Topic 3.2: Cultural Dimensions by Edward T. Hall

1. Historical Background

The work of the anthropologist Edward T. Hall is considered an important contribution to the field of intercultural research (Hart, 1999). Starting in the mid-20th century, Hall published a series of monographs which, over the years, developed into an expanded cultural framework. The first work by Hall that attracted public attention was 'The Silent Language' (1959). Based on Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Hall argues that individuals tend to be partially unaware of elements of their non-verbal communication behaviour. This first major publication by Hall refers to the three dimensions of time, space and context (Kittler, Rygl and Mackinnon, 2011, p. 65):

1. The dimension of time shows how people of different cultures orient towards time and how they perceive it (monochronic versus polychronic).

2. Space refers to different cultural frameworks for the definition and organization of space, whereby the particular frameworks are internalized in all individuals on an unconscious level.

3. Context describes the way meaning is constructed differently across cultures using different ratios of context and information.

Hall's three dimensions of culture are further elaborated in his later works. Since the three dimensions of time, space, and context are interrelated, Hall always refers to the other two dimensions when elaborating one of it in more detail. For example, Hall assumes that members of monochronic cultures are low context and need information, while members of polychronic cultures tend to be high context and pre-programmed to a larger extent (Kittler, Rygl and Mackinnon, 2011, p. 65).

In the following, the above-mentioned cultural dimensions of time, space and context are further elaborated and illustrated with examples.

2. Dimension of Time

A distinction is made between monochronic and polychronic time. Monochronic cultures are characterized by linear time sequences and successive events. Work and time schedules are taken seriously, and privacy is highly valued. Rather short-lived relationships between people are established. As one does not necessarily have enough information about the context or the other person, these cultures tend to be low context oriented. Germany, Switzerland and the Scandinavian cultures represent classic examples of monochronic time orientation (Hall and Hall, 1990, pp. 13-14). However, in polychronic cultures several things can happen at the same time. Members of these cultures are temporally flexible, but also easily distracted. They focus more on human relationships than on work, and these relationships often last a lifetime. Due to close connections and polychronic time sequences, there is more knowledge about the context, so communication is rather in high context. Latin American and Arabic cultures are examples for polychronic time (Hall and Hall, 1990, pp. 13-14). The following table illustrates differences between monochronic and polychronic cultures:

Monochronic Actions	Polychronic Actions
➢ Do one thing at a time	➢ Do many things at once
➢ Concentrate on the job	➢ Are highly distractible and subject to interactions
➢ Take time schedules seriously	➢ Consider time commitments an objective to be achieved if possible
➢ Are low context and need information	➢ Are high context and already have information
➢ Are committed to the job	➢ Are committed to people and human relationships
➢ Adhere strictly to plans	➢ Change plans often and easily
➢ Are concerned about not disturbing others and follow rules of privacy	➢ Are more concerned with those who are closely related than with privacy
➢ Show great respect for private property; rarely borrow or lend	➢ Borrow and lend things often and easily
➢ Emphasize promptness	➢ Base promptness on the relationship
➢ Are accustomed to short-term relationships	➢ Strong tendency to build lifetime relationships

Table 1: Differences between monochronic and polychronic actions
Source: adapted from Hall and Hall, 1990, p. 15

3. Dimension of Space

"Every living thing has a visible physical boundary - its skin - separating it from its external environment. This visible boundary is surrounded by a series of invisible boundaries that are more difficult to define but are just as real. These other boundaries begin with the individual's personal space and terminate with her or his 'territory'" (Hall and Hall, 1990, p. 10).

3.1 Territoriality

Territoriality, an innate characteristic whose roots go back hundreds of millions of years, is the act of claiming and defending a territory and represents a vital link in the chain of events necessary for survival. In humans, territoriality is highly developed and strongly influenced by culture. It is particularly well developed in Germans and Americans. Americans tend to define places that they call "mine" - for example, a cook's feeling for a kitchen or a child's view of his or her bedroom. In Germany, this sense of territoriality is often extended to all possessions. If, for example, a German's car is touched, the person might feel as if he or she had been personally touched (Hall and Hall, 1990, p. 10).

