Does Style Matter? A Cross-cultural Study into the Influence of Differences in Style Dimensions on the Persuasiveness of Business Newsletters in Great Britain and the Netherlands

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Abstract

An important consideration in the field of intercultural communication is the difference in communication styles between cultures. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) distinguish four dimensions of communication styles: direct - indirect, instrumental – affective, personal – contextual and succinct – elaborate. This last dimension is central to the present study. In an experiment the attractiveness and persuasiveness of a succinct and an elaborate business newsletter was investigated in two countries: Great Britain and the Netherlands. Findings show that, although respondents clearly recognized the style differences between the two newsletters, these style differences had a limited effect on respondents' reactions to the newsletters. The study did not provide any evidence that there were differences between respondents from Great Britain and the Netherlands in their preference for a succinct or elaborate communication style.

Introduction

Research in the field of document design has demonstrated that content, structure and style are important factors in determining the persuasiveness of a text (see e.g. Hoeken, 1995, House, 2002).
For texts that are designed to be used in an international context, an additional factor is that writers may need to adapt the style of the text to the preferred communication style in the different countries in which the text is to be used. Due to a globalization of organizational communication, increasingly the same source text (e.g. advertisements; international aids campaigns etc.) may need to be designed to appeal to readers in different countries. Designers of texts can choose to use the same text (in the same language) for different target countries, or they can choose to translate the source text into the language of the target countries. If translations are made, the question is always whether and how the style of the original text - often English - needs to be adapted to the style of the target language, e.g. Spain or France (so-called 'covert translation' see House, 2002).

Culture and Language

The relationship between culture and language has occupied many researchers since the beginning of the twentieth century. A central theme in this area of research has been whether language influences culture or vice versa, or whether there is no relationship at all. On the basis of a survey of research in this field, Matsumoto (2000) concluded that there is a close relationship between culture and language and that this relationship manifests itself at the level of the lexicon and at the level of language use.

The relationship between culture and lexicon has been on the research agenda since the groundbreaking Sapir-Whorf hypothesis about the relationship between culture and the lexicon (e.g. Hymes (1972), Gumperz (1982), Maltz and Borker (1982). However, comparatively few studies have investigated the relationship between culture and language use, which is the focus of the present study.

Studies that have investigated style dimensions in particular (e.g. Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988, Mulac, Bradac and Gibbons, 2001) have shown that there are cultural differences in the appreciation of readers in terms of verbal communication styles. A key study in this respect is that of Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988), who carried out a comprehensive descriptive study into the relationship between culture and communication styles, i.e. the way in which members of a particular culture use their language. They distinguish four dimensions of verbal communication styles:
1. direct – indirect; a direct style of communication means that a speaker formulates his or her goals, intentions and wishes rather explicitly. An indirect style of communication, on the other hand, is characterized by a more implicit phrasing of a speaker's goals and intentions.
2. instrumental – affective; an instrumental communication style is characterized by goal oriented and sender-oriented language, as opposed to an affective style where communication is receiver-oriented and process-oriented.
3. personal – contextual; characteristic for a personal style is an emphasis on the expression of the sender's identity through the use of personal pronouns and adverbs of place and time. In a contextual style language is used to focus on the group; not everything is formulated explicitly, because much can be deduced from the context.
4. succinct – elaborate; this dimension is described by Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988, p. 105) as: 'the quantity of talk that is valued in different cultures'. An elaborate style is characterized by flowery language. The succinct end of the dimension is characterized by understatements, pauses and silence. On this dimension Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey also distinguish an exacting communication style, which means that a speaker's contribution contains 'neither more nor less information than is required' (p. 105). The exacting communication style would thus seem to occupy a mid-position on the succinct – elaborate dimension.

Empirical Research into Style Dimensions

The majority of studies investigating communication style have looked at the style dimension direct – indirect (e.g. Katriel, 1986; Cohen, 1990; Okabe, 1983; Miller 1994; Nelson, Batal & Bakary, 2002) and have found that cultural differences on this style dimension may give rise to communicative misunderstandings. However, much less research has been done into cross-cultural differences with respect to the other style dimensions. One of the few studies to date that have included the other style dimensions is Mulac, Bradac and Gibbons (2001), who used the style dimensions distinguished by Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) to investigate differences in language use between men and women. They started with an inventory of what other studies have revealed about 'typical' male/female language use and concluded that men more often use imperatives, elliptical sentences and evaluative adjectives, while women more often make use of adverbs of intensity, longer sentences and hedges. They subsequently report on three experiments in which they found that the linguistic characteristics typically used by men were regarded as more direct, succinct, personal and instrumental, whereas the linguistic characteristics typically used by women were seen as more indirect, elaborate and affective. In this way, Mulac et al. succeeded in linking specific

linguistic characteristics to particular communication styles. In so doing, they provided a useful tool for operationalising communicative styles linguistically. While Mulac et al. investigated differences within one national culture, it would be interesting to use their operationalisations to investigate if differences in communication styles between national cultures are recognized by members of the cultures in question, and whether these differences lead to differences in the effectiveness of documents

