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Misinterpretation of speaker intent in a multilingual workforce

ABSTRACT

This article deals with communication problems in intercultural communication in the workplace. Findings from this study have practical implications for developers of both intercultural and language courses. The research established that a beckoning gesture commonly used by white people is regarded as offensive by most blacks. At the same time many whites are unaware of non-verbal politeness markers signalled by means of kinetics. What whites interpret as "blunt" requests (often regarded as demands) can be ascribed to different norms of communication in African languages. These findings have implications for successful intercultural communication in an industrial society. Awareness of differences in verbal and non-verbal behaviour (termed *mutual ignorance* by Reagan) needs to be included in training for all members of the multicultural workforce.

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1. BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Randelsome (2002: 70-71) maintains that in the workplace culture and language play a role in affecting daily lives and could seriously affect productivity. When people do not share a common home language or culture, differences in language-specific behaviour could result in misinterpretation of speaker intent and in behaviour being interpreted as offensive. Chick (1985: 315) believes that misinterpretation of speaker intent plays a role in the development of negative stereotyping, while Applegate (1975: 279) maintains that it is not uncommon for people to be judged as evasive, irresponsible or even deceitful on account of differences in conversational styles or ignorance of politeness markers that go unnoticed.

Research commissioned by the Scientific Advisory Council in the 1980s covered a wide spectrum of issues involving more than 20 disciplines (for instance law, political science, economics, industrial relations, religion and communication). The findings indicated that most intercultural communication in South Africa took place in the workplace where speakers of a multitude of languages come into contact (Marais 1985). It transpired that more than half of the respondents had not had contact with someone from a different culture the previous day, and where this had taken place, it was generally task-oriented and occurred in structured vertical situations (such as supervisor/worker or customer/shop assistant). Population groups differed significantly in their evaluation of these contacts, bearing testimony to the asymmetrical situations in the country. Most whites were significantly more satisfied with their communication with other groups than were those groups with the communication of whites with them. Reagan, who was invited to head a research team consisting of researchers and representatives from industrial training schemes to analyse communication problems in industry in South Africa, identified mutual ignorance as a major source of communication problems. Reagan (1986: 106) says,

> ... it was found that not only the greatest number of problems, but the most serious ones, were at the black-white contact point. A significant number of the problems were, in essence, caused by what might be termed *mutual ignorance,* rather than by either bad will or language difficulties. Indeed, even racism per se, although often mentioned by workers in the abstract, did not appear to be at the root of many communication problems between black workers and white supervisors.

In response to Reagan's hypothesis, research was undertaken to establish what constitutes mutual ignorance (Wydeman & Ribbens, 1993; Ribbens, 1994) and the most glaring instance of ignorance identified again tested in 2007.

2.   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS THAT EXPLICATE POLITE AND OFFENSIVE BEHAVIOUR

When people from difference cultures have to interact, what is considered appropriate behaviour needs to be known consciously by participants in the process, otherwise the communication could be misconstrued. The need for a description of differences in behaviour between the West and

East was acknowledged when, towards the end of World War II, the American Office of War Information commissioned the anthropologist, Ruth Benedict to explore Japanese culture. Her work "created a sensation" (Watson, 2001: 402) when she uncovered a complicated hierarchical system of interlocking "obligations" that dictates all forms of behaviour in Japanese society. In the 1960s another anthropologist, Hymes (1962, 1967, and 1972) developed the ethnography of speaking framework for the documentation and analysis of the speech of Native Americans. He believes that the components of the speech event can be used for a description of differences in cultural behaviour, enabling people to participate appropriately. Each of the components identified in the acronym *SPEAKING* can be the determining component that governs the use of a particular sociolinguistic rule.

- **S** represents the setting;
- **P** the participants in the interaction;
- **E** stands for the ends or goals, i.e. the reason for the interaction;
- **A** stands for act (which in Hymesian terms means the topic and the manner in which it is discussed);
- **K** represents key, which has to do with the manner or spirit in which something is said;
- **I** stands for instrumentalities, i.e. the channel used and includes non-verbal communication;
- **N** stands for norms - how speech acts are realised differently in different speech communities and the
- **G** represents genre (for instance, "small talk" (casual speech) as opposed to formal instructions by a superordinate).

Not all the components in this framework necessarily come into play all the time. This article will reveal that *setting* (the **S** component) plays a role in the way in which language is realised and that the non-verbal **I** component accounts for most instances of mutual ignorance.

