

Communication Style and Cultural Features in High/Low Context Communication Cultures: A Case Study of Finland, Japan and India

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Abstract: *People from different countries communicate in ways that often lead to misunderstandings. Our argument, based on Hall's theory of high/low context cultures (1959, 1966, 1976, 1983), is that these differences are related to different communication cultures. We argue that Japan and Finland belong to high context cultures, while India is closer to a low context culture with certain high context cultural features. We contend that Finnish communication culture is changing towards a lower context culture. Hall's theory is complemented with Hofstede's (2008) individualism vs. collectivism dimension and with Lewis's (1999, 2005) cultural categories of communication and Western vs. Eastern values. Examples of Finland, Japan and India are presented.*

Keywords: *high/low context culture, communication style, culture, cultural features, individualism, collectivism, Finland, Japan, India.*

Aim of This Article

It is generally acknowledged that people from different countries tend to communicate in slightly different ways. We argue that these differences are more related to different communication cultures than other differences. Being aware of these differences usually leads to better comprehension, fewer misunderstandings and to mutual respect. Our aim in this article is to describe, analyse and interpret communication style and certain cultural features in Finland, Japan and India.

We base our arguments on Edward T. Hall's concept (1959, 1966, 1976, 1983) of high context (HC) and low context (LC) cultures. This concept has proved val-

id and useful in transcultural studies (Kim, Pan & Park, 1998). We also refer to Lewis's (1999, 2005) cultural categories of communication and Western vs. Eastern values, and to Hofstede's (2008) collectivism–individualism dimension. As far as we know, no previous study has discussed these three countries together from the aforementioned perspectives.

This article hopes to contribute to foreign language education, transcultural communication, transcultural studies and multiculturalism.

Culture

Hall (1959) defines culture as the way of life of a people: the sum of their learned behaviour patterns, attitudes and materials things. Culture is often subconscious; an invisible control mechanism operating in our thoughts (Hall, 1983). In his view, we become aware of it by exposure to a different culture. Members of a certain society internalise the cultural components of that society and act within the limits as set out by what is 'culturally acceptable' (Hall, 1983, 230).

Hofstede's (1980, 1991) theory aims to explain cultural differences through certain dimensions, such as power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity vs. femininity. Of these, we use the individualism vs. collectivism dimension. This dimension is defined by Hofstede (2008) as "the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. On the individualist side, we find societies in which the ties between individuals are loose ... On the collectivist side, we find societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families...".

Context

Context is defined as the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event: "The cultures of the world can be compared on a scale from high to low context" (Hall & Hall, 1990, 6).

High vs. Low Context Cultures

Hall (1976) suggested the categorisation of cultures into high context versus low context cultures in order to understand their basic differences in communication style and cultural issues. Communication style refers to ways of expressing oneself, to communication patterns that are understood to be 'typical' of, say, Finns or Japanese people. Cultural issues mean certain societal factors, such as the country's status, history, religion and traditions. Cultural issues also include Hofstede's (2008) individualism vs. collectivism dimension.

Communication style in a high vs. low context culture

In HC cultures, communication style is influenced by the closeness of human relationships, well-structured social hierarchy, and strong behavioural norms (Kim et al., 1998, 512). In a high context (HC) culture, internal meaning is usually embedded deep in the information, so not everything is explicitly stated in writing or when spoken. In an HC culture, the listener is expected to be able to read “between the lines”, to understand the unsaid, thanks to his or her background knowledge. Hall (1976, 91) emphasised that “a high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalised in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, or transmitted part of the message”.

In an HC culture, people tend to speak one after another in a linear way, so the speaker is seldom interrupted. Communication is, according to Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988), indirect, ambiguous, harmonious, reserved and understated. In an HC culture, communication involves more of the information in the physical context or internalised in the person; greater confidence is placed in the non-verbal aspects of communication than the verbal aspects (Hall, 1976, 79).

