Oksana Erdeli

Adam Mickiewicz University

Poznań, Poland

Stereotypes in Business Communication:
introducing the field

Abstract

It is hypothesized that in cross-cultural business communication stereotypes play a crucial role. In my research work I am trying to answer the following questions: (a) do members of a business community in a given nation-state make use of stereotypes while collecting information on another nation-state as a potential business partner?

(b) If so, what impact do they have on business communication?

(c) If not, why are these stereotypes rejected by members of the business community?

Our discussion of the role of stereotypes in business communication is conducted with the consideration of the following criteria: age groups and stereotypes, professional position (rank) and stereotypes, education and stereotypes, gender and stereotypes. The results obtained are applied to a discussion of overall effectiveness of business companies immersed in national guises, with particular reference to Ukrainian and Polish enterprises.

Key words: stereotypes, business communication, cross-cultural kommunication, Ukrainian and Polisz enterprises

Intercultural business communication

Nations and cultures alike engage in international communication if they recognize its principles of equal partnership.

– The onset of theoretical research into international communication (1952[1]) sees it as synonymous with political communication. Intercultural communication has also for a long time been an extention of national foreign policies.

Today, this has changed. Seen from the modern perspective, intercultural communications is a discipline developed under the pressure of reality. "Diplomats, active members of international organizations and businesspeople experienced increasing difficulty in communicating with persons from cultures other than their own. The deeper they wished to penetrate the more they encountered problems adequately getting their message across and interpreting the responses of those they talked to.[2]"

---

[1] Pomorski J. M. 2005. Międzynarodowość jako płaszczyzna komunikacji, Euro–limes – issue 1(5) – Jan 2005

[2] *Ibid.*

Intercultural communication, or communication between persons coming from different cultures (see Maletzke[3];Hall and Useem[4]) has been analyzed in terms of its participants or the course it takes. Which naturally results in two directions of communication research:

a) into cross-cultural communication, i. e. into the characteristics of certain specific cultures; and

b) into intercultural communication, i. e. into the communication process (see S.Puppel)[5].

Academic reflection on intercultural communication makes effective international co-operation easier, but also encourages people to reflect on their actions or behaviour, drawing their attention to the idea that their principles and ways of life are not the only or ideal ones; rather, it is possible to live, and achieve results, according to any of a number of principles and norms (see Mikułowski; Pomorski[6]S.Puppel[7]).

For intercultural communication to be effective, the following conditions must be fulfilled:

1. Conducive to effective communication:

– a strong personality

– ease of entering interpersonal relationships;

– communicative skills, in both their varieties;

– the ability to adapt to another culture; and

– tolerance and acceptance.

2. Hindering effective communication:

– difficulty using the language of a business partner from another country;

– the stress accompanying communicative processes;

– lack of skills regarding interpreting non-verbal messages;

– ethnocentrism, taken in its negative aspect (see Matsumoto[8]);

– prejudice (see Kofta[9]); and

– stereotypes regarding persons representing another culture.

---

[3]   International Communication, Media,Channels, Functions. Ed. By h. D. Fiszer and John Calhoun, Merill, New York,1970

[4]   Hall E.T. 1959. Bezgłosny język, Polish edition: PIW,1987

[5]   Puppel S. 2007. Interlingwalizm czy translingwalizm? Interkomunikacja czy transkomunikacja? Uwagi w kontekście współistnienia języków naturalnych w ramach globalnej wspólnoty kulturowo-językowo-komunikacyjnej (w)Społeczeństwo-kultura- język: w stronę interakcyjnej architektury komunikacji pod red. S.Puppel, Poznań

[6]   Pomorski J. M.2005 Międzynarodowość jako płaszczyzna komunikacji, Euro–limes – issue 1(5) – Jan 2005