According to Birdwhistell (1970) and Ogden (1988: 13), non-verbal signs may carry over half of the total information that we receive from a speaker and the chances of misreading these signs increase greatly when dealing with foreigners whose non-verbal codes may vary as widely as the languages spoken. In Arab countries foreigners have to be made aware that the soles of their shoes should not be exposed (Vilarrubla, 1987: 1023). The bow in Asian cultures is affected by the relative status of the individuals involved, and management in Japanese department stores send their newly hired sales clerks to a special workshop on the art of bowing so as not to offend customers (Armstrong, 1986: 36). Westerners often find interaction with the Japanese very difficult, mainly because of their restrained facial expressions and habit of smiling and laughing unexpectedly. When a Japanese person nods her/his head in response to a statement, this may not necessarily indicate agreement; it may simply mean that he has heard what has been said and is continuing to pay attention (Baglan,1988: 5). Sherman (1989: 6) reports that the Japanese smile when they are happy or give friendly acknowledgement, but they may also smile on occasions where Westerners would frown. Messages may be conveyed by "rolling eyes" by American black women whose aim is to express disapproval of the person who is in the authority role (Johnson, 1976: 261) A gaping mouth and raised eyebrows express surprise for Americans and Europeans, while Eskimos and Brazilians slap their hips and the Ainu of Japan lightly tap the nose or mouth (Krout, 1942; 1971

in Corder, 1989: 22). The Koori in Australia purse their lips to indicate direction or intent. Hannan (n.d.: 7) explains that in response to questions a Koori is likely not to respond verbally, but to indicate by pursing the lips to point in the general direction. This has been observed in response to such questions as *Who owns this pen?* The owner responds by pursing the lips quickly. (A Koori joke tells of two hitch-hikers, the one making his request with his arm outstretched and his thumb extended in the international convention while the Koori is reclining against a tree, hands in pockets, flicking his pursed lips in the direction he wants the lift.)

Nwoye (1992) discusses some of perspectives used to explore politeness phenomena, amongst others the conversational-contract view presented by Fraser (1975) and Grice's (1975) set of "general truths" (that urge the speaker to "be informative, truthful, relevant and brief and orderly"). Research that explores non-Western behaviour challenges these principles as being applicable in all cultures. Keenan (1976 in Wolfson, 1989: 59), for instance, indicates that in Malagasy society information is withheld instead of being shared, thereby violating the "be informative" Gricean maxim.

In the 1980s the awareness of cultural differences in speech behaviour led to the development of a large international research data base termed the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP). Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) theory of politeness serves as theoretical basis for the research (cited in Blum-Kulka *et al*., 1989). This data base enables researchers (and developers of language courses) to compare differences in communicative conventions and social aspects of language use across a variety of language and cultural backgrounds in the expression of requests and apologies. Languages that were compared include Canadian French, British, American and Australian varieties of English, Danish, German, Hebrew and Russian. The universality of various features, e.g. the notions of 'face' (one's public image, proposed by Goffman, 1967), the link between indirectness and politeness, etc. have since been shown to be not only language-specific but also culture-specific, challenging research that politeness principles are universal. Nwoye's (1992) work reveals that an individual's sense of self in African culture is group-related, and studies in Chinese (Mao, 1994) and Japanese (Matsumoto, 1988) also challenge the notion of face espoused by Brown and Levinson. Yu (2003: 1679), however, maintains that Brown and Levinson's model "maintains its pancultural validity" and De Kadt (1995) indicates that in Zulu the notion of (losing) face is understood in terms of group membership and not individually.

Concerning directness and politeness, Blum-Kulka (1987: 131) reports that Hebrew speakers are more direct than Americans when expressing requests. From a South African perspective, De Kadt (1994) confirms that in isiZulu a direct, but nevertheless polite form (*ngiyacela*) is used for the formulation of requests, (translated as *I request*). Gough (1996) confirms that the same holds true for isiXhosa, namely that one can be direct and deferential at the same time. He explains that *Ndicela ukubu undiphe imali*, (*I request that you give me some money*) is a common strategy for making requests. Finlayson (1991: 10) states that "African languages are as polite and sensitive to mood as any other language but there are no special words to indicate that something is a request. The problem of translation and interpretation is often where most difficulty is experienced by the non-mother tongue speaker and a request incorrectly translated may often emerge as a

demand". De Kadt (1992: 104) found that in isiZulu "politeness seems to be negotiated primarily by means of other, often non-verbal dimensions of the interaction, which create a context of politeness". The non-verbal dimension of her model is confirmed by other South African scholars such as Wood (1992: 272) who indicates that in African languages, instead of verbally saying *please* and *thank you*, a hand gesture signals these standard forms of politeness. (These examples explain one of the differences of "bluntness" mentioned by white interviewees in the report that follows.) A research project "Cross-cultural Politeness and speech Act Realisation Patterns in English and South African Indigenous Languages" has since been established (Lwanga-Lumu, 2005: 242), and hopefully African cultural norms will be documented for use by developers of language and intercultural training courses in South Africa.