In a low context (LC) culture, meanings are explicitly stated through language. People communicating usually expect explanations when something remains unclear. As Hall (1976) explains, most information is expected to be in the transmitted message in order to make up for what is missing in the context (both internal and external). An LC culture is characterised by direct and linear communication and by the constant and sometimes never-ending use of words. Communication is direct, precise, dramatic, open, and based on feelings or true intentions (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Cultural issues in high vs. low context cultures

Rooted in the past, HC cultures are very stable, unified, cohesive and slow to change. In an HC culture, people tend to rely on their history, their status, their relationships, and a plethora of other information, including religion, to assign meaning to an event.

LC cultures typically value individualism over collectivism and group harmony. Individualism is characterised by members prioritising individual needs and goals over the needs of the group (Triandis, Brislin & Hui, 1988; as cited in Pryor, Butler & Boehringer, 2005, 248).

Another salient feature that is often seen to differentiate these two contextual cultures, is the notion of politeness. In an LC culture, it is thought to be polite to ask questions that in an HC culture often seem too personal and even offensive. (Tella, 2005; see also Tella, 1996.)

Hall and Hall (1990) categorise different countries as follows (Table 1).

Table 1. High/Low context by culture (Hall & Hall, 1990).

High Context Cultures
Japan
Arab Countries
Greece
Spain
Italy
England
France
North America
Scandinavian Countries
German-Speaking Countries
Low Context Cultures

Finland and India are not expressly mentioned in Hall and Hall's table (1990), so our interpretations only lightly touch on the table categorisation. Japan, however, is at the top of the list of high context cultures.

Cultural Categories of Communication, and Western vs. Eastern Values

Another classification that we find relevant to our study is Lewis's (2005, 89) division of cultural categories of communication. Lewis divides countries into linear-active, reactive and multi-active cultures (Figure 1).

According to Lewis (2005, 70, 89), linear-active cultures are calm, factual and decisive planners. They are task-oriented, highly organised and prefer doing one thing at a time. They stick to facts and figures that they have obtained from reliable sources. They prefer straightforward, direct discussion, and they talk and listen in equal proportions.

Reactives are courteous, outwardly amiable, accommodating, compromising and good listeners. Their cultures are called 'listening cultures'. Reactives prefer to listen first, in order to establish both their own and the other's position. They often seem slow to react after a presentation or speech, and when they speak up, it is without clear signs of confrontation. (Lewis, 2005, 70–71.)

Multi-actives are warm, emotional, loquacious and impulsive. They like to do many things at a time. They often talk in a roundabout, animated way. It is typical of them to speak and listen at the same time, leading to repeated interruptions. They are uncomfortable with silence and seldom experience it between other multi-actives. (Lewis, 2005, 70, 89.)

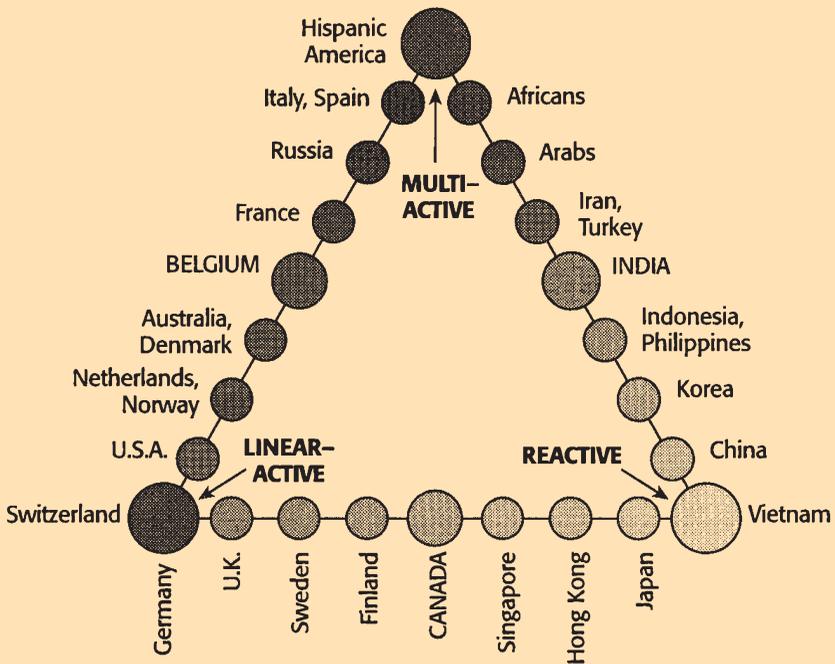


Figure 1. Cultural categories of communication (Lewis, 2005, 89).

