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# UNCOVERING AND NEGOTIATING BARRIERS TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AT GREENMARKET SQUARE, CAPE TOWN'S 'WORLD IN MINIATURE': AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE

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*Intercultural communication (ICC) is one of the most relevant fields for investigation in post-colonial Africa and post-apartheid South Africa, given the freedom of movement between African countries and the wide range of attractions, both economic and social, that South Africa holds for people from other African countries. This article is based on research conducted at Greenmarket Square in the heart of Cape Town, well-known as a hub for informal traders (mainly from other parts of Africa), local people and tourists from all over the world. It discusses three of the major barriers to ICC in this space which emerged from our research. These three major 'intercultural fault-lines' (Olahan, 2000) are identified as non-verbal communication, ethnocentrism/xenophobia and the contrasting communication styles of people from High Context Cultures and Low Context Cultures (Katan, 2004). The paper concludes with some suggestions on how such barriers can be overcome if people in this space learn to become more 'interculturally competent' (Jandt, 2004).*

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This article addresses the following questions:

1. What are the major barriers to intercultural communication in a world-famous open-air market called Greenmarket Square, Cape Town?

2. How can such barriers be overcome, i.e. how can people working in this environment learn to become more interculturally competent?

Intercultural communication (ICC) is one of the most relevant fields for investigation in post-colonial Africa and post-apartheid South Africa, given the freedom of movement between African countries and the wide range of attractions, in both the economic and the social domains. This article reports on ICC in post-democratic South Africa in an era marked by what Appadurai (1990) calls 'flows' – the flow of people (ethnoscapes), money (financescapes) and ideas (ideoscapes) across the world. Accompanying these flows are the problems of communicating across language and cultural barriers, what Olahan (2000) terms the 'intercultural fault-lines'.

Gudykunst (2002) and Jandt (2004) both define ICC as communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. Thus, even when there are few linguistic barriers and a common language like English serves as *lingua franca*, people may still struggle to communicate efficiently with one another because of these cultural barriers. Knapp and Hall (1992:227) regard ICC as the interpersonal interaction between members of different groups who differ from each other in respect of knowledge shared by their members and in respect of their linguistic forms of symbolic behaviours. When such groups communicate while assuming that the other group shares their world of knowledge, a breeding ground for miscommunication is created.

The site of this study was Greenmarket Square, Cape Town, a well-known market dealing mainly in African arts and crafts. Here the visitor finds a mixture of traders from South Africa, Africa and the rest of the world, plying their wares. The main clients of the market are tourists from all over the world. This means that the market is a site for ICC between people from diverse cultural backgrounds. For trading to take place, communication and interaction in a common language is required. In most cases, English is used, although one can also hear French, Portuguese, Lingala and other South African languages, like Afrikaans and Xhosa, in situations where the traders and the clients have these languages in common.

The position of Greenmarket Square in the heart of Cape Town, otherwise known as the "Mother City" of South Africa, is also of relevance to this study. The South African Parliament meets in Cape Town, the legislative headquarters of South Africa. Cape Town also has numerous tourist attractions– its natural beauty, incredible bio-diversity, important cultural and historical sites, museums and art galleries – which make it one of the top ten tourist destinations in the world. The South African population of this world-class city is made up of the following ethnic groupings: the majority group consists of the so-called'Coloured' people who constitute 44% of the population, Black people (34.9%, mainly belonging to the Xhosa group) and White people (19.3%). The majority South African language in this city is Afrikaans, spoken by 40% of the population, followed by Xhosa (30%) and English (24%) (Small, 2008).

In addition to these groups, tourists; short-term residents from other parts of South Africa; settled diasporic communities from different countries; and refugees, mainly from African countries like Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo can nowadays be found in Cape Town at any given time. In 2008, South Africa witnessed an explosion of xenophobic violence, mainly against black foreigners from other parts of Africa, which resulted in several deaths (*Cape Argus*, 15 May 2008). Similar attacks took place in the black townships and squatter camps of Cape Town, resulting in the displacement of thousands of people. It is therefore clear that learning to communicate effectively with a range of people from different cultural backgrounds becomes an essential skill in such a city.