Elaborate or Succinct

The present study focussed on the communication style *elaborate – succinct* for two reasons. The first reason is that the dimension has been the topic of very few studies to date (but see Hendriks et al., in press). The second reason is that Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) make predictions about the relation between communication styles and Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions. According to Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, style differences on the dimension succinct – elaborate are linked to differences between cultures on the dimension 'uncertainty avoidance' (Hofstede, 2001). Hofstede defined uncertainty avoidance as 'The extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations. (Hofstede, 2001, p. 161). According to Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, speakers from countries with high scores on Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance index prefer a succinct communication style, whereas speakers from countries with moderate scores on the uncertainty avoidance index prefer a more elaborate communication style. Speakers from countries with low scores on Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance index prefer an exacting communication style. In western Europe there are major differences between countries with respect to their scores on the uncertainty avoidance index. The five countries with the highest scores include three European countries (Greece, Portugal, Belgium), but the five countries with the lowest scores also include three European countries (Great Britain, Sweden, Denmark). The other European countries, including the Netherlands, occupy a mid-position (Hofstede, 2001, p. 151). If differences in the use of a succinct or elaborate communication style are indeed related to differences on the dimension uncertainty avoidance then it is quite likely that there are differences between Great Britain and the Netherlands with respect to a preference for communication style.

The question is whether the persuasiveness of a business document is in any way dependent on the extent to which the communication style of the document is adjusted to the preferred communication style of the culture in question. In order to test this, a persuasive text was designed which is used in Great Britain and the Netherlands, and which was long enough for the style to be manipulated. It was decided to use business newsletters since these documents have a clear persuasive goal in that they try to persuade readers to order goods.

In the present study two different newsletters were developed, an elaborate newsletter and a succinct newsletter. The manipulation of communication style was based on the linguistic characteristics as identified by Mulac et al (2001). The texts for the newsletters were taken from English company websites. The texts were subsequently manipulated to display linguistic characteristics of the two style dimensions and then translated into Dutch. Native speakers in Great Britain and the Netherlands were asked to evaluate the newsletters. The purpose of the experiment was to answer the following two questions:

1. Are differences on the style dimension elaborate versus succinct perceived as such in the two countries?

2.   Do differences on the style dimension elaborate versus succinct lead to differences in persuasiveness in the two countries?

Method

Design

A within-subject experimental design was used in which respondents were asked to evaluate a succinct and an elaborate business newsletter by means of written questionnaires.

Materials

The texts for the business newsletters were taken from the English websites of companies in the same line of business, diaries and time management systems. The texts were subsequently manipulated to display linguistic characteristics of the elaborate and succinct end of the style dimension and then translated into Dutch.

Two newsletters were developed in English and in Dutch, which differed on a number of linguistic characteristics derived from Mulac et al. (2001) and Gudykunst en Ting-Toomey (1988). The elaborate newsletter was characterised by a more wordy style; longer sentences; more adverbs of intensity, adjectives and dependent clauses, whereas the succinct newsletter was characterised by a concise and business-like style: short and elliptical sentences; fewer adverbs of intensity, adjectives and dependent clauses.

Below are two extracts from the newsletters. The full text of the newsletters is included in Appendix I.

| **Succinct newsletter** | *What are your priorities? A job plus car? A trip around the world? Your own home? Good health? Time for yourself? However rare, fortunately quality time is attainable.* |
| **Elaborate newsletter** | *There are many lectures, training courses, workshops, magazines and books on how those plagued by a shortage of time can get their planning under control. But these are often of little use, because what is lacking is the implementation of the good intentions and rules.* |

Respondents

A total of 102 respondents took part in the study, 50 Dutch respondents and 52 British respondents. There were 58 (56.8%) male respondents and 44 (43.2%) female respondents. Most respondents fell in the age category of 31-50. Respondents were all existing business-to-business customers of the company Time/system, based in the Great Britain and the Netherlands, who were on the mailing list of the company and thus received the company's newsletters. All respondents read and evaluated the newsletters in their native language.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire included two questions to check whether the manipulation of communication style (succinct versus elaborate) had been successful. Respondents' evaluation of the style of the newsletter was measured using two seven-point semantic differentials: concise – verbose, succinct – elaborate. The internal consistency of the scales was calculated in terms of Cronbach's α. Qualifications of Cronbach's α were determined using the criteria in Van Wijk (2000, p. 217). The reliability of the items was good (both

versions α > .80). Composite means were calculated of the two scales, resulting in a new variable *conciseness of the newsletter.*

Seven-point scales were used to measure the persuasiveness of the business newsletters and respondents' attitude towards the newsletter (attractiveness and intelligibility). For all scales a balanced scale technique was used.

