of prejudices, stereotypes, conservatism, preference of one’s own language and even ethnophobia (Rozkwitalska 2011, p. 70). Ethnocentrism can be present both on the part of a foreign investor and on the part of a host country. However, in the case of the former it can generate much more serious consequences. An ethnocentric head-office strives to impose its own model of functioning on the whole organization. The readiness to establish dialogue and cooperation with local representatives is limited. The failure to understand another culture, reluctance to get acquainted with it as well as absence of a need to adjust to local conditions often generate international conflicts and affect relations with external stakeholders (Rozkwitalska 2012, p. 116).

### **Obstacles to communication in organizations with foreign capital**

The results of a study conducted in 2017 among 153 enterprises with the share of foreign capital operating in Poland revealed the most common problems and obstacles to communication with foreign branches, boards of directors or clients as well as partners being foreigners. The greatest problems faced by respondents were related to: poor foreign language knowledge (42.5%) and difficulty in understanding interlocutors (35.9%). Cultural differences in general as well as differences in the style of management constituted an obstacle for almost every fourth respondent (23.5% and 25.2%, respectively). Stereotypes and prejudices made cooperation difficult to 17% of respondents while different forms of behaviour, norms and standards in the workplace were an obstacle to 18% of them. Difficulties resulting from misreading gestures and body language were the rarest cause of problems in communication with foreigners. The presence of this obstacle was indicated by a mere 8% of respondents (Figure 1).

Three criteria of diversifying the study sample were adopted:

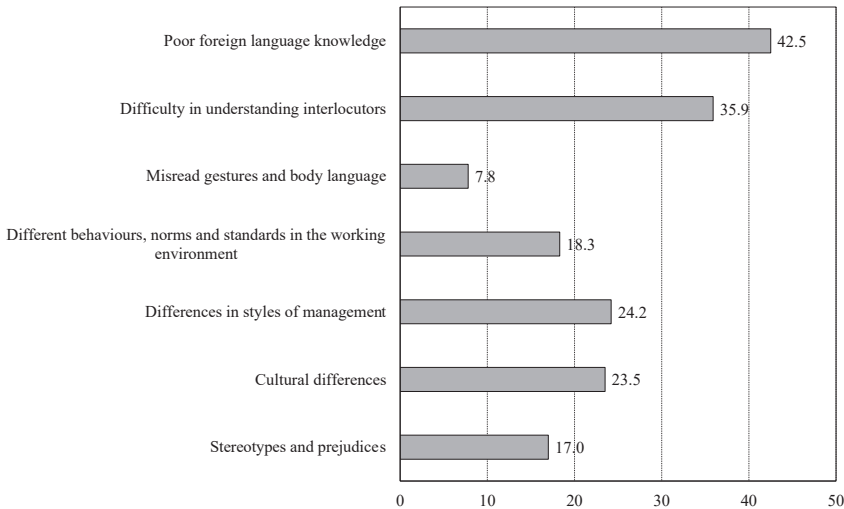
- type of conducted activity – section acc. to PKD 2007;
- dominating form of internationalization: franchising, license, joint venture, acquisition of Polish enterprise, direct investment, branch office of parent firm;
- size of the enterprise measured in the number of employees: micro (up to 9 employees), small (10-49 employees), medium (50-249 employees), large (250 and more employees).

Main characteristics of the enterprises surveyed in the study allowed to determine:

- what parent country the enterprises come from;
- what the share of foreign capital is, in %;
- how many countries, Poland included, the enterprise operates in;
- the period of time the enterprise has been operating in the territory of Poland.

**Figure 1**

**Obstacles to communication in organizations with foreign capital**



Source: results of own research.