[7]   Puppel S.,, Pupel J.2005. Zagadnienia percepcji języka naturalnego w triadzie: język ojczysty – język globalny –język sąsiedni na przykładzie triady język polski-język angielski – język niemiecki w jeciu ekolingwistycznym: próba typologii (w) Scripta neofilologia Poznaniensia, Poznań. S. 83-84

[8]   Matsumoto, D. 2000. Culture and psychology (2nd edition) Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks Cole Publishing Co

[9]   Stereotypy i uprzedzenia: uwarunkowanie psychologiczne i kulturowe (2001) // pod red. M.Kofty i A. Jasińskiej-Kani, Warszawa

Let us look in more detail into one aspect of intercultural communication, namely the role stereotypes play in intercultural business communication.

Stereotypes in intercultural business communication

The concept *stereotype* is very common in literature on intercultural issues. Almost all sources point to the negative aspects of stereotyping (Todd D. Nelson[10] ,Beata Ociepka,[11] Mikułowski Pomorski[12], Mudyń[13],) Steele and Anderson (1995) even point out the phenomenon of "stereotyping risk"[14], and in a $$ pre-survey, representatives of international businesses claim that there are no stereotypes in the intercultural communication they experience. The discrepancy called for an investigation.

What then is a stereotype, and when did the term first appear in communication theory? Is there a unified perspective on its role in communication, or are there many approaches?

As of today, there is no such thing as one, universally agreed-upon definition of *stereotype*. The several disciplines approach the term according to their own principles of research. Let us now try and put those approaches in order, as well as find out what they all have in common beyond the word *stereotype* itself.

Printing. The word *stereotype* is hundreds of years old, and it was first used in printing. In 1799 William Ged of Edinburgh used a gypsum imprint, or stereotype, to print. The term comes from Greek and is composed of two words, *stereós* and *týpos*, meaning respectively *hard*, and *imprint, form* (see WEP[15]). From that time till the beginning of the 20th century it was used only in printing.

Biology. The term *stereotype*, or to be precise, *dynamic stereotype*, entered biology in 1932 in I. P. Pavlov's *The Dynamic Stereotype of the Brain's Upper Section*. Pavlov did not define it, but he did point out one important quality of stereotypes in human life; namely, that a person takes it very hard when their established ways of thinking or being change, because such changes destroy the old dynamic stereotype, leading to an abrupt need for a new one. That is the reason why the stereotype is so powerful and so difficult to modify, let alone reject.

Psychology. The word acquired a new life owing to the American journalist, political commentator, author and liberal thinker Walter Lippman, an advisor of President Theodore

[10]   Nelson T.D.2003. Psychologia uprzedzeń, Gdańsk . 184-185
[11]   Ociepka B. 2002. Komunikowanie międzynarodowe, Wrocław , 230 s.
[12]   *Ibid.*
[13]   Mudyń, K.. 1998. Stereotypy, Encyklopedia psychologiczna, Warszawa
[14]   Steel, C.M.,Aronson, J.1995. Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. Journal of personality and Social Psychology, 69 (5), 797-811.
[15]   WEP .1968. t.11, Warszawa. – s.7-8

Roosevelt. It is Lippmann (in his *Public Opinion* of 1922[16]) who first attempted to define stereotype in its communication-related sense.

Research into stereotyping in social psychology has a most complex history. As mentioned above, they were initiated by Walter Lippmann, who believed that stereotypes are images in our heads, or representations of members of other groups, although he never proposed a systematic definition of the term (see *Encyklopedia psychologii*)[17]. The approach of a later scholar working on stereotypes, Gordon Allport (1954[18]), was similar. Then massive changes were introduced into the field by Katz and Braly (1933; 1935[19]), who agreed that steareotypes are a product of our cognitive system, but also maintained that their content and power depends on cultural conditions. They defined *stereotype* as "a belief common to many people within a given culture" (*ibid.*: 336[20]). Research has also been done that relates stereotypes to persons rather than cultures (Adorno *et al*[21]). The study was subject-centered and focused on strongly prejudiced persons with a limited ability to think rationally.