## 2. THE STUDY

The study on which this paper is based was undertaken as part of Wankah's research towards his Master's degree in Linguistics at the University of the Western Cape. Dyers was his academic supervisor.

The principal objective of the ethnographic study was to get feedback from the informal traders, on the one hand, and the tourists, on the other hand, on what happens when people

from different cultural backgrounds interact in a cosmopolitan space like Greenmarket Square. The tools that were used to collect the data were interviews, questionnaires and participant observation. Wankah was particularly well placed to do the participant observation, as he was an informal trader at Greenmarket Square, selling crafts from his native country, Cameroon, at the time of the study. He carried out his research over a period of nine months, from October 2007 to June 2008. During this period, he worked at Greenmarket Square for four days a week. He had an assistant who looked after his stall for part of each day (for approximately two to three hours) when he needed to focus exclusively on interviewing respondents and distributing questionnaires. However, even when Wankah was working as a trader, he made full use of quiet trading periods to observe interactions in the market and to record his fieldwork notes.

The study made use of a total of 65 traders and tourists who were willing to assist Wankah with his research once he had explained the objectives of his study to them. The research population emerged as three major groupings:

- South Africans (locals, stall assistants, tourists)
- African foreigners (tourists, asylum seekers, economic migrants, students, etc.)
- Visitors from Europe, America, the Middle East and Australia, who included short-term residents, holiday seekers and tourists.

A total of 27 traders and 17 tourists completed two questionnaires (one for traders and one for tourists/clients at Greenmarket Square). These questionnaires (prepared in English as the global *lingua franca*) are included in the Appendix. A further 10 tourists and 10 traders were interviewed with the use of the questionnaires and these interviews were recorded and transcribed. Some of the interviews were conducted in English, but Wankah interviewed traders and tourists from Francophone countries in French. A further 11 traders and tourists were closely observed while interacting in the market. The data consisted of the completed questionnaires, transcriptions of the interviews with willing participants from both groups, and notes based on participant observation of naturally occurring interactions between traders, and between traders and their clients. The responses to the completed questionnaires were quantified, while the interviews were analysed using discourse analysis. Foucault (1980) asserts that discourse analysis provides higher awareness of the hidden motivation in others and in us with regard to any utterance or form of non-verbal communication. According to this study, a core component of intercultural miscommunication in the space of Greenmarket Square is how 'the other' is constructed discursively.

## 3.    FINDINGS

While the discursive construction of 'the other' and the space of Greenmarket Square emerged as dominant factors leading to breakdowns in intercultural communication, this paper is restricted to a discussion of three barriers that were reported by most of the research participants:

1. Non-verbal communication and kinesics
2. Ethnocentrism and xenophobia
3. The different styles of communication in High Context and Low Context Cultures

We will be analysing the effect of space and the discursive constructions of 'the other' in a different paper.

## 3.1 Non-verbal communication and kinesics

Non-verbal communication was reported by many of our respondents as a major factor in intercultural miscommunication. Pillay (2001:38-43) acknowledges the central role of non-verbal communication when he writes '[r]esearch has shown that cues in the nonverbal "channels" of communication (how something is said) are often more important than words alone (what is said)'. Kinesics forms part of non-verbal communication, and is defined by Birdwhistell (1970) as 'not what we say but what the nonverbal codes that accompany speech portray'. In other words, kinesics either confirms or contradicts the actual verbal communication, and indicates what the speaker's mood and emotions are.

Different cultures interpret non-verbal communication differently, and this could create barriers to ICC (Neuliep, 2000). Dlomo (2003) agrees, saying that people take nonverbal codes more seriously than verbal communication when interpreting a message, but that one is never asked to repeat one's nonverbal cues, unlike the verbal counterpart.