To explicate misinterpretation of speaker intent, Thomas (1983) identifies two sources of communication failure. Speaker intent may be misunderstood when what a speaker wants to say is "lost in translation", for example when the "can" in the utterance "Can you lend me R200?" is not understood as a request but as an inquiry into the financial status of the addressee. This is termed pragmalinguistic failure. To those socialised in Western culture it is obvious that when borrowing money, a certain (familiar) relationship between speakers must obtain, but this obligation does not necessarily apply in all cultures. Therefore another source for misunderstanding of speaker intent can be ascribed to cross-culturally different views of what is considered appropriate behaviour in a specific context, termed sociopragmatic failure by Thomas (1983: 104).

We can conclude that failure to interpret a speaker's intention correctly occurs when conventions of language behaviour in spontaneous speech differ across languages. Wolfson (1989: 14) refers to these conventions as 'rules of speaking'. Many of these sociolinguistic rules are not learned consciously and come to people's attention only after offence has been registered.

3. DATA COLLECTION

Nielsen and Wagner (2007: 441) support audio or video recordings in "full-blown real time analysis as practised in ethnomethodology" as a means of data collection in natural interactions in institutions. Gaining access to the workfloor is well-nigh impossible, thus establishing differences in behaviour between black and white groups in the workplace reported on here was elicited by means of interviews and questionnaires.

For qualitative data collection, interviews were conducted with a wide representation of the labour force: managers of organisations or factories, training managers, a human resources manager, and supervisors, as well as with employees themselves. The aim of the interview phase was to obtain first-hand opinions on possible causes of friction. Grievances established by means of interviews were pilot-tested, some features were discarded and others tested with two larger samples. In one research project a questionnaire that yielded 1870 responses (Wydeman & Ribbens, 1993), only one sociolinguistic question (with subdivisions for preferred terms of address) was slipped into the schedule. In this article the beckoning feature is discussed. Preferred terms of address are reported on by Ribbens (2004).

For the other research project 50 structured interviews were conducted on the work-floor and the other features were explored (Ribbens, 1994). The structured interviews included a discourse completion test (DCT), which like a questionnaire, is not ideal for obtaining sociolinguistic data and has disadvantages because respondents do not always do what they say they do, but a DCT also has advantages because it is possible to capture a specific type of speech behaviour within a relatively short time while simultaneously controlling variables such as status, age, gender or setting. In both research projects issues other than non-verbal behaviour were the central focus of the investigation. (In Wydeman & Ribbens (1993) educational needs in ABET had to be established and in Ribbens (1994) many pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic differences were explored.)

3.1 "Free Attitude" Interviews

The "Free Attitude Interview" technique was used. This technique is a method of obtaining information used by social workers, therapists, lawyers and journalists (Meulenberg-Buskens n.d.). It encourages interviewees to express views on a topic and to say as much they wish without interference from the interviewer. Only one issue is raised and the interviewer constantly summarises what the interviewee has said, prompting the interviewee to add to the discussion because there is no structured schedule that has to be completed. To test Reagan's *mutual ignorance* hypothesis, interviewees were asked to provide examples of behaviour or language that they experienced as different from what they were accustomed to. Group labels were consciously avoided when respondents were asked for differences that arose when people did not share a common home language. However, reference to "whites" and "blacks" cropped up in discussions as a matter of course.

Interviewees had no difficulty in expressing very definite views on irritations and offensive behaviour. Yet, what they reported was often not misinterpretation of speaker intent, but rather a litany of other grievances (such as not being called to the telephone or having the boots of their cars searched or other discriminatory practices).

Many managers who were approached did not think their companies had communication problems and had to be convinced that the time spent interviewing staff would be to the advantage of the company. Often it was said that, although employees did not share a common language, people could judge goodwill by "reading their body language". They seemed to be unaware that many features of non-verbal communication are not universal, as this article confirms. One of the most offensive gestures used commonly by whites is that of pointing a finger and then beckoning to call someone. Hillerman (in Lustig & Koester, 1993: 183) reports that this gesture is viewed as a violation of the rules of courtesy, adding that this is "rude in a multitude of other cultures." Leaver, Ehrman & Shektman (2005: 186) report: "To beckon to someone in the United States, one makes a crook of one's index finger and wiggles it toward oneself. Not so in Spain. In Spain, one turns the palm down and waves all the fingers or the whole hand. In Norway, one does not use the hand at all for beckoning, but the head. In Indonesia, it is impolite to point with the forefinger, but pointing with the thumb (and a closed

fist) is normal." Birdwhistell (1970), Ogden (1988: 13) and Haworth and Savage (1989: 238) are all aware of the importance of differences in non-verbal communication and have documented that the beckoning gesture is regarded as suitable for calling dogs (not people) in some cultures.