Space also conveys power. In the United States, for example, a private office in any location has more status than a desk in the open without walls. In both German and American business, the top floors are reserved for high-ranking managers. In contrast, important French executives occupy a position in the middle, surrounded by subordinates. The emphasis there is on the central position in an information network, where one stays informed and is able to control what is happening (Hall and Hall, 1990, pp. 10-11).

3.2 Personal Space

Personal space is another form of territory. Every person has an invisible space bubble around them, which expands and contracts depending on several things: the relationship with people nearby, the emotional state of the person, the cultural background and the performed activity. Only few people are allowed to enter this mobile piece of territory, and then only for short periods of time. Changes in the bubble caused by cramped conditions or crowding make people feel uncomfortable or aggressive. In Northern Europe these bubbles are quite large, and people keep their distance. In the south of France, Italy, Greece and Spain the bubbles are getting smaller and smaller. The distance perceived as intimate in the north, overlaps with the

normal conversational distance in the south, with the result that, for example, Central Europeans may 'get too close' to Germans, Scandinavians and British during conversation. In Northern Europe people usually do not touch others. Even the unintentional stroking of the sleeve of a coat can elicit an apology (Hall and Hall, 1990, p. 11).

4. Dimension of Low and High Context

"Context is the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event. The elements that combine to produce a given meaning - events and context - are in different proportions depending on the culture. The cultures of the world can be compared on a scale from high to low context" (Hall and Hall, 1990, p. 6).

In Hall's original concept, he describes High and Low Context cultures as the following: "A high context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low context (LC) communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code. Twins who have grown up together can and do communicate more economically (HC) than two lawyers in a courtroom during trial a (LC), a mathematician programming a computer, two politicians drafting legislation, two administrators writing regulation" (Hall, 1976, p. 101). The following figure illustrates the concept of low and high context:
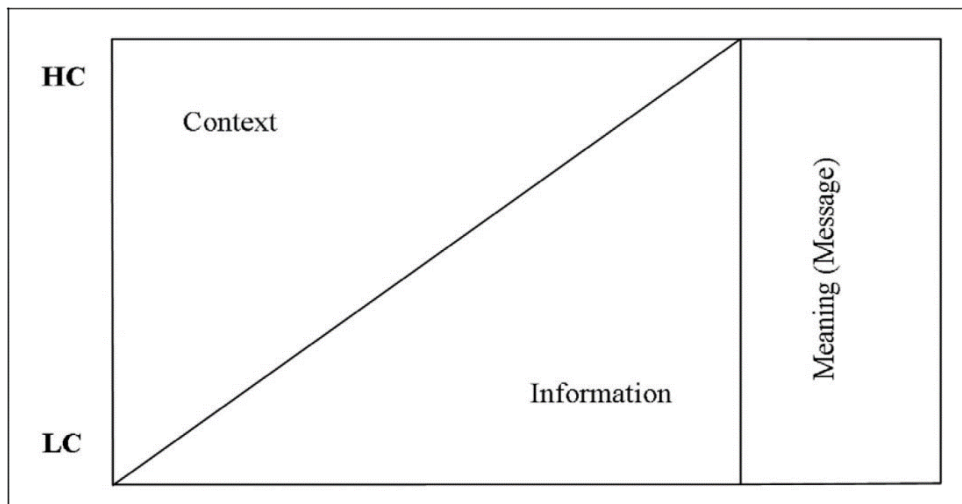

Figure 1: High and Low Context
Source: adapted from Hall, 1976, p. 102

High context communication describes a message that is not only transmitted by what is said, but also by facial expressions, gestures and other factors. Japanese, Arab and Mediterranean cultures, which have extensive information networks among family, friends, colleagues and customers and are involved in close personal relationships, are high context. Therefore, they do not need or expect much detailed background information for most transactions of daily life as they inform themselves about everything related to the people they care about in their lives (Hall and Hall, 1990, pp. 6-7).

