Research Paper

Context in Communication: A Linguistic Study of the Interaction between the Chinese and the Indians in Chennai, India.

[1]T. SENTHAMARAI, [2]DR. M.R. CHANDRAN

[1]Research Scholar, Mother Teresa Women's University, Kodaikanal–624 102 India. /Assistant Professor, Department of English, Veltech Multitech Engineering College, Avadi, Chennai, India-600 062
[2]Associate Professor, Centre for Research in English, Saraswathi Narayanan College, Madurai- 625 022

ABSTRACT:- *This paper discusses the importance and interconnectedness of Culture and Context in Intercultural Communication. The definition and classification of contexts vary in theory. This paper follows Anthropologist Edward Hall's theory of High Context and Low Context for its theoretical framework. Communication which takes place across these two contexts has a high risk of being misunderstood because of cultural variations of high and low contexts. This paper tries to go a step further to find out the cultural differences which affect communication in the same context- High Context. The background of this study is the interaction between the Chinese and the Indians in Tamil Nadu, India.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication is a social phenomenon without which interaction between two individuals is not possible. Communication strategies and styles differ when more than one culture involves in the act of communication. This variation happens because of the different social contexts they belong to. Thus, the focus of culture and context in the study of intercultural communication becomes vital. Intercultural communication has become increasingly popular in the study of sociolinguistics.

Globalisation has led to the relocation of people, institutions, and corporate companies which eventually leads to cultural integration worldwide. Communicating across cultures becomes essential in order to be successful in the mission of the relocation.

China and India are the emerging economies in the world and the cultural exchange started long ago. However, with the advent of technology and reforms in socioeconomic policies, the influx of the Chinese in India is on the rise. They spread into business, education, and other occupations. Basically these two countries are called Oriental, and share common cultural values and beliefs. But, there are remarkable differences in the way they behave and communicate with each other. The set of rules each follows and individual values each upholds define their communicative style which determines the objective of their stay in a foreign country, in this case, India. According to Hall's theory of Context, India and China fall into High Context countries. So, they naturally share common cultural contexts and communicating with each other is expected to be easy and successful. This paper has taken the task of analysing the cultural context in which the Chinese and the Indians communicate to find out the differences in their communication styles.

II. OBJECTIVES

This paper facilitates the following objectives:
a) the cultural context of the Chinese in Chennai (India)
b) the influence of context in communicative style

*Corresponding Author: [1]T. Senthamarai
Research Scholar, Mother Teresa Women's University, Kodaikanal–624 102 India. /
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Veltech Multitech Engineering College,
Avadi, Chennai, India -600062

32 | Page

III. METHODOLOGY

A survey was done on 42 Chinese respondents to test their contextual background. Claire B. Halverson's Cultural-Context Inventory is possibly one assessment tool to suit Edward Hall's High Context and Low Context theory in Communication. There are 20 questions with 5 point scale. This band of 20 questions consists of 9 high context questions, 9 low context questions, 1 question of both contexts and 1 question free of the said context. For assessing the answers, only 3 points (1, 3, & 5) in the 5 point scale have been counted for assessment.

The inventory requires the respondents to total the points and subtract the high context points from low context points. Minus point indicates a person as low context and plus point indicates a person as high context.

A direct question has been added to the questionnaire to find out if context affects their communicative style.

IV. COMMUNICATION

Communication is a linguistic representation of ideas and thoughts. It is a set of words and sentences governed by rules. Whorf and Sapir (1940/1956) in their hypothesis record, "We discuss nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organised by our minds- and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds."

It was Edward Hall who first used the term intercultural communication in his study. He finds that communication is an important element in different cultures where individuals share different ideas and values. He concludes "Culture is Communication and Communication is Culture".

V. CULTURE

Culture is a complex theory and it is essentially contextual. The term 'culture' has been defined differently by many theorists. Plum (2008; 58-59) refers culture as "essentialism" because human beings uphold an inner core of culture which they consider essential for their identity. This eventually leads people behave the way they do. Hofstede (2005; 3) defines culture as the "collective programming of mind" and "software of the mind".

Culture is generally perceived as the set of norms, values, beliefs of an individual and group of people. The social behaviour of the people becomes main determinant of their norms, and later, rules are slowly generated. However, this norms, beliefs, and rules are dynamic. Culture is an ongoing phenomenon. Learning and adapting to it is a process as the world order changes every day. Holliday focuses on "the complexity of culture as a fluid, creative social force which binds different groupings and aspects of behaviour in different ways, both constructing and constructed by people…" (Holliday et al. 2004; 3).

VI. DEFINITIONS AND CLASSIFICATION OF CONTEXTS

Context, at the outset, is defined as any given situation. There has to be a situation for an idea or thought to be communicated. In a communication process, context plays a very important role without which a discourse becomes meaningless. Communication occurs in various situations, that is, various contexts. The variation in contexts makes communication more complex. It is difficult to understand the meaning of an utterance without understanding the contexts. Understanding the context helps in relating to the background information. Fillmore says, as quoted, "The task is to determine what we can know about the meaning and context of an utterance given only the knowledge that the utterance has occurred … I find that whenever I notice some sentence in context, I immediately find myself asking what the effect would have been if the context had been slightly different" (Brown & Yule, 2000, p.35).