3.2 A beckoning gesture tested by means of a questionnaire

Regarding methodology in South African sociolinguistic research, Chick (1992) laments the 'narrowness' of the empirical base of studies conducted at universities. He expresses reservations as to whether it is possible to generalise findings from micro-interactional contexts to the macro-context of a wider society. Therefore, when the management of a major mining house undertook research to establish the educational and training needs for aspirations of communities on the West Rand, a unique opportunity of testing some sociolinguistic features with an exceptionally large sample of speakers presented itself. As a result it was possible to obtain data at the rock face, instead of from the ivory tower, so to speak, and data was captured by means of a questionnaire (Wydeman & Ribbens, 1993). Observation as a means of data collection is preferable to elicitation by means of a questionnaire, but when a large sample presents itself, observation becomes impossible. Fortunately there are means of avoiding what Labov terms the *observer's paradox* (interviewees being self-conscious of their behaviour). In his research in three department stores in New York in the 1970s the respondents had no inkling that Labov (1972) was interested in the pronunciation of [r] and not in their 'fourth floor' answers. We can surmise that respondents of the questionnaire, which formed part of a much larger survey that focused on issues of adult education, were not consciously alerted to issues of social status or offensive behaviour. In this way it was possible to obtain reaction to a beckoning gesture by getting responses from 1870 people, mainly Sesotho, Setswana and isiXhosa speakers.

The mining house wanted to establish the educational needs of the communities of Kokosi, Wedela and Khutsong, as well as the hostel dwellers who worked on the mines of the company. The goal of the research was to find ways and means of involving the communities by establishing a culture of learning. Representatives of various groups in the region were identified, meetings were held to ensure that all interested parties were involved, and the Community Education concept thrashed out by means of workshops. After relevant questions were decided upon by leaders of the communities, 2 300 structured interviews schedules were handed out. Of these 1 870 were returned. This exceptionally high response rate (81,3 percent) validates the data collected as being statistically representative of the total populations of the three communities as well as the hostels of the mining company concerned, representing a total of 152 000 people. The sample drawn from each community took into account variables such as age, sex, educational level, status of employment and living conditions. The interview schedules were pilot-tested by the fieldworkers, and, after ambiguities were eliminated, completed by members of each of the communities. The interview schedule was prepared in English only, but the fieldworkers from each community who volunteered to interview members

of their respective communities acted as interpreters. This means that every respondent was interviewed in the language of his or her choice. The schedules were completed by the fieldworkers on a one-to-one basis because of the high rate of illiteracy among the population surveyed.

Of those interviewed, 63,4 percent were employed full-time. The high percentage of employed within the population surveyed can be ascribed to returns from the workers on two mines (who in total represent 90 000 people) and as they were in the service of the mines, they were naturally all employed. In the townships only 464 (40,7 percent) of the respondents were employed full-time. The largest number of responses was received from the mining division, namely 645. Workers employed elsewhere totalled 157 and represented 39 different occupations. Sesotho (25,9 percent) and Setswana (23 percent) speakers accounted for almost half of the respondents, while isiXhosa speakers numbered 25,9 percent.

The question *Effective communication* was included in the interview schedule with the aim of ascertaining what (and how) learners wanted to be called when in an ABET class, enabling the researchers to test terms of address and the beckoning gesture mentioned as offensive during the interview phase.

3.3 Features tested at an industrial site near Johannesburg

Apart from this large-scale data collection project that tested only terms of address and the beckoning gesture, 50 employees who did not have one of the official languages as a home language were interviewed in an organisation with approximately 400 staff members in the industrial area of Johannesburg where there is a concentration of factories and organisations (Ribbens 1994). The interview included a series of DCTs and here the grievances mentioned during the interview phase were explored. In this sample 40 percent of the speakers were Sepedi speakers, 24 percent were Xhosas, 14 percent were Shangaan or Tsongas, 12 percent were Zulus and 10 percent Vendas. All but 6 percent had been working for the organisation for more than five years, 50 percent were between the ages of 30 and 49, and 44 percent between 50 and 59 years. All the respondents were male.