These types of barriers were reported in 19 out of the 20 interviews (95%), in all 27 (100%) of the questionnaires to the traders, and in 13 of 16 (85%) of the questionnaires completed by the tourists. Below are some examples from the data collected through interviews:

> *…You are inviting somebody to come, then I am using my hand to show come… she doesn't even understand what I am saying, she wants me to, I don't know… then I have to run after him to bring him back to my place… then I show the object and write on the calculator… I want to think these problems; we got them because of different cultural backgrounds… .* (Trader from Cameroon)

Clearly, varying contexts and different styles of non-verbal communication led to difficulties for this trader. It is an accepted custom in Cameroon to call someone with a gesture using a finger whereas this may be viewed as an insult in South Africa. Below are more examples:

> *Sometimes, we do not understand each other because of the language they are talking or the way that they show signs which sometimes it is difficult to know all types of communication.* (Senegalese trader)

> *… So when there's difficulty communicating someone's language, you use any means to try to get someone to understand what you are saying. Sometimes you use the hands, sometimes you just use one word and sometimes the hand means something else…Like the Chinese people…I did that once and the three Chinese… What they told me was I was rude and then someone else told me that I said 'wipe dirt' by that sign….* (Congolese trader)

> *There are times when you try to tell someone that this item cost something like two hundred in the other shops, you show him two with the fingers and this person can think that you are telling him two hundred and he gonna go.* (Kenyan trader)

The data showed that customers at the market also used non-verbal communication which was misinterpreted by the traders. Below are excerpts from some of the interviews with tourists:

> *Yes, I found one guy who was disappointed, he is a South African. In Ghana, when you are calling someone you can use the second finger, but here in South Africa it is different. Calling someone with your finger is looking down upon that person.* (Tourist from Ghana)

> *I will use gestures to complement the little that I know, but it was not easy. They could understand some of the things that I said but not all as I used hands to communicate.* (Tourist from Burundi).

> *Each time I tried to say something and could not, I used signs… Like when I lifted up my middle finger to tell someone to come nearer as we do in Belgium but he was angry and furious because he said this was rude.* (Tourist from Belgium)

One can see here that the nonverbal codes are often ambiguous in meaning and one therefore needs to take the local context into consideration to avoid miscommunication. Clearly, the Ghanaian tourist, and to some extent the tourist from Burundi quoted above, understood the implications of non-verbal communication in different contexts.

Participant observation provided additional evidence of these barriers. We observed that even those traders who claimed that they did not have any problems with nonverbal communication and kinesics, did in fact experience such problems. They only focused their attention on the majority of the customers who spoke English, and neglected those whom they could not communicate with verbally.

People tend to use nonverbal cues to judge relationships between others and between themselves and others (Singelis, 1994). A typical case that was observed occurred between an Indian tourist and an informal trader in Greenmarket Square. The Indian was interested in an item that the trader was selling, and was told that the cost was R250.00. When he offered to pay R30.00, the trader was offended and waved him away with his hand. Onlookers, predominantly traders and a few tourists from Europe, who were not aware of what had transpired, interpreted the trader's behaviour as very rude. But the Indian, who understood the context, interpreted this differently and made a better offer that was accepted by the trader. The trader's behaviour here was therefore spontaneous and intentional (Singelis, 1994) but was misinterpreted by the observers, who had different interpretations of the same nonverbal cue.

## 3.2 Ethnocentrism and Xenophobia

The second major barrier to ICC in Greenmarket Square is ethnocentrism and its more extreme form, xenophobia. Jandt (2004:76) defines ethnocentrism as negatively judging the aspect of another culture by the standards of one's own culture. Xenophobia, according to Pattian (2008), is the 'irrational fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners, or what is strange or foreign'. Data from 18 of the 20 (90%) interviews and 30 of the 43 (70%) questionnaires showed that these two phenomena are major barriers to ICC, as can be seen in the following examples:

> *… They are fond of saying 'our culture is the best', they even tell you sometimes that 'you must speak our language, you must dress like us, you must do this like us'…they are claiming superiority over everything.* (Trader from Cameroon)