A different approach to stereotyping research was proposed by Brigham (1971[22]). In his view, stereotypes are beliefs we hold regarding members of other groups (quoted in Sznaider[23]); the beliefs need not be false, negative or unchangeable. Lippmann's theory underwent creative and critical reshaping by Polish psychologists as well. As Mirosław Kofta[24] points out, as a kind of category, a stereotype helps form quick, subjective judgments of the surrounding reality.

The *Encyklopedia psychologii* (1998[25]) defines stereotypes as follows: "Stereotypes are simplified beliefs (including expectations) with clear emotional and judgmental connotations, shared by the members of a group or community, expressed verbally, visually or symbolically, and based more on diverse forms of social tradition than on the members' direct

[16]   Lippman W. 1922. Public Opinion
[17]   . Mudyń K.. 1998. Stereotypy, Encyklopedia psychologiczna, Warszawa
[18]   Allport, G. 1954. The nature of prejudice. Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Anchor
[19]   .Katz, D., and Braly, K. (1933). Racial stereotypes in one hundred college students. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 28; Katz, D., i Braly, K. (1935). Racial prejudice and racial stereotypes. Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 30,
[20]   Macrae C. N., Stangor Ch. Hewstone M. 1999. Stereotypy i uprzedzenia, Gdańsk
[21]   Adorno, T. W, Frenkel.Brunswik, E. L,evinson, D. J., i Sanford, R. N. 1950. The authoritaric: personality. New York: Harper & Row
[22]   Brigham, J. C. 1971. Ethnic stereotypes. Psychological Bulletin,76, 15-33.
[23]   C. N. Macrae, Ch. Stangor M. Hewstone (1999), Stereotypy i uprzedzenia, Gdańsk.
[24]   Myślenie stereotypowe i uprzedzenia. Mechanizmy poznawcze i afektywne, red. M. Kofta, Wydawnictwo Instytutu Psychologii PAN, Warszawa 2004, s. 10–37
[25]   Mudyń K.,.1998. Stereotypy, Encyklopedia psychologiczna, Warszawa

experience. They concern a 'class of objects', conceived of globally, of some importance to the community, and are characterized by low malleability and liability to change"[26].

One of the most recent definitions of stereotype comes from David Matsumoto, who believes stereotypes are our generalizations about groups of people, and especially about their basic psychological and personality traits. All the psychological processes considered here reinforce one another, thus making stereotypes into an inevitable aspect of human psychology. Indeed, as a generalized category of mental concepts, stereotypes are useful in organizing information. We all have such categorical ideas about many entities in the world; otherwise we would not be able to interpret it. Such categorical ideas are commonly called *stereotypes* when they apply to people.

Stereotypes are important in that they help us co-operate with others in the world, or, conversely, hinder such co-operation. The problem is stereotypes are relatively easy to form, because our culture-specific upbringing and filters and our ethnocentrism give rise to a number of expectations regarding other peoples' behaviour and character.

Sociology. Sociologists, too, have extended the meaing of *stereotype* by pointing out that stereotypes make it possible to interpret, categorize and evaluate the society. They are also a social reality construct, general and unable to exist in isolation. (H. Pietrzak, *Następstwa i efekty stereotypowego postrzegania..., op. Cit.:* 73[27].)

Programming and computer science. This discipline likewise makes use of the term *stereotype*, its origins the same as in printing or biology. It is used in UML (Unified Modelling Language, a language used to describe the universe of objects in object analysis and object-oriented programming. In computer science as in communication, the important aspects are interaction and co-operation, as well as the internal behaviour of classes, components and subsystems. The meaning of *stereotype* in this discipline resembles its meaning in others; a stereotype modifies the meaning of an element and serves to make the semantics of the model's elements more precise. Its role is thus to affect the semantics of the element, that is, to affect fundamental content; it is an instrument of extension and modification[28]. Social psychology refers to the phenomenon as *activation mechanism*.