4. FINDINGS OF THE INTERVIEW PHASE

4.1 Speakers of Afrikaans or English

As was the case when speakers of one of the African languages were interviewed, topics not overtly relevant to the aim of the research were mentioned by speakers of Afrikaans and English. A topic that often cropped up was the transgression of boundaries of familiarity. For this topic a few kinds of differences were mentioned, namely being too familiar when greeting, sitting down without being asked to do so, and asking to sell personal belongings, and also of displaying a different concept of personal space by standing too close. A complaint often heard was that (black) strangers were "too familiar", explaining that strangers often asked *How*

are you? after greeting or being introduced and reference was also made to people sitting down without being offered a seat. Loud speech was also mentioned, as well as irritation with people holding more than one conversation or talking at the same time while not paying attention to the person addressed. It was reported that blacks often bluntly demanded something, instead of asking politely. Also mentioned as different, but not as disturbing, was the utterance of *Sorry! Sorry!* when the fault clearly did not lie with the speaker, for instance when someone had dropped something or had tripped.

4.2 Speakers of African languages

African interviewees mentioned ways of attracting attention, the lack of the use of titles or surnames and constant questioning, such as *Do you understand?* (This was interpreted as lack of confidence in ability.) Also mentioned were the use of the left hand (which is anacceptable) when handing something to someone and whites not being aware of the custom that whoever enters a room of people is obliged to greet first. It was mentioned that status and respect are highly valued in African cultures, but this is ignored by whites. Another grievance was the lack of acknowledgement or recognition of the expertise and experience of Africans. Talking while walking ("on the hoof" i.e. without stopping) and grinning instead of greeting were also documented.

One operator explained that *lack of* communication was the real problem. He maintained that he had come up with a better and faster way of completing a task, but that his suggestions were brushed aside. He believed that his suggested change would have been an improvement that would have benefited the company, but that because he was not white, his views were dismissed. He maintained that blacks were never *consulted*, only *instructed*. As proof he mentioned a consultant agency that was contracted to work with the operators to improve the productivity by making each member of the workforce aware that, like in a game of soccer, each member played a vital role. He claimed that the workers had not been consulted and had to participate in the workshops simply because these took place during work hours. He felt the company was pandering to the workers' interest in soccer as a means of trying to make them more productive.

5. RESEARCH THAT EXPLICATES SOME OF THE BEHAVIOUR REPORTED ON DURING THE INTERVIEW PHASE

During the interview phase the importance of respect was mentioned so often that subsequently respect in African cultures was explored in the literature with the aim of comparing what whites knew about this topic and whether certain practices were falling into disuse because of acculturation in an urban environment.

De Kadt (1994: 104) explains that in Zulu society younger people are required to show respect towards older people and that a series of hierarchies exist "involving authority and submission based on the categories of age and social status (these two often coinciding) and gender". There is considerable prescriptiveness and formality in Zulu society and set ways of showing respect.

De Kadt (1994: 106) counters the grievance about blacks "being too familiar" by explaining that "There is a very strong obligation on persons with lower status in an interaction not to remain standing" and explains that "[i]n more traditional society, the subordinate would start by squatting or kneeling, and then move to sitting on the ground" and "when receiving or handing over something, two hands must be used; if this is not physically possible, the second hand should be used to support the other arm" and that "hand-shaking ... must be initiated by a person of higher status" while there is a "strong obligation to avoid eye contact with a person of higher status". This information on non-verbal and kinetic features was gleaned from educated Zulu-speakers, but in the interview phase of this study confirmed by uneducated people in a working environment.

Finlayson (1990: 9) reports: "Signs of respect are very important within the black society, and are usually shown to someone older or senior. If visiting someone's house, the visitor will sit down as soon as possible, while the host will not stand up if the guest is an older person. Conversation will not take place while standing." This obviously accounts for the grievance mentioned by whites of blacks "being too familiar" by sitting down without being asked to do so. This is an instance of *mutual ignorance* as hypothesised by Reagan (1986: 106). Finlayson advises, "[t]ransferred into a white environment, one should not feel put out if a black guest takes a seat without being asked to". She also claims that it is not acceptable to talk to someone while "on the hoof" and says "[t]raditionally in black society one stood still when greeting ..." (Finlayson 1991: 10).

Van Jaarsveld's (1988) large-scale investigation by means of 550 questionnaires translated into Sepedi, Southern Sotho, Setwana, isiXhosa and isiZulu, sheds light on obligatory protracted forms of greeting, thus explaining the complaint of blacks being "too familiar" when greeting. De Kadt (1995:146) comments on the greeting ritual as follows, "tightly structured rituals are an integral part of any Zulu dialogue; they are commonly initiated by the subordinate, and are followed by inquiries into health . . ."

