

THE IMPACT OF CULTURE ON FRENCH AND BRITISH BUSINESS PRESENTATIONS

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Introduction

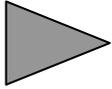
This article focuses on the differences between the French and the British business presentations and attempts to explain them in relation to the different characteristics of the national cultures of these countries.

After stating the reasons of my interest in this topic, I will define culture, point out its various levels and present French and British cultures by means of some of the most comprehensive anthropological models. I will then discuss the differences between the two types of presentation as far as role, audience, structure and tone are concerned. After a brief outline of some similarities between the two discourses, I will end with an overview of the main difficulties Romanian students face when learning to give presentations in English and French.

Background

As a teacher of both business French and English working with students who learn both languages, I have noticed the difficulties they face when adapting to the proper communicating style of either language. Such difficulties lead to interferences between the two styles, i.e. transposing the characteristics of one into a situation where the other would be appropriate.

I have therefore decided to attempt an explanation of the differences between French and British communication in similar situations. My research has led me to the conclusion that such differences are due to dissimilarities in the two national cultures, as well as between the students' culture and the foreign one.



Culture

In this article, I define culture as “the way in which a group of people solves problems” (Trompenaars, 1993: 7) based on patterns of thinking, feeling and acting, i.e. based on a “software of the mind” (Hofstede, 1994: 4).

As Hofstede points out (id.), people can deviate from their “mental programs”. However, the norm ruling in a community will bear the traces of the cultural software.

According to Trompenaars, there are various levels of culture:

- a. The highest level is **national** culture, prevailing in the national community.
- b. **Corporate** or organizational culture is “the way in which attitudes are expressed within a specific organization (Trompenaars, 1993: 7).
- c. Finally, “people within certain functions will tend to share certain **professional** and ethical orientations” (id.).

Each act of business communication falls under the influence of all these three levels of culture: national culture brings about the differences in style within the same situation, while professional culture accounts for the similarities. Corporate culture, on the other hand, is responsible for the personal touch every (or almost every) organization will bring when dealing with similar cases.

This article is not concerned with corporate culture, as it aims at finding ways to give students a general background which will enable them to communicate effectively with various French and British organizations. As similarities in communicating styles will only briefly be dealt with, mentions of professional culture will be scarce. My main concern will be with national culture.

The models I have summoned so as to explain national cultures are those of Fons Trompenaars, Gerd Hofstede and John Mole.

The table below presents the main features of Britain and France as described in the above models. As I intend to review the difficulties faced by our students when learning presentations, I have added a column outlining the Romanian culture. Romania was not included in Hofstede's and Mole's models and was scarcely referred to in Trompenaars'. I had to turn, therefore, to other sources for my description, namely:

- the works of Professor E. Burduş (2001) for universalism and particularism and Professor A. Istocescu (2001) for masculine/feminine, power distance and uncertainty avoidance;
- my own research for the remaining features.

Features	United Kingdom	France	Romania
1.Universalism/Particularism	Universalist	Particularist	Particularist
2.Collectivism/Individualism	Individualist	Individualist	Individualist
3.Neutral/Affective	Neutral	Affective	Affective
4.Achieved/Ascribed status	Achieved	Ascribed	Ascribed
5.Synchronic/Sequential	Sequential	Synchronic	Synchronic
6.Power distance	Small	Large	Large/Small *
7.Masculine/Feminine	Masculine	Feminine	Masculine
8.Uncertainty Avoidance	Weak	Strong	Strong/Weak *
9.Individualistic/Group Management	Group	Individualistic	Individualistic

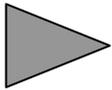
* These two features are questionable, as Romania, like the other Eastern European countries, exhibits a gap between the older generation (large power distance and strong uncertainty avoidance) and the younger one (small power distance and weak uncertainty avoidance). Cultural changes do reverberate in communication styles. However, this is a gradual process which may sometimes take longer than the change itself so that traces of both systems coexist in people's discourse. I have therefore chosen to include both features in the outline.

As may be noticed, two important features have been omitted from the table: diffuse/specific and organic/systemic organisation. The first feature is part of Trompenaars' model, but the author himself fails to provide a definite description of UK and France from this point of view. In so far as this feature is similar to Edward T. Hall's high and low context (1973; 1979), certain authors (i.e. C. Usunier, 1992: 1140) include both France and Britain in the same category which I

take the liberty of calling “middle context” as it is lower than Scandinavia, Germany and the USA and higher than the Middle East and Japan.