The adopted criteria were used in the analysis of the obtained study results, with the features of the study sample being taken into account. The obstacles to communication with foreigners indicated by respondents varied depending on the form of internationalization of the enterprises participating in the study. In enterprises operating on the basis of a license, the greatest problems were differences in management styles (including, in particular, relations between the employees and the employer), cultural differences as well as stereotypes and prejudices (44.4% of indications for each of the obstacles listed). In enterprises operating on the basis of franchising, the largest obstacle was poor knowledge of foreign language and difficulty in understanding interlocutors related to accent, pronunciation or specialist language or terminology (40.9% of indications for both obstacles). These obstacles were also the most common to be indicated in enterprises which have their branch office in Poland and operate as an affiliate (45.6% and 40.4%, respectively). Poor foreign language knowledge constituted the main problem in relations with foreigners for every second representative of enterprises operating on the Polish market as foreign direct investments while in joint

ventures the principal obstacles to communication were different forms of behaviour, norms and standards in the working environment (42.9%). In enterprises in which internationalization proceeded in result of the acquisition of the Polish enterprise, principal communication obstacles included: different behaviours, norms and standards in the working environment, cultural differences such as: customs, traditions or religion as well as poor foreign language knowledge (45.5% of indications for each of the obstacles listed) – Table 1.

Poor knowledge of a foreign language was the most frequently indicated obstacle to communication with foreigners in the enterprise the parent country of which was Germany (51.4%), France (50%) and the U.S.A. (42.1%). In enterprises from other European countries, difficulties in understanding interlocutors (45.8%) and poor knowledge of a foreign language (42.4%) were the most commonly indicated. In enterprises from non-European countries problems related to differences in the style of management prevailed (38.5%). Merely every third enterprise indicated obstacles of general character resulting from differences in behaviour and cultural differences (Table 2).

Poor knowledge of a foreign language and difficulty in understanding interlocutors were the greatest problems in enterprises with foreign capital whose share was higher than 50%. For an enterprise in which the share of foreign capital was lower than 5%, difficulty in understanding interlocutors was a slightly greater problem – 32.9%. Poor language knowledge was indicated by 31.4% of respondents (Table 3).

Poor language knowledge and difficulty in understanding the interlocutor were the most frequently indicated obstacle to communication, irrespective to the number of countries in which the enterprise operates. Enterprises with a wider scope of activity (over 31 countries) pointed equally frequently to differences in management styles. For 44% of them these differences constituted a serious obstacle. The problem was also observed by every fourth enterprise with the smallest scope of activity. Every fifth enterprise operating on more than three foreign markets also pointed to the problem of different behaviours (Table 4).

Also in terms of the period of time when the enterprises have been operating on the Polish market answers looked similar. Among the enterprises present on the Polish market for the longest time (established before 1992), the most frequently indicated obstacles were poor language knowledge (43.3%) and differences in management styles (40%). Among the shortest-operating enterprises (established after 2009) problems related to poor language knowledge dominated being indicated by 54% of respondents (Table 5).

Poor language knowledge was the largest difficulty in communication among micro (up to 9 employees) and large (over 250 employees) enterprises (40% and 47%, respectively). Among small enterprises (10-49 employees) poor language knowledge was indicated most frequently (46.2%) along with difficulty in understanding interlocutors (48.77%) while among medium-sized enterprises (50-249 employees) the distribution of answers was fairly even: 34.3% - poor language knowledge, 31.4% - difficulty in understanding interlocutors and differences in management style, 28.6% - different behaviours, norms and standards in the working environment. The latter two constituted a significant difficulty for micro enterprises (Table 6).

**Table 1****Obstacles to communication and form of internationalization (in %)**

Form of internationalization	Poor language knowledge	Difficulty in understanding the interlocutor	Wrong reading of gestures	Different behaviours	Differences in management styles	Cultural differences	Stereo-types and prejudices
Licence	22.2	22.2	22.2	22.2	44.4	44.4	44.4
Franchising	40.9	40.9	4.5	4.5	27.3	31.8	18.2
Joint venture	14.3	14.3	0	42.9	28.6	14.3	0.0
Acquisition of a Polish enterprise	45.5	27.3	9.1	45.5	18.2	45.5	9.1
Direct investment	50.0	38.6	6.8	6.8	13.6	13.6	20.5
Branch of parent company	45.6	40.4	8.8	24.6	29.8	22.8	14.0

Source: results of own research.