From the literature reviewed we find explanations for many of the sources of irritation mentioned by whites, and see that these can be ascribed to differences in rules of speaking, more specifically sociopragmatic differences. This confirms Reagan's identification of mutual ignorance being the source of communication problems.

6. PILOT TESTING

Many of the blacks respondents of the pilot study were not satisfied with features of communication identified during the interview phase and regarded various forms of behaviour as rude. However, allowances were made for the demands of the workplace and therefore some of the grievances were not tested on the work-floor because discussions during the pilot phase indicated that these features would not be misconstrued when the setting was the workplace. These include: no form of greeting, grinning instead of greeting, talking without stopping, the obligation to greet when entering a room, asking to sell personal belongings, and resentment at "being controlled" by the utterance *Do you understand?* Employees indicated that they had no objection to this question, saying that it was indeed necessary to check whether the information had been clearly conveyed

and the message understood, indicating that in the workplace it is regarded as acceptable for a supervisor to ask this question.

The beckoning gesture, however, was deemed rude under all circumstances and was therefore tested with the larger samples.

7. FINDINGS OF THE INTERVIEWS TESTED WITH LARGER SAMPLES

7.1 Beckoning gesture as means of attracting attention

Most frequently mentioned by blacks interviewed was behaviour in encounters in which initial contact was made, for example ways of attracting someone's attention, such as a loud whistle or calling *Hey, you!, Haai, jong! or Haai, jy!* and non verbal gestures to attract someone's attention. Most offensive of all was the non-verbal gesture of attracting someone's attention by pointing a finger and then beckoning with the hand. It transpired that this was the way dogs are called; to call people one was to make a large sweeping movement starting at the elbow.

This feature was tested by means of a DCT with the 50 employees in industrial Johannesburg (Ribbens 1994). The respondents were given a range of choices from which they had to select the least appropriate form of behaviour. The scene described was very close to their daily experiences on the work-floor. It was put to the respondents that, because of the noise on the work-floor the supervisor could not be heard when he had to call someone that he (the supervisor) had to use some form of non-verbal communication to call the subordinate urgently. Various beckoning gestures
were demonstrated and the respondents were asked which ones were not acceptable.

Expressions of disgust were witnessed on the faces of the people being interviewed when the hand movement commonly used by whites was demonstrated. Some said immediately that this form of calling was abhorrent to them. Others responded that no gesture was acceptable and that the supervisor was compelled to call the operator by name. It had to be explained again that in the imaginary situation described, the noise level on the work-floor ruled out any possibility of a name being heard and therefore some kind of gesture was the only option. Reluctantly, the whole arm movement was then declared to be acceptable.

The following beckoning gestures were considered inappropriate:
- Arm movement   2 %
- Hand movement   72 %
- None of the above   8 %
- Both arm and head   8 %
- Other   10 %

For "other" respondents said that whistling, shouting and pointing were not acceptable forms to use for calling someone.

It was also possible to include this feature on non-verbal behaviour in the questionnaire in the mining educational project (Wydeman and Ribbens 1993), and the exceptionally large sample of quantitative data obtained confirms verbal reports that this gesture commonly used by whites is regarded as offensive by most blacks. Of the 2 300 schedules handed out, 1 870 were returned, but only 1 048 (56 percent) responded to the question "How do you want to be called when you cannot hear because of noise?" (The sociolinguistic nature of the question perhaps explains why many of the respondents ignored this question as they were probably more interested in the educational implications of the research, but a thousand responses is nevertheless an exceptionally large sample in terms of sociolinguistic data collection.) Respondents had to indicate what hand or head gestures they found offensive as a way of attracting someone's attention when there was too much noise for verbal forms of address to be heard. More than two-fifths (44 percent of the 1 048 respondents) indicated that they found the pointing-and-beckoning movement offensive. Slightly more than a quarter (26,8 percent of the 1 048) respondents indicated that they found the calling movement in which the whole hand was used offensive. When these two figures are added, it totals 70,8 percent of respondents that are repelled by this form of calling someone, while only 15,1 percent indicated that neither the head movement nor the hand gestures were offensive.

The DCT of how to call someone was repeated with white respondents. The findings are startling: an overwhelming majority (94 percent) used the offensive gesture to show how they would call an imaginary person. Only 6 percent knew that it was offensive and that one had to use the whole arm movement manner when calling someone not within earshot.