Motivation to order. The first dependent variable measuring the persuasiveness of the newsletter was the likelihood that respondents would order products from the company in question. This was measured using a seven-point Likert scale for which respondents were asked to indicate whether they would order products after reading the newsletter.

Attitude towards the newsletter. The second dependent variable measuring the persuasiveness of the newsletter was respondents' attitude towards the newsletter: attractiveness and intelligibility.

The attractiveness of the newsletter was measured using eight seven-point semantic differentials (based on Maes, Ummelen, & Hoeken, 1996, p. 209). The pairs of adjectives were: varied – monotonous, engaging – boring, irritating – pleasant, interesting – uninteresting, strange – unexceptional, appealing – distant, not enjoyable to read – enjoyable to read, natural – unnatural. The reliability of the eight items was good (both versions α > .90).

The intelligibility of the ad was measured using four seven-point semantic differentials (based on Maes et al., 1996, p. 208). The pairs of adjectives were: incoherent – coherent, clear – unclear, easy – difficult, logically structured – illogically structured. The reliability of the four items was adequate (both versions α > .70).

Composite means were calculated for all variables consisting of more than one scale since the reliability of the scales in each case was at least adequate.

Results

Conciseness of the newsletter. To test whether the manipulation of the communication style had been successful, a repeated measures analysis (GLM) was carried out with *country* as between-subject factor and *version* as within-subject factor and *conciseness* as dependent variable. The analysis revealed that there was a main effect for *version* of the newsletter (F(1, 99) = 111.41; p < .001). The succinct newsletter was evaluated as significantly more concise than the elaborate newsletter by both groups of respondents (see Table 1). In other words, the differences in communication style were indeed recognized as such by both the Dutch and the British respondents.

Table 1

Mean scores and standard deviations for conciseness of the newsletter (1=wordy, 7=concise); motivation to order goods after reading the newsletter (1=totally agree, 7=totally disagree); attractiveness of the newsletter (1=negative; 7=positive); comprehensibility of the newsletter (1=negative; 7=positive)

	Conciseness of the newsletter		Motivation to order		Attractiveness		Comprehensibility	
	M (SD)	n	M (SD)	n	M (SD)	n	M (SD)	n
Netherlands								
Succinct newsletter	5.11 (1.27)	50	3.86 (1.41)	49	3.04 (1.02)	50	2.95 (1.08)	50
Elaborate newsletter	3.49 (1.31)	50	3.71 (1.72)	49	3.51 (1.06)	51	3.03 (0.93)	50
Great Britain								
Succinct newsletter	5.55 (1.31)	51	4.04 (1.25)	49	3.88 (1.04)	50	3.51 (0.99)	51
Elaborate newsletter	3.65 (1.28)	51	4.06 (1.20)	52	4.03 (1.14)	51	4.03 (1.26)	51

Persuasiveness and Appreciation of the Newsletters

The persuasiveness of the newsletters was measured by means of three variables: *motivation to order goods, attractiveness of the newsletter* and *comprehensibility of the newsletter* (Table 1). Repeated measures analyses (GLM) were carried out with *country* as between-subject factor and *version* as within-subject factor for all dependent variables.

First of all, the analysis for *motivation to order goods* revealed no significant differences for any of the factors ($F < 1$). In other words, respondents' motivation to order goods from the company was not affected by the style differences in the newsletters.

The analysis for *attractiveness* revealed a main effect for *country* only ($F(1,99)=22.65$; $p < .001$). The Dutch respondents evaluated both newsletters as more attractive than the British respondents did.

Finally, the analysis for *comprehensibility* revealed main effects for both *version* ($F(1,99)=4.08$; $p < .05$) and *country* ($F(1,99)=25.55$; $p < .001$). This indicates that respondents rated the comprehensibility of the two newsletters differently, and also that respondents in Great Britain evaluated the comprehensibility of both newsletters differently than the respondents in the Netherlands. An analysis of the means revealed that both the British and the Dutch respondents evaluated the succinct newsletter as more comprehensible than the elaborate newsletter and that the Dutch respondents evaluated both newsletters as more comprehensible than the British respondents.

It can be concluded that, although respondents clearly recognized the style differences between the two newsletters, these style differences had a limited effect on respondents' reactions to the newsletters. The only significant difference concerned the succinct newsletter, which was evaluated as more comprehensible than the elaborate newsletter by respondents in both Great Britain and the Netherlands. This would seem to suggest that respondents in both countries have a slight preference for a more succinct communication

style. The results do not reveal any differences between respondents from Great Britain and the Netherlands in their preference for a succinct or elaborate communication style.