Lewis (1999, 2005) has also compared certain Western European and US values with Asian values. We present here his classification (Table 2), which aims to compare Finnish values and communication styles with those of other Western and Eastern countries. According to Lewis (2005), Finnish values are in line with Western values, while their communication styles are closer to Eastern communication.

In the following, we will discuss Finland, Japan and India, and try to see if either of these two context be seen in people's ways of communicating or in certain cultural features.

Finland, Japan and India Revisited

When discussing Finland, Japan and India, we will first reflect on Hall's theory of high vs. low context cultures (Hall, 1959, 1966, 1976, 1983; Hall & Hall, 1990). Second, attempt to analyse certain features of Finnish, Japanese and Indian cultures in the light of Lewis's (1999, 2005) and Hofstede's (2008) classifications.

Table 2. Finnish values/communication dilemma (Lewis, 2005, 68).

USA /West Europeans	FINNS	ASIANS
VALUES	VALUES	VALUES
democracy self-determinism equality for women work ethic human rights ecology	democracy self-determinism equality for women work ethic human rights ecology	hierarchies fatalism males dominate work ethic inequality exploit environment
COMMUNICATION STYLE	COMMUNICATION STYLE	COMMUNICATION STYLE
extrovert forceful lively thinks aloud interrupts talkative dislikes silence truth before diplomacy overt body language	introvert modest quiet thinks in silence doesn't interrupt distrusts big talkers uses silence truth before diplomacy little body language	introvert modest quiet thinks in silence doesn't interrupt distrusts big talkers uses silence diplomacy before truth little body language

Finland—Communication Style

In terms of its communication style, Finland reveals a Janus face. Finland seems to have been a high context culture in many respects, but that feature is gradually changing and it is becoming, at least regarding the younger generation's communication, a lower context culture.

Finnish communication culture has been described as silent and rather monologic; characterised by longish, slow-moving turns of speech, relatively long pauses, and a dislike of being interrupted with superficial external feedback, such as applause or verbal exclamations. Is the silent Finn a myth or reality? Salo-Lee (2007) is inclined to view it as a myth that is well known by all Finns but which might already be fading away even as a stereotype.

As Tella (2005) has reported, international guests are often quick to comment on how Finns observe and listen to the speaker, not showing in any way that they are paying attention to what is being said. When behaving like that, Finns clearly behave as people in a high context culture traditionally do, showing what Lewis (2005, 65) calls "ultra-taciturnity". However, they are, in fact, paying the speaker a compliment, because that is their way of listening most attentively. As Lewis (2005,

67) aptly put it, “[t]he dilemma of the Finns is that they have Western European values cloaked in an Asian communication style” that is often incompatible with those values (see Table 2).

We argue that Finnish communication culture has long been closer to an HC culture than an LC culture. Many of the features we can still recognise in Finnish communication point in that direction. It is, however, true that Finns’ communication style may have changed, starting to resemble low context communication in the use of people’s first names, interrupting other interlocutors, asking more questions at the end of presentations and practising small talk more convincingly.

Finland—Cultural Features

Finns do not have as deeply-rooted traditions as many Asian countries, such as Japan and China. Family ties are not as strong as in Asian countries. Nevertheless, one can easily identify certain features that belong to HC cultures. One of them is high commitment, which Hall (1976, 148) explains as a feature, due to high cohesiveness, of people eager and committed to complete action chains. “A person’s word is his or her bond and a promise for others to take” (Keegan; as cited in Kim et al., 1998, 510). This is nicely reflected in Lewis’s advice to foreign business people negotiating with Finns: “Be just, keep your word, and don’t let them down, ever” (Lewis, 2005, 141).