> *… Someone has to kill this xenophobia thing before it kills a lot of people… I am of the opinion that we should live in an environment with peace and tranquillity… We are brothers and sisters. We should accommodate some of our foreign guys who are looking for opportunities here in South Africa, so I say no to xenophobia, because it does not make you in the market here a team.* (Tourist from Ghana)

As a trader in Greenmarket Square, Wankah observed a high degree of tension between South Africans and foreign traders from other parts of Africa, with the foreign traders tending to regard the South Africans as being hostile towards them. This tension often manifested itself in insulting remarks and behaviour by the South African traders towards fellow traders from the rest of Africa.

When Vigouroux (1999) carried out her research on immigrants in the market, she observed that South Africans (most of whom had a good command of English) used to be employed as sales assistants to the foreign traders. At the time of the study reported in this paper, this was no longer the case, and there were clear tensions between the South African traders and the traders from other parts of Africa. Some African tourists admitted to Wankah in interviews that they were scared to interact with the South African traders because these traders were aggressive towards them:

> *They hate foreigners and speak only their language…they discriminate against different cultures…some are cold…and they are rude and aggressive…because I cannot speak any local language… they are nice but they have problems with the other blacks….* (Tourist from Cameroon)

This particular tourist contextualised his response by adding that a Black South African in the market, upon noticing that he was from Africa, became rude and asked him to speak Xhosa.

> *Wow! Xenophobia, I think it's sad to me…. We are supposed to live like brothers but they will tell you 'go to your country'….* (Tourist from Nigeria)

This Nigerian woman wanted to know from a South African trader whether there were some Nigerian traders in the market, but was rudely told to go back to her own country. Obviously this animosity led to a total breakdown in communication.

The data from the questionnaires also suggested that xenophobia and ethnocentrism were barriers to ICC at Greenmarket Square. Twenty-two of the twenty-seven traders (80%) agreed that these were major barriers, as did most of the tourists from Africa. Participant observation tended to confirm that ethnocentrism and xenophobia are a cause for concern. Furthermore, there have unfortunately been a number of violent incidents between the foreigners and the South Africans in the market (Pattian, 2008).

### 3.3 High and Low context cultures

According to Katan (2004), a major barrier to ICC occurs when people from high context cultures (HCC) and low context cultures (LCC) interact. A high context culture can be defined as one in which most of the information being conveyed is in the context of the interaction (Myers-Scotton, 2006:182). Hall (1976:70) explains communication in HCCs as being conveyed through both verbal and non-verbal cues, but 'very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message'. The listener has to rely heavily on the context and

non-verbal cues to work out what the speaker's intentions are. In contrast, speakers from a low context culture try to make everything explicit through their words and phrases. Thus it is unsurprising that misunderstandings may arise when members of these two types of culture interact. People from these two types of culture may interpret the communicative event differently due to their cultural backgrounds.

According to Myers-Scotton (2006:182-185), a HCC is a culture in which most of the information being conveyed is in the *context* of the interaction. For this reason, an outsider to such a culture has to take into consideration the setting, the people, and the rules for interaction (message form and context) in order to make sense of the communication (Saville-Troike, 1989:172). Talbert-Johnson and Beron (1999:430) state that the meaning of HCC messages depends on nonverbal signals and, as such, requires that one read between the lines. Albert (1996) confirms this statement when he says that miscommunication occurs when the communication process does not go as expected, especially as different societies have different nonverbal languages, just as they have different verbal languages.

HCCs are collectivist and, as such, tend to interpret what others say as an expression of the context. In other words, they tend to find meaning in factors external to the speaker. On the other hand, LCCs pay attention to the literal message in words and phrases that the speaker uses, and try to spell out everything very clearly.