**Table 2****Obstacles to communication and the parent country of the organization (in %)**

Parent country	Poor language knowledge	Difficulty in understanding the interlocutor	Wrong reading of gestures	Different behaviours	Differences in management styles	Cultural differences	Stereo-types
France	50.0	33.3	4.2	20.8	25.0	25.0	20.8
Germany	51.4	31.4	5.7	14.3	20.0	17.1	11.4
USA	42.1	31.6	26.3	15.8	26.3	36.8	31.6
Other European Countries	42.4	45.8	5.1	18.6	23.7	22.0	13.6
Other non-European countries	15.4	23.1	7.7	30.8	38.5	30.8	23.1

Source: as in Table 1.

**Table 3**  
**Obstacles to communication and the percentage share of foreign capital (in %)**

Share of foreign capital	Poor language knowledge	Difficulty in understanding the interlocutor	Wrong reading of gestures	Different behaviours	Differences in management styles	Cultural differences	Stereo-types
To 50%	31.4	32.9	7.1	22.9	24.3	22.9	15.7
51-99%	54.3	48.6	11.4	11.4	28.6	34.3	22.9
100%	53.3	33.3	6.7	17.8	22.2	17.8	15.6

Source: as in Table 1.

**Table 4**  
**Obstacles to communication and the number of countries the enterprise operates in (in %)**

Number of countries of operation	Poor language knowledge	Difficulty in understanding the interlocutor	Wrong reading of gestures	Different behaviours	Differences in management styles	Cultural differences	Stereo-types
3	39.3	28.6	3.6	7.1	25.0	21.4	21.4
4-10	37.2	44.2	14.0	20.9	14.0	30.2	9.3
11-30	52.9	32.4	5.9	20.6	11.8	14.7	17.6
31+	44.4	37.8	6.7	22.2	44.4	26.7	22.2

Source: as in Table 1.



**Table 5**  
**Obstacles to communication and the year of commencing activity in Poland (in %)**

Year of establishment	Poor language knowledge	Difficulty in understanding the interlocutor	Wrong reading of gestures	Different behaviours	Differences in management styles	Cultural differences	Stereo-types
1992	43.3	30.0	3.3	13.3	40.0	23.3	16.7
93-97	44.8	37.9	6.9	13.8	20.7	27.6	20.7
98-2000	37.0	33.3	0.0	18.5	22.2	14.8	11.1
01-08	39.5	44.7	7.9	31.6	23.7	28.9	18.4
2009+	53.8	34.6	23.1	11.5	15.4	23.1	19.2

Source: as in Table 1.

**Table 6**  
**Obstacles to communication and the number of people working in the territory of Poland (in %)**

Size	Poor language knowledge	Difficulties in understanding the interlocutor	Wrong reading of gestures	Different behaviours	Differences in management styles	Cultural differences	Stereo-types
9	40.0	20.0	0	30.0	30.0	20.0	20.0
10-49	46.2	48.7	15.4	12.8	20.5	20.5	12.8
50-249	34.3	31.4	2.9	28.6	31.4	17.1	14.3
250+	47.0	34.8	7.6	15.2	22.7	30.3	21.2

Source: as in Table 1.

**Table 7**  
**Obstacles to communication and the type of conducted activity (in %)**

	Poor language knowledge	Difficulty in understanding the interlocutor	Wrong reading of gestures	Different behaviours	Differences in management styles	Cultural differences	Stereo-types
G	47.8	37.0	13.0	10.9	21.7	15.2	19.6
H	46.7	33.3	6.7	26.7	26.7	33.3	20.0
K	61.1	38.9	11.1	27.8	11.1	16.7	5.6
N	35.3	29.4	5.9	29.4	29.4	29.4	23.5
IPORS	35.2	38.9	3.7	16.7	29.6	29.6	16.7

Source: as in Table 1.