Regarding Lewis’s (2005) cultural categories of communication, Finland exhibits certain features of both linear-actives and reactives. The Finnish conception of time, for instance, is clearly linear and one-task-at-a-time. Finnish people’s traditional way of respecting old sayings, such as “silence is gold”, “to understand from a half-word”, reflect the HC, linear-active form of culture. Modesty is still one of the national virtues; Finns continue to have difficulty boasting about themselves. As Lewis (2005, 68) mentions, Finns dislike big talkers. Finns belong to the ‘listening countries’, in which speakers are rarely interrupted and silence can be constructive. Lewis (1999, 14) puts this as follows: “In Finland and in Japan it is considered impolite or inappropriate to force one’s opinions on others—it is more appropriate to nod in agreement, smile quietly, avoid opinionated argument or discord”.

Silence is still something Finns can easily live with. In fact, among friends and close colleagues, a Finn does not necessarily feel compelled to keep on talking; silence can be very relaxing and communal.

According to Lewis (2005, 71), Finns are the only Europeans that are so clearly reactive, although other Nordic cultures share some reactive traits. Reactive people are intensive listeners, and their communication style usually consists of monologue, pause, reflection, monologue (Lewis, 2005, 71). The reflective stage

often takes some time, and, as Lewis points out, Finns think in silence, as do many Asians (Lewis, 2005, 73).

Another way of distinguishing cultures is based on data-orientation and dialogue-orientation (Lewis, 1999). According to Lewis, “[i]nteraction between different peoples involves not only methods of communication, but also the process of gathering information” (Lewis 1999, 45). In this respect, Finland clearly relies on data-orientation.

Japan—Communication Style

Japanese communication style is deeply rooted in the Japanese language. As Maynard (1997, 1–2) put it, “Japanese is classified as an agglutinating language, one that contains many separable elements—particles, auxiliary verbs, and auxiliary adjectives—attached to the words. Particles express not merely grammatical relations but also personal feelings. And, of course, the Japanese language is known for its system of respectful and humble forms as well as its variety of strategies for marking politeness.” Thus, one may argue that Japanese-language communication tends to be high-context.

The Japanese language is also high-context from the viewpoint of phonetics. It has a restricted number of *moras* (a unit of sound determining syllable weight), which results in many homonyms. About 35% of Japanese words belong to one of the groups of homonyms (Tokuhiro & Hiki, 2005). Japanese conversation often cannot be understood without knowing the context because of these homonyms. For example, “KISHA no KISHA ga KISHA de KISHA shimashita” [貴社の記者が車で帰社しました] means “a reporter of your company returned to the office by train”. The first “KISHA” means your company, the second means a reporter, the third a train, the fourth means returning to the office. The four “KISHA” can be distinguished by using KANJI characters as “貴社”, “記者”, “汽車”, and “帰社”, but cannot be distinguished in oral communication without knowing the context.

Hall and Hall (1990) place Japan at the top of the list of HC cultures and, indeed, Japanese communication style has all the characteristics of HC cultures, such as indirect and digressive communication, use of few words, reliance on contextual cues, avoidance of the use of personal names, respect for long silences, and waiting politely until the other person has stopped speaking before taking turns.

When conversing in Japanese, people have to listen carefully to their interlocutors to find the context and elicit the meaning beyond the words. Even the use of personal names only when they cannot be avoided has roots in this feature of the Japanese language. Japanese has a lot of second person singular pronouns, such as “ANATA”, “KIMI”, “OMAE”, “KISAMA”, “OTAKU”. These pronouns are used according to the situational requirements. For example, “ANATA” is the safest to use

when the speaker is not sure of the listener's social status.

Richardson and Smith (2007) noted that Japanese students scored modestly but statistically significantly higher on the LC/HC scale than US students. It is their interpretation that Japan differs from US in terms of LC/HC cultures only relatively. (Richardson & Smith, 2007.)

Japan—Cultural Features

As Goodman and Refsing (1992, 3) mention, “one of the first distinctions any anthropologist embarking on research in Japan learns to make is between *tatemae* and *honne*. *Tatemae* ... refers to an individual's explicitly stated principle, objective or promise; *honne* refers to what that individual is really going to do, or wants to do.” These two concepts are clearly symbolic characteristics of the Japanese culture. Hall (1983, 102) describes *tatemae* as a sensitivity towards others and as a public self and *honne* as a sensitivity towards one's own private self. It can also be argued that this duality of Japanese communication refers to an HC culture.

One of the most popular examples of *honne* and *tatemae* is *bubuzuke* of Kyoto.