6.2. Edward Hall's High And Low Context

Edward Hall in his book, *Beyond Culture* has developed a theory of context in which communication takes place. His distinction of high context and low context helps people to interact with other nationalities intelligibility.

The characteristics of contexts are furnished below in the table.

High context	Low context
• Relational, collectivist, intuitive, and contemplative. • Emphasize interpersonal relationships. • Trust is more important • Prefers group harmony • Collectivists • Words are not so important – including speaker's tone of voice, facial expression, gestures, posture—and even the person's family history and status • Countries: Middle East, Asia, Africa, and South America.	• Logical, linear, individualistic, and action-oriented. • Value facts logic and directness • Decision making is based on fact rather than intuition • Communicators are expected to be straightforward, concise, and efficient in telling what action is expected. • Words are very important and they use precise words and intend them to be taken literally. • Countries: North America and much of Western Europe.

TABLE 1

In his study, Edward Hall, besides verbal communication, included three types of non verbal communication; proxemics (personal space), chronemics (time) and kinesics (movements and gestures) which are integral part of communication. Non verbal communication is dominant in some cultures where most of the subtle meaning is expressed through non verbal cues such as gestures, eye contact, bowing, hierarchical relationships, personal space, silence, etc. Understanding and adapting the nature of context gives a communicator an idea of appropriateness and relevance of the topic and time.

VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The results of the study with 48 respondents have been represented in percentage in the following charts.
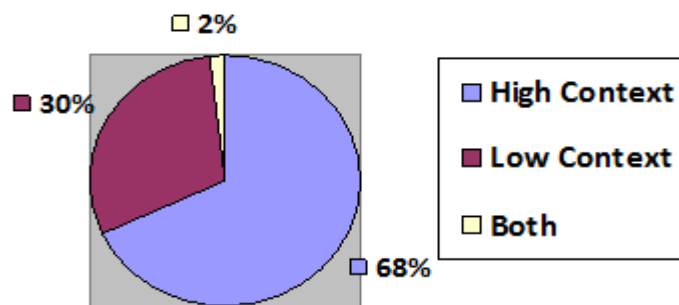
Fig 1: High Context and Low Context Indicator

In Fig 1, it is found out that 68% of the respondents are identified as low context persons whereas 30% of the respondents are identified as high context persons and only 2% which accounts for only one person who is identified as of both contexts.

Though high context and low context have specifications as tabled above (Table 1), in recent times, there seems to be a cultural muddle all over the world. Cultures are forced to embrace the new order in order to be accommodative. This could be attributed to the wide influx of foreigners and to the global exposure of westernization. The result of the study deviates from the conceptions of Edward Hall's theory of Contexts. The distinction of countries based on high context and low context theory is to be reconsidered.
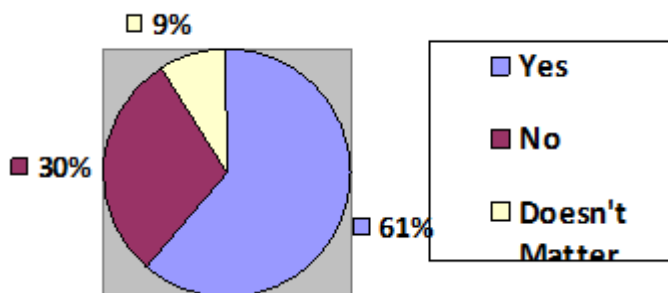
Fig 2: Influence of Context in Communication

In Fig 2, it is found out that 61% of the respondents view that cultural context influences their communication style whereas 30% of the respondents are of the view that cultural context does not influence their communication style and 9% of the respondents said that cultural context does not matter in communication.

Thus majority of the respondents have experienced the influence of cultural context in their communication.

VI. CONCLUSION

From the above study it is understood that communication between the same context countries (India and China) is not necessarily the same. It is also understood that context changes as culture and language change over the years. So, it is important to note that communicators must know the cultural context in order to make communication intelligible.

REFERENCES

Books
[1]. Whorf Benjamin Lee. Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf John B. Carroll (ed.) MIT Press. (1940/1956)
[2]. Hall, E. T. The silent language New York: Doubleday, (1959)
[3]. Plum, Elisabeth – in collaboration with Benedikte Achen, Inger Dræby & Iben Jensen. (2008). CI – Cultural Intelligence. The art of leading cultural complexity UK: Middelsex University (2008).
[4]. Hofstede, Geert & Gert Jan Hofstede. Cultures and Organizations – Software of the Mind. Revised and Expanded 2nd Edition. McGraw-Hill (2005)
[5]. Holliday, Adrian, Martin Hyde & John Kullman. (2004). Intercultural communication – an Advanced Resource Book. (Routledge Applied Linguistics)
[6]. Gillian Brown & George Yule. Discourse Analysis Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.(2000)