Poor knowledge of a foreign language as well as difficulty in understanding the interlocutor constituted a major problem in communication among enterprises belonging to Section G (Wholesale and Retail Trade, Car Repairs) and Section H (Transport and Inventory Management). It was similar in the case of enterprises belonging to Section K (Financial and Insurance Activity); however, in this case the obstacle related to poor language knowledge dominated, being indicated by as many as 61% of respondents. In the remaining sections the distribution of answers was fairly even. In enterprises belonging to Section N (Activity in the Field of Administrative Services and Supporting Activity) 35% of respondents indicated poor language knowledge while difficulty in understanding the interlocutor, different behaviours, norms and standards in the working environment, differences in management styles and cultural differences were equally crucial problems for merely 30% of enterprises – Table 7.

## Conclusion

A multicultural environment constitutes a challenge for many enterprises in terms of both the knowledge of new markets and different behaviours of the staff employed. Neglect of cultural differences in an international organization frequently leads to failures on local markets and even failure of the organization as a whole. Simultaneously, adequate management taking into account the specificity of cultural diversity can prove a significant competitive advantage contributing to the success of an organization. A survey of the literature of the subject as well as a study carried out among enterprises with foreign capital confirm the importance of cultural determinants in the development of these enterprises. The results of the study revealed that the cultural aspect still constitutes an obstacle to the functioning of enterprises with foreign capital. The most frequently listed obstacles included poor knowledge of a foreign language as well as difficulty in understanding interlocutors. Insufficient knowledge of the first language of the organization still remains a large difficulty for local enterprises. In spite of good knowledge of foreign languages characteristic of employees of international organizations in Poland, few of them can use the language fluently. This gives rise to misunderstandings and limitations in contacts between co-workers. Differences in management styles, cultural differences as well as different behaviours, norms and standards in the place of work also constituted obstacles to communication with foreigners.

The analysis of cultural determinants confirms their influence on the functioning of an international organization. That is why, similarly to economic, political or legal factors, factors of cultural character should be considered so as to reconcile the global approach of international organizations with the specificity of local enterprises in the host countries.

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## **Różnice i bariery kulturowe w komunikacji i funkcjonowaniu organizacji międzynarodowej**

### **Streszczenie**

Uwarunkowania kulturowe są bardzo istotnym czynnikiem kształtującym system wartości wyznawany przez daną grupę. Decyduje on w znacznym stopniu o zachowaniu, sposobie komunikacji czy podejściu do współpracy. Różnice kulturowe w organizacjach międzynarodowych są często przyczyną powstawania barier w komunikacji z otoczeniem oraz problemów w zarządzaniu. W artykule przedstawiono literaturowe rozważania na temat kultury i jej podstawowych pojęć oraz wpływu na działalność przedsiębiorstw międzynarodowych. Zaprezentowano również wyniki badania dotyczące problemów w komunikacji i zarządzaniu, z którymi borykają się

organizacje międzynarodowe działające na terenie Polski, wynikających z różnic kulturowych. Artykuł ma charakter badawczy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kultura, bariery kulturowe, organizacje międzynarodowe.

**Kody JEL:** D23, M14

## **Культурные отличия и барьеры в коммуникации и функционировании международной организации**

### **Резюме**

Культурные обусловленности – весьма существенный фактор, формирующий систему ценностей, исповедуемую данной группой. Он в значительной степени решает вопрос о поведении, способе общения или подходе к сотрудничеству. Культурные отличия в международных организациях часто являются причиной возникновения барьеров в коммуникации с окружающей средой, а также проблем в управлении. В статье представлены рассуждения в литературе о культуре и ее основных понятиях, а также о влиянии на деятельность международных предприятий. Представлены также результаты, касающиеся проблем в коммуникации и управлении, с которыми сталкиваются международные организации, действующие на территории Польши, вытекающих из культурных отличий. Статья имеет исследовательский характер.

**Ключевые слова:** культура, культурные барьеры, международные организации.

**Коды JEL:** D23, M14

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