”Bubuzuke, known outside Kyoto as ochazuke, is a simple Japanese dish made by pouring green tea, dashi broth, or hot water over rice in roughly the same proportion as milk over cereal.”

When a native of Kyoto asks if a guest wants to eat *bubuzuke*, it really means that the person has overstayed their welcome and is being politely asked to leave (Kyoto Tourism Council, 2007)¹.

Japan has developed as very unique culture when compared to other countries. There are three principal factors influencing its uniqueness: Japan's long history of isolationism, its geography which has led to densely populated areas, and the Japanese language itself (Lewis 1999, 400). On Lewis's (2005, 89) linear-active-reactive scale, Japanese culture is closest to the reactive end of the scale, together with China, Korea and Vietnam.

India—Communication Style

India is a multilingual subcontinent, and many Indians are bilingual or even trilingual. The mixed and complex use of different languages in everyday conversations is typical of Indian communication. In India, 22 languages are recognised as official languages. The largest language is Hindi; the second largest Bengali. English is the second official language of 100 million speakers, but also the language of law and government. Indian languages have corresponding distinct alphabets. (Wikipedia, Languages of India, n.d.) Indian English is mainly spoken by the educated class, and it has served as a bridge to the Western world and as a link across different languages spoken in India (Zaidman, 2001).

Traditionally, Indian communication style follows the HC culture discourse. In most Indian languages (e.g., Hindi and Marathi), people talking to an elderly person use respectful forms. High respect (e.g., Marathi) for elders is also seen in younger sisters and brothers never calling their elder sibling by their first name, but by the words *tai* (eldest sister), *mai* (second eldest sister) and *bhau* (eldest brother).

Indian English is formal and poetic, including elegant and imposing forms of speech. It is very polite with expressions of humility, honorifics and respect terminology. (Mehrotra 1995; as cited in Zaidman, 2001.) An example of how a person shows their respect is the use of the respect suffix *jee/ji* when referring to elders or to anyone meriting respect, e.g., *Please send the copy to Nevgi-ji*. The use of long sentences and ambiguous expressions with multiple meanings often leads to misunderstandings between Indians and people from Western LC cultures (Zaidman, 2001).

For Indians, the purpose of communication is to maintain harmony and forge relationships, not to exchange exact information. (Lewis, 1999; Pakiam, 2007).

Indians are, however, moving towards an LC culture, and the process of change is, as Chella (2007) contends in his article, strongly supported by the four T's; technology, trade, travel and television. Traditionally, Indians differ in their communication style from the Japanese, Chinese or Korean by being more verbose and dialogue-oriented (Lewis, 1999). Dialogue-orientation and a strong favour for a direct communication style may also be supporting Indians move towards an LC culture, especially in communication style.

Kapor, Hughes, Baldwin and Blue (2003) investigated how Caucasian American students studying in the United States and Indian students studying in India differed in HC/LC communication in terms of individualistic and collectivist values. The Indian sample reported more indirect communication and more positive perception of conversational silence than the United States sample. However, the Indian sample reported more dramatic communication than the US sample. The results indicate that Indian communication style is closer to an LC culture than would traditionally have been expected.

India—Cultural Features

India's culture is one of the oldest in the world. Sen (2005, p. ix) describes India "as an immensely diverse country with many distinct pursuits, vastly disparate convictions, widely divergent customs and a veritable feast of viewpoints." Indian society and culture are ambiguous in many senses. Indians are seen as spiritual and "other-wordly", but the opposite is often true. Indians pursue material well-being, appreciate success in business, and admire creativity, especially in technology (Varma, 2004; Lewis, 1999).

On the reactive–multi-active scale, Indians are a little closer to the multi-active end of the scale. Indians are extrovert, talkative, emotional, and unpunctual, and they mix professional and family affairs. (Lewis, 1999, 340–346.)

Traditionally, India represents an HC culture. It is characterised by the same courtesy, patience, harmony and pragmatism that characterises Japanese culture. Indians are very family-oriented and loyal to their group and to their employer. Indian society is a hierarchical system in which all obligations and duties arise from being a member of the family, a member of a work group, an employee or an employer (Lewis, 1999, 340–346).