Conclusion and Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether the persuasiveness of a document is related to the degree in which the communication style of the document is adjusted to the preferred communication style of the country in question. In order to examine this, two business newsletters were developed, a succinct newsletter and an elaborate newsletter. The style manipulation of the texts was based a study by Mulac et al. (2001), which identified the linguistic characteristics pertaining to the style dimension succinct – elaborate. For each newsletter an English version and a Dutch version were constructed, which were evaluated by British and Dutch respondents respectively.

The first research question was whether differences on the style dimension succinct versus elaborate are recognized as such in the two countries. Findings from the study show that style differences between the two newsletters were indeed recognized. The succinct newsletter was evaluated as more concise than the elaborate newsletter by respondents in both countries.

The second research question was whether differences on the style dimension succinct versus elaborate lead to differences in persuasiveness of the newsletters in the two countries. Findings indicate that, although respondents in the Great Britain and the Netherlands noticed the style differences, this did not result in a clear difference in persuasiveness. Findings do indicate that respondents in both countries feel that a succinct communication style is more comprehensible than an elaborate communication style.

A possible explanation for the lack of a clear effect might be that the manipulation of style differences in the two newsletters may not have been extreme enough. Although style differences were recognized, they may not have been extreme enough to have a profound effect on the persuasiveness of the letters. Other studies, too, have found that for style differences to have a clear effect, manipulation of linguistic characteristics may need to be overtly clear (e.g. Hendriks et al., in press)

Unlike other empirical studies into cultural differences in preferences for communication styles (Miller, 1994; Nelson et al., 2002; Cohen, 1987) the present study did not reveal differences between national cultures in their preference for communication styles. A possible explanation may be that the studies mentioned above investigated cultures that differed more extremely from each other on one or several of Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions than the two cultures that were the focus of the present study. In contrast to Hofstede's (2001) findings, other research has indicated that western European cultures are relatively homogeneous (Fiske et al.,1998; Hoeken et al., 2003; Smith and Schwartz, 1997).

Future studies should first and foremost be aimed at the development of stimulus materials in which the style dimension 'succinct – elaborate' is manipulated more clearly and extremely. This would enable researchers to provide more insights into whether the persuasiveness of a persuasive document depends on the degree to which the communication style of the document is adjusted to the preferred communication style of the culture in question.

Appendix I The texts of the newsletters used in the experiment

Elaborate newsletter (English version)

There are many lectures, training courses, workshops, magazines and books on how those plagued by a shortage of time can get their planning under control. But these are often of little use, because what is lacking is the implementation of the good intentions and rules. Old habits can never be completely changed by attending a workshop or reading a book.

Satisfactory changes in behaviour can be obtained by means of the Time/system management system as a very useful instrument for implementation of the time management principles.

The crucial difference from other time planners (including electronic organisers) is that our Time Management system permanently urges the user to establish priorities in order to achieve his or her personal and business goals.

Elaborate newsletter (Dutch version)

Er bestaan tal van lezingen, trainingen, workshops, tijdschriften en boeken over hoe mensen, die geplaagd worden door tijdsgebrek, hun planning onder controle kunnen krijgen. Maar die hebben vaak weinig nut, want wat ontbreekt, is de implementatie van goede bedoelingen en regels. Oude gewoontes kunnen nooit compleet veranderd worden door een workshop te volgen of een boek te lezen.

Bevredigende veranderingen in gedrag kunnen bewerkstelligd worden door het Time/system management systeem, een zeer nuttig instrument voor de implementatie van de tijdmanagement principes.

Het cruciale verschil tussen Time/system en andere planningsystemen (waaronder ook de elektronische organisers) is dat het Time/system management systeem de gebruiker voortdurend ertoe aanzet prioriteiten te stellen om zijn of haar persoonlijke en zakelijke doelen te bereiken.

Succinct newsletter (English version)

What are your priorities? A job plus car? A trip around the world? Your own home? Good health? Time for yourself? However rare, fortunately quality time is attainable. As long as you remember your most important date; the date you have with yourself. Quality time means to reserve time for free time. To free time means to organise your time, starting with a good overview of your activities. Time/system helps you!

Succinct newsletter (Dutch version)

Wat zijn uw prioriteiten? Een baan plus auto? Een reis rond de wereld? Uw eigen huis? Goede gezondheid? Tijd voor uzelf? Hoe schaars ook, quality time is gelukkig bereikbaar. Zolang u uw belangrijkste afspraak maar niet vergeet; de afspraak die u met uzelf heeft. Quality time betekent tijd reserveren voor vrije tijd. Tijd vrijmaken betekent uw tijd indelen, te beginnen met een goed overzicht van uw activiteiten. Time/system helpt u!

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