7.2 African politeness markers

Various African customs of showing respect were examined with the 50 black employees at the industrial site and afterwards whites were asked about what they knew about these politeness forms. They were first given an opportunity to list politeness forms used by blacks, and after naming all the features they knew, a list of features not mentioned was read and they had to identify what they were familiar with, after all. Examined, amongst others, were supporting the right wrist with the left hand to show gratitude, clapping hands to show gratitude, sitting down without being offered a seat first, and whether they used *please* and *asseblief* when requesting something.

7.2.1   Supporting the right wrist with the left hand to show gratitude
This feature was included in the interview schedule to establish whether this form was in use in an industrial environment or whether this had fallen into disuse owing to acculturation. More than three-fifths confirmed that they did so as a gesture used to show respectful gratitude and 18 percent alleged that they had done so when they were younger. As 62 percent said that they supported their wrists, this feature was tested with whites. Only 17 percent mentioned this gesture without being prompted, but when it was read from the list, 40 percent admitted to having observed this at times.

7.2.2   The clapping of hands to show gratitude

Wood (1992: 272) claims that this form can be used instead of saying *thank you*. Again 62 percent maintained that they still did so, while 8 percent said only children were required to do this. Because so many regarded this as good manners, this feature was tested with whites and it turned out to be the one that most whites could recall. Almost two-thirds (65 percent) had identified it on their own and the other third (35 percent) readily admitted that they had observed this gesture. When we compare 65 percent of the speakers of one of the official languages mentioning this feature with 62 percent of the blacks claiming to use this form, this is evidently one feature that has not gone unnoticed, unlike the supporting of the wrist.

7.2.3   The "correct" hand to use when giving and receiving something

The use of the left hand when handing something to someone was reported as being insulting. A DCT was again used: the scene sketched was one in which the respondent was told that he had money and wanted to send someone to buy fish and chips, for instance. A second scene was sketched in which the person was told he had a gift he wanted to give to someone. He was then asked whether there were any rules that dictated which hand was the correct one when giving something to someone. The answer was unequivocal: all but one respondent said that they used the right hand. The only dissenter was a man in his forties admitting that he was left-handed. When questioned what the reaction was when this was done unwittingly by someone who was left-handed, it was said that allowances could be made, but the general feeling was that this was a very basic rule of good manners and that people should think before acting and should therefore not use their left hands. When asked whether they would regard it as offensive if they were handed anything by a white person, many respondents made allowances for what was regarded as deviant behaviour in their own culture, 34 percent claiming that they would not be insulted as "white people have a different culture". However, 42 percent added that apart from being insulted, they felt the gift was not heartfelt if it was handed with the "wrong" hand, while 14 percent added that they would not accept anything handed to them with the "wrong" hand. Some claimed that they would ask the person handing them the object why they were using the wrong hand, but all whites interviewed denied this ever happening.

Because of the high percentage of people who said that they would feel disappointed if the left hand were used, this feature was tested with whites. This feature came as a total surprise to speakers who have Afrikaans or English as a home language. In contrast to the responses of African speakers, not a single respondent admitted to knowing that it was regarded as impolite by members of the black communities to give something with the left hand. Most said they used their right hands simply because they were right-handed and those who are left-handed used their left hands. A few people admitted that they knew that the left hand was not acceptable in some countries in the Middle East, but expressed amazement when told how members of the black communities had responded to the question. Ten percent of those interviewed wondered whether this custom was not probably

more prevalent in the rural areas, but when told that the research was based on responses from people who had been working in industry in the Johannesburg area for many years, disbelief was once again expressed.

7.2.4   Sitting down without being offered a seat first

Respondents were asked to say whether they would wait to be seated when called to the foreman's office and when they visited a friend's house. Their answers reveal how they were aware of different customs: more than a quarter said they would sit immediately when visiting, while only 6 percent would do so at work, indicating that they had adapted their practices to suit the culture of whites at work.

7.2.5   The use of "please" and "asseblief" when requesting something

Respondents were asked to formulate a request in their home language in which they ask to borrow a pen, then were required to repeat this request in either English or Afrikaans. Interestingly polite forms (*please, sorry* and *askies*) were transferred into the home language of the workers. A Shangaan dictated to the interpreter to write *Sorry, lomba pen*. His attempt in English was, *Sorry, please can you borrow me your pen?* Another Shangaan dictated: *Askies, lompa ballpen*. A Pedi interviewee said, *Sorry, ke kgopela go shomisha pen ya goga* and *Sorry, ek vra pencil*.

From these responses it is evident that although these politeness forms do not exist in the home languages, the interviewees had transferred *sorry* and *askies* as an adoptive practice, thereby signalling politeness in the vernaculars as well.