Linguistics. According to Bartmiński and Panasiuk[29], "In linguistics, stereotypes are characterized by: repetitive description of the object in a number of utterances; fixing that in the language, that is, in lexical meanings, observable through an analysis of derivations, metaphors, collocations and proverbs, wityh a given characteristic fixed in proportion to the

[26]   *Ibid.*

[27]   *Pietrzak H., Następstwa i efekty stereotypowego postrzegania..., op. cit.: 73*

[28]   http://wazniak.mimuw.edu.pl/images/f/f3/lo-6-wyk.pdf. s.30

[29]   Bartmiński J. 2007. Stereotypy mieskająw języku, lublin

frequency of it being attributed to the object in spontaneous utterances. In addition, social fixing need not be followed by linguistic fixing, although the reverse does apply, and a linguistic stereotype is fixed socially as well."

Research methodology

Research into intercultural business communication has its own particular characteristics. While it is only interested in the domain of business, it is not possible to limit oneself to the individual level, as intercultural research require a collective approach as well (see Kofta; Boski). This study was carried out in two international business companies, two of them located in Poland, and the other two in the Ukraine. It observes the conditions of imposed on intercultural research, to wit:

high cultural context of the countries concerned;

the collective vs. Individual balance[30];

the same number of participants in each country;

the same period for each country; and

similar types of business (medical products and sanitechnology, each type in each country).

The questions of the survey are general and open-ended (e. g., *What are your associations with the words* Ukraine *and* Ukrainian*? What are your associations with the expression* doing business with the Ukrainians*? What are your associations with the expression* a Ukrainian businessperson*?*) This way the researcher does not influence the answers. One point of importance is where such associations stem from. I intend to analyze statistically how many survey participants are at all able to answer this kind of (open) question, and to demonstrate the actual sources of associations (which need not be the same as those indicated in the answers). In addition the participants will have the opportunity to indicate, also in answer to open questions, what the two groups of businesspeople have in common and how they differ, based on their own experience in intercultural business communication. In my analysis of the answers I shall sift the stereotypical from authentic ones and propose the following typology of the stereotypes uncovered:

according to quality (positive vs. negative);

according to accuracy (sociotypical vs. authentic); and

according to gender (feminine vs. masculine vs. gender-neutral).

It is vital to find out whether any of the stereotypes are non-verbal (that is, related to behaviour, facial expressions ot gestures). They will of course appear in the surveys in a

---

[30]   Hofstede G., Hofstede G. J. 2007. Kultury i organizacje, Warszawa

verbal form if at all. Most scholars (see Kofta; Panasiuk) favour the notion that only verbal stereotypes exist.

To verify the extent to which the stereotypical ideas of Poles regarding Ukrainians are accurate, I have carried out a self-stereotyping survey in Ukrainian business companies. Using the comparative method, I shall determine how accurately the Ukrainians see themselves against their image among their Polish business partners.

In the study I will also apply collective personality characteristics of a Ukrainian business representativeexpressed in terms of the following: kindness; intelligence; extroversion; introversion; self-control; independence; calm; impracticality; truthfulness; domination; being spoiled; openness; selfishness; being active; remarkability; frankness; hospitality; communicative skills; and enterprising.

However, my goal here is not only to determine whether the trait obtains, but also how typical is it (percentile-wise) of Ukrainian businesspeople.

The research will all be differentiated according to the following categories: position in the company; age group; education; gender; command of the language and familiarity with the culture of the nationality in question. In intend to answer the following questions:

Do business representatives resort to stereotypes in evaluating their partners?

What are the sources of their stereotypical beliefs?

Do position, age group, education, gender and language and culture familiarity influence the differentiation?

The long-term goal is to seek an answer to this question: What relationship is there between communication research results and effective communication between businesses?