To many outsiders, it would appear that South Africa forms part of those nations that can be defined as HCC (Gudykunst, 2002:93). Their ways of communicating are often full of nonverbal cues which make it difficult for outsiders to understand them. For example, if a South African raises his middle finger, it means something extremely rude, but to a Cameroonian, it is just a sign that may be misinterpreted. Another example is the gesture of raising one's thumb, which, in the South African context, implies that everything is all right, but which is meaningless to a Congolese. The meanings of such gestures are based on the context and so cannot be interpreted well by someone from an LCC.

The results of the data analysis conducted for this study appear to suggest that South Africa is a typical example of an HCC country, just like Britain, China and Japan (Katan, 2004). This is because, during communication, the South Africans who formed part of this study always left some gaps to be filled in by the listener, who would often misinterpret the conversation if they were not South African.

Speakers from a LCC, on the other hand, try to make everything explicit through their words and phrases (verbal language). Countries like Germany and the USA are good examples of LCC countries which try to spell out everything very clearly (Katan 2004). Miscommunication can occur if the participants in a conversation at Greenmarket Square come from an HCC and an LCC, respectively, and the LCC participant fails to 'read between the lines' (Talbert-Johnson and Beron 1999:430) of the conversation in this setting.

From the data that were collected, 17 of the 20 (85%) traders interviewed appeared to find this a major barrier to effective ICC with South Africans. Below are some examples from the interviews.

> *South Africans think we understand their gestures. But it often means something different to us or is completely meaningless. They always talk and leave some gaps for you to fill which is difficult sometimes.* (Trader from Angola)

> *They cut things in a way that I find it difficult to understand… If I make complete sentences, they don't understand it as well and will say sorry. Even the way they greet seem casual. It is difficult to understand them.* (Trader from Cameroon)

These non-South African traders were commenting specifically on their difficulties when communicating with South Africans. According to them, South Africans often assume in conversations that the listeners know enough about the local context to be able to fill in the information left out of the conversation. However, the fact that the traders come from different, possibly low context, cultures, may make it difficult for them to use the local context successfully, leading to a breakdown in communication between themselves and the South Africans.

Below are additional excerpts from the interviews, which also refer to clients from other countries. Note how the traders distinguish between China (HCC) and Germany (LCC).

> *I prefer customers from Germany because they are easy to deal with. They are willing to make business with you. But the Chinese are difficult to deal with because they are naturally like that…Even when they try to talk, you do not seem to understand as they talk very little and not clear.* (Trader from Zimbabwe)

> *People from China do not have time even to listen to you or whatever you want to say. Some of them if you say 'brother', they say they are not your brother.* (Trader from Zambia)

Some tourists also reported experiencing difficulties as a result of HCC/LCC differences, as exemplified below.

> *Even the many signs that they use, I do not understand as they do not talk explicitly. The traders do not explain well what they say.* (Tourist from Germany – LCC)

> *The people are good and always smiling but they do not give direct answers to questions. When you ask them the price for an item or where they get their goods from, they will ramble. It is not easy to deal with the traders in the market. You end up buying their attitude and not what they say. (*Interview D, Tourist from USA – LCC)

In their responses through the questionnaires, 27 traders (100%) and 13 of the 16 tourists (80%) indicated that there is a breakdown in communication whenever people from HCCs interact with people from LCCs. These data were elicited by the following questions:

3. "*Who are your most preferred customers and from which countries and why?*"
4. "*Who are your least preferred customers and from which country and why?*"

Participant observations showed that most South Africans, like the Chinese and the Japanese, appeared to operate within the frame of a HCC and as such made extensive use of nonverbal codes. Wankah also observed that most of the traders prefer the German and British tourists because they are from LCCs, like most of the traders. Unlike the South African clients, they do not make extensive use of nonverbal cues, nor do they leave gaps to be filled in by their listeners. Wankah observed a German customer (LCC) who asked a South African trader (HCC) about the price of an item and was told that the price was 'one fifty'. There was no

specification whether it was 'one hundred and fifty rands', or 'one rand and fifty cents'. The client simply walked away, not because he did not want the item but because he did not understand that he needed to fill the gap, as is customary in South Africa (by assuming that cost is indicated in South African Rands unless specified otherwise). The client probably expected the trader to be clear and precise, as is customary in the client's LCC culture, while the trader may have expected the client to fill the informational gap, as is customary in the trader's HCC culture. These differing expectations led to miscommunication.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Given the above findings, one might ask how traders and clients can become more interculturally competent, since this is clearly a skill that will enhance communication in a globalised world.