8.   THE MOST GLARING EXAMPLE OF IGNORANCE RE-EXAMINED IN 2007

Since the initial research was undertaken in 1990s, the racial composition of middle management in the workforce has changed and many positions previously reserved for speakers of Afrikaans or English have been taken over by speakers of one of the African languages. To establish whether these societal changes have spilled over into an awareness of cultural practices of "the other", the most glaring instance of mutual ignorance identified was tested again in 2007.

In order to test whether any change regarding this offensive non-verbal behaviour has occurred, the offending beckoning gesture was tested with twenty whites who had been working in a multicultural place of work for at least five years. Whites interviewed were at first suspicious when asked to indicate how they would call someone who could be seen but not heard because of interfering noise. When it was explained that cultural differences can give rise offence and were therefore assured that it was not a trick question, one interviewee mentioned that she had learned in an intercultural course that blacks object to a smile instead of a form of greeting, but was not aware of the offending gesture. A member of the Permanent Force, who had served in Namibia, said that he had been instructed that it was rude to point with the fingers, but as for the rest, the offending gesture was used by all but three of the interviewees. The three pointed and gestured

with the whole hand instead of using the offensive one-finger beckoning gesture, but had not done so consciously. The findings of the initial research were therefore confirmed in that 85% of the whites used the offensive beckoning gesture.

When the gesture was demonstrated to black interviewees (their occupations ranging from waiters to university lecturers), most (80%) confirmed that the gesture was offensive, saying it was "rude in my culture". However, allowances were made for the context in which it was used: a waiter claimed he did not find the gesture offensive at all, as did the parking attendant at the shopping outlet for the School for the Blind in Pretoria. It is interesting that those who were more tolerant (the waiter and the parking attendant) worked in an environment where they were often called in this manner.

Home languages represented in the 2007 research study were Setswana, Xitsonga, Sepedi, isiNdebele and isiZulu. If we compare this with the research undertaken in Kokosi, Wedela and Khutsong (Wydeman & Ribbens 1993,) we see that speakers interviewed mostly spoke Sesotho, Setswana and isiXhosa, whereas in the industrial site near Johannnesburg (Ribbens 1994), Sepedi, Xhosas, Shangaan, Tsongas, Zulus and Vendas were interviewed. Across the board the speakers of African languages expressed unhappiness with the hand beckoning gesture.

9. DISCUSSION

We can conclude that in South African society miscommunication is likely to occur where one culture has developed a complex structure while the other has none. African cultures have a more complex status and respect structure than do modern urban industrial cultures. Furthermore, in African cultures many aspects of the status and respect structure are communicated non-verbally. Whites are therefore likely to misinterpret eye-contact conventions, conventions of who sits and who stands when a superior enters a room, and means of expressing gratitude or making requests.

Bechan and Visser (2005: 68) express the need for "a better understanding of cultural differences expressed through language" and recommend that South African corporate society institute cultural awareness training programmes "to assist in demystifying the perceived cultural idiosyncrasies". Since the initial research was undertaken, many training courses in conflict management, organisational behaviour and intercultural communication have indeed taken place in the industrial sector. A publication entitled *Body language – the South African way* (Jude, 1997) has seen the light, but the offending gesture is not documented with other differences that need to be noted (such as differences in eye contact, personal space, loudness, differences of pressure in handshakes, greeting first and sitting down). This omission underlines the need for on-going research and for sensitivity to differences in rules of speaking that could lead to misinterpretation of speaker intent and concomitant negative stereotyping.

In the latest Reconciliation Barometer released by the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, Hofmeyr (2006: 47) states that sufficient informal interaction between groups is one of the requirements for meaningful dialogue to take place in South Africa (the other being an environment of trust). Hofmeyr indicates that slightly more than half (56 percent) of South Africans indicated that they never communicate informally with people from other groups on an average day. Both

formal and informal contacts between races were most frequent in the higher income groups. Three-fifths of South Africans agreed with the statement that it is difficult to understand the customs and ways of South Africans from other racial groups. Hofmeyr (2006: 52) suggests that this "creates a breeding ground for negative stereotypes". These findings underline the need for a better understanding of awareness of differences in cultural behaviour, as this article attempts to do.

The literature on intercultural communication training (as well as the many courses available world-wide for people who have a multiracial workforce) acknowledges the need to adapt to the dynamics of working and living in a culture overwhelmingly different from one's own (Lustig & Koester, 1993; Randelsome, 2002; Armstrong *et al.*, 1988; Setliff & Taft, 1988; Bush-Bacelis, 1987; Crane 1986; and Baird & Stull, 1981).

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