In low context communication, however, the information is hidden directly in the coded message. Low context cultures include people from the US, Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia and other northern European countries. They separate their personal relationships, their work and other aspects of everyday life. Consequently, they need detailed background information every time they interact with others. Compared to people from Germany or the US, the French are much higher on the context scale (Hall and Hall, 1990, p. 7).

The following figure shows an example of a country classification concerning the cultural dimension of high and low context:
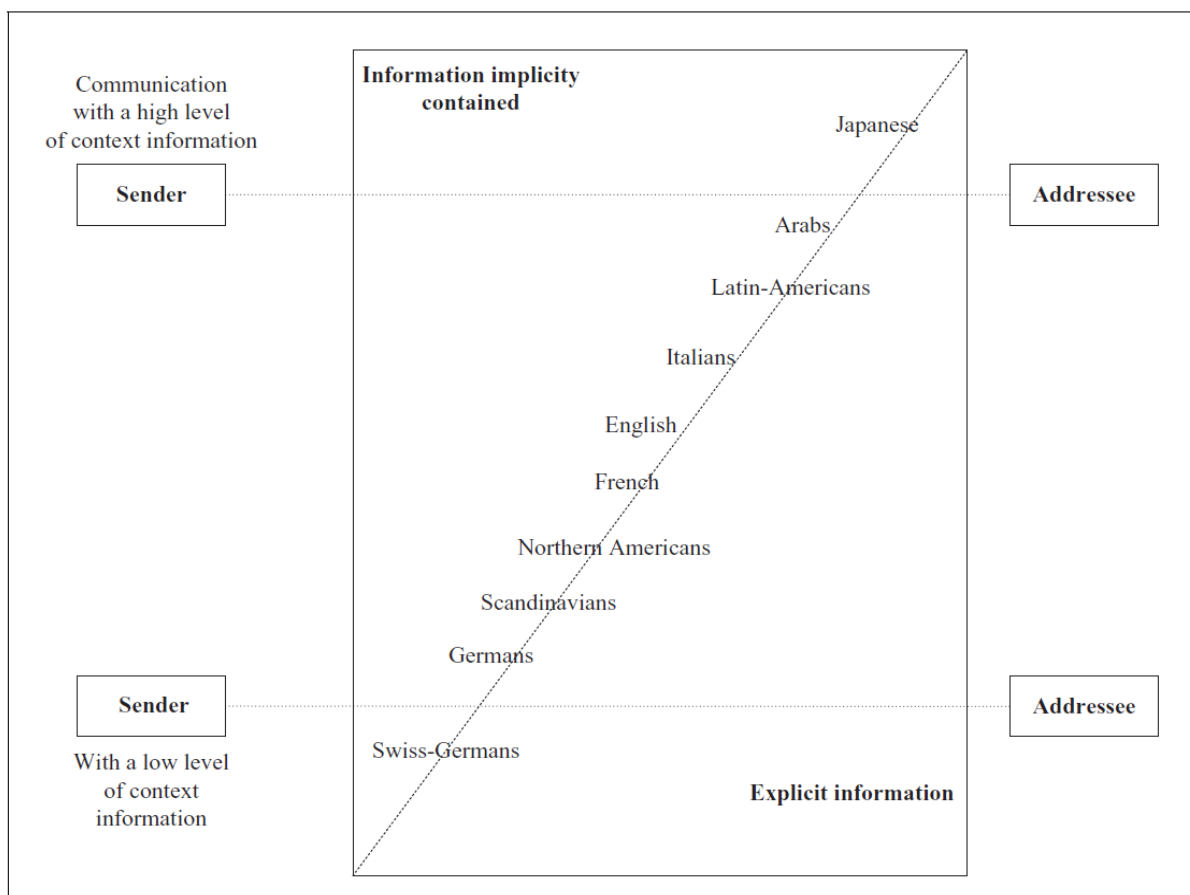

Figure 2: Country classification attached to the dimension of high and low context
Source: adapted from Rösch and Segler, 1987, p. 60

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