Ribbens (1994:94) suggests that 'organizations need to develop suitable intercultural awareness courses for their employees'. As this study took place in Greenmarket Square, an informal trading area, it would be necessary for the organisers or the government to arrange a form of training for its traders in consultation with the traders themselves, who would have to make themselves available for such training. According to Dlomo (2003:96), the course should incorporate, among other things,

> sensitizing the traders to the vitality of their different cultures, tolerance for other cultures around them and also the development of other skills like listening patiently, empathy, reading nonverbal behaviors correctly in intercultural interactions and the avoidance of stereotypes and prejudices towards other cultural groups. (Dlomo, 2003:97)

Simulations of real life situations should be used to enable the traders to derive full benefit from such an awareness programme. Du Preez (1987) states that successful communication is a result of knowing what the other person stands for, together with his or her true values and beliefs.

At present, efforts are being made by some traders, at a personal level, to learn about each other's cultural practices and languages. However, this is not far reaching enough because it is done for personal reasons only. A body that could be a representative of the traders should be elected to oversee their well-being in Greenmarket Square. If an awareness course could be organised, it may go a long way to improve the level of competency in ICC on the part of the traders. It would improve ICC among the traders, leading to a more harmonious atmosphere in Greenmarket Square, as well as between traders and their clients (leading to a higher success rate for business transactions). The involvement of the administrative and the support service sectors in this programme would also be of advantage to the traders. Such an initiative could be taken further by developing intermediate and advanced ICC skills in English, which is the vehicular language of the market.

A cultural awareness programme for those who do business in Greenmarket Square is not simply desirable, but is also vital and urgent, given the high rate of xenophobia and consequent violence experienced, especially by foreign black Africans in South Africa at present.

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**Appendix**

### I. Interview questions for the traders

1. Where are you from?
2. How long have you been an informal trader?
3. Do you have foreign/ South African friends?
4. Can you shed more light on the way that people greet in your country?
5. Can you please also help to brief me on how other communities greet?
6. Are these forms of greetings the same or different from the way that you greet in your community?
7. When you greet these people, do you connect well with them?
8. Did you ever attend any cultural event that was organised by the foreigners/ South Africans?
9. Was it similar to the cultural events in your culture?
10. How did you interact with the people who were present here?
11. Were they friendly?
12. Did you learn anything new from them?
13. Did you ever invite foreigners/South Africans to a cultural event of your own country?
14. What was their attitude and behaviour?
15. What was it that was not clear during this event?
16. Is it easy to communicate with the foreigners/ South Africans?
17. If yes, why do you think so?
18. Could you please give some instances of prejudice and stereotypes in the market?
19. What do you really think about them?
20. Have you ever experienced any xenophobia? What is your opinion?
21. How can it be eradicated?
22. Have you noticed any differences in the ways people use gestures and facial expressions in Greenmarket Square?
23. What do you think the traders need to do to better their conditions in communicating with the foreigners and tourists?

### II. Interview questions for the tourists

1. Where do you come from?
2. Why did you choose Cape Town as your destination?
3. Do you like it here?
4. How do you find the local people to interact with?
5. Do you find any difficulties communicating with them?
6. Can you identify any instances of these difficulties, if any?
7. Can you say anything about the manner in which local people communicate?
8. Have you ever attended any of the local cultural activities? How was it?
9. Would you like to attend more events like these?
10. Did you teach them anything about your own culture? How did they react to it?
11. When you visited Greenmarket Square, did you experience any problems in communicating with the traders? Can you give examples of this?
12. What are some of the things you would like to be changed here if you had your way?
13. What new things did you learn from the market?