Indians are highly collectivist in their local group, but individualistic when dealing with outsiders (Lewis, 1999). On Hofstede's (2008) individualism–collectivism scale, India is close to the global average. Indian students did not differ from US students in the individualism scale (Kapoor et al., 2003).

Indian culture is, however, changing and becoming westernised. Globalisation is not, however, new. The persistent movement of goods, people and techniques has occurred from time immemorial and it has shaped the world (Sen, 2005, 347).

Conclusion

This article compared communication style and some cultural features in Finland, Japan and India. Our approach was exploratory and based on prior research findings. We agree with the argument that the concept of HC and LC cultures has been validated and proved useful in transcultural studies (Kim et al., 1998).

In summary (Table 3), Finland and Japan share some features of introversion, while India is clearly more extrovert. Finland and Japan also share the virtue of modesty, while Indians tend to be more assertive. India is livelier than Finland or Japan in communication style. Finns and Japanese, not liking to be interrupted too often, prefer to think in silence; more talkative Indians think aloud and easily tolerate interruptions. All three countries know how to use silence effectively. Indians use a lot of body language, while Finns and Japanese people are more non-committal.

As to cultural features, the power of tradition is relatively modest in Finland, while in Japan and in India it is significant. All three countries show a high commitment to the completion of action chains that have been started. While doing this, Finns tend to do one thing at a time (linear-active) while still reacting to other people's opinions and viewpoints (reactive); Japanese people show strong signs of reactive behaviour, that is, they do not like to take the initiative but rather follow the group's decision; Indians are both multi-active and reactive: they can do many things simultaneously, but still listen to others.

Table 3. A summary of communication style and cultural features in Finland, Japan and India.

Finland	Japan	India
Communication style	Communication style	Communication style
Introvert	Introvert	Extrovert
Modest	Modest	Forceful
Quiet	Quiet	Lively
Doesn't interrupt	Doesn't interrupt	Interrupts
Uses silence	Uses silence	Uses silence
Thinks in silence	Thinks in silence	Thinks aloud
Dislikes big talkers	Dislikes big talkers	Talkative
Little body language	Little body language	Overt body language
Cultural features	Cultural features	Cultural features
Little power of traditions	A lot of power of traditions	A lot of power of traditions
High commitment to complete action chains	High commitment to complete action chains	High commitment to complete action chains
Linear-active and reactive	Reactive	Multi-active and reactive
Listening culture	Listening culture	Talking culture
Data-orientation	Data-orientation	Dialogue-orientation
High situational relevance	High situational relevance	Low(er) situational relevance
Relatively homogeneous	Relatively homogeneous	Highly diverse and contradictory
Punctual	Punctual	Unpunctual
Non-hierarchical	Hierarchical	Hierarchical
Respect for elders	High respect for elders	High respect for elders
Individualistic	Collectivistic	Collectivistic in local group; individualistic with outsiders

Finland and Japan are listening cultures; people are allowed to talk freely, without being interrupted. India is a talking culture, in which talking may be preferred to listening. Talking simultaneously with others is tolerated much more than in Finland or in Japan. Finland and Japan are more data-oriented than India, which is more dialogue-oriented. In Finland and in Japan, a cultural context is highly relevant to understanding a discourse, in India less so. As a culture, Finland is relatively homogeneous, as is Japan. India is highly diverse and contradictory in many ways.

Finns tend to be punctual, non-hierarchical and individualistic; Japanese people are punctual, hierarchical but rather collectivistic. Indians are often rath-

er unpunctual, hierarchical and collectivistic in their local groups, but frequently much more individualistic *vis-à-vis* outsiders. Respect for elder people is evident in all three countries, although it is more obvious in India and in Japan than in Finland.

In conclusion, we believe that knowing certain key principles of Hall's theory of high vs. low context cultures (1959, 1966, 1976, 1983), especially when complemented with other theories, such as Lewis's (1999, 2005) and Hofstede's (1980, 1991, 2008) can prove to be valid, interesting and transculturally most relevant.

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Note

1. In certain parts of Finland, an expression "eikös keitetä lähtökahvit" (literally, "why don't we make some coffee before you leave") is used in a similar situation.