As to organization, Mole’s map (2001: 257) places both countries at equal distances between the organic and the systemic ends.

Since neither of these features is clearly defined and neither appears to show great differences between the cultures of the countries of this study, I have elected to exclude them from the table.



Differences

In this section, I will point out the main differences between the British and the French presentations and account for them by the differences between the two cultures as shown in the table above.

➤ **The role and the audience of presentations**

Presentations play a central role in British business communication. The British give many presentations both as parts of seminars and conferences and as main events of various meetings. It is not unusual to gather a smaller or larger number of people just to have them witness a presentation.

The favoured audience for business presentations consists either of potential customers or of a specified group of employees, e.g. the sales force, managers and/or representatives of various branches and subsidiaries, staff members of a specific company, awaiting to find more about a specific subject from an expert speaker.

This preference for communication through presentations can be explained by the universalist and group management features of the British culture, as well as by their efficient use of time.

The rule in business is indeed to reach as many people as possible in the shortest period of time. On the other hand, as the group is involved in decision-making, convincing the group to make a favourable decision is the best way of achieving your goal. A presentation is in this respect the most appropriate means: it reaches the group instantly and it perfectly applies the golden rule of business.

France is, on the contrary, a particularist country, with individualistic management and strong hierarchy. Hence, the French people's preference for reports as the main means of business communication: the report is addressed to the boss, as the sole decision-maker, can be preserved as proof of the decision background or of the author's zeal. A presentation, on the other hand, is not a suitable way for establishing a personal relationship, as particularist societies require.

The French will consequently give few presentations and those they give will be delivered at the beginning of a board meeting (Bojin and Dunand, 1993: 193) and aim at starting and orienting discussions towards the end expected by the speaker.

➤ **The introduction to the presentation**

The introduction to a presentation made by the British is dominated by their weak uncertainty avoidance. If the British do not fear uncertainty is because they have developed means of controlling it. Every business communication situation they are involved in contains three parts: the introduction in which they anticipate the unknown, the content in which they deal with it step by step and the ending in which they summarise the now tamed and obviously less unknown topic. Business meetings and negotiation also follow this pattern, as they both start with an introduction and possibly an agreement on the agenda.

The introduction to the presentation will also include an overview of the "agenda". The speaker starts by announcing the topic and by listing the parts of his/her presentation, everything very clearly sequenced by means of specific signaling/linking devices (Firstly...secondly...lastly; first of all...then...finally; to start with...later...to finish up...).

Being a masculine culture, the British will stick to the rational side of the presentation, considering that its main function is to provide the audience with all information necessary for a proper understanding and assessment of the matter discussed.

The French, on the other hand, display large uncertainty avoidance. Their style does not include means of controlling the unknown. A French speaker will start by introducing the topic but instead of sequencing his/her main points, he/she will continue by an overview of the audience's needs, as well as the results they will achieve by attending the presentation. The speaker will thus trespass on unknown

private land. This certainly attempts at establishing a relationship with the audience (particularist society), at considering their needs (feminine culture) and at enlisting their support by an appeal to their feelings (affective culture), but does in no way diminish uncertainty. Mention should be made of the fact that, originating from a neutral culture, the British speaker will avoid dealing with feelings.

Each speaker may introduce him/herself at the beginning of the presentation. However, the British speaker will only state his/her name and company, as his/her status is achieved and undeniable, while the French speaker, with ascribed status, may feel he/she needs to reinforce his/her position and therefore spend some time presenting his/her qualifications and importance in the company's hierarchy.

➤ **The structure of the presentation**

As members of a sequential culture, the British will carefully structure their presentation in well defined sections. They will start by introducing the first topic, letting their audience know that they are doing so (I'll start by..., I'd like to begin by...), they will deal with it, will mark the end of it (That's all I have to say about..., So much for...), summarise it (I've told you about..., We've looked at...) and will signal the beginning of the next topic (Let me turn now to..., Let's move on to..., Let's look now at...). There is no rule concerning the order in which topics are dealt with other than clarity.

The British will bring arguments in support of their point of view, their arguments being mostly factual, based on figures, examples and explanations.

The French are a synchronic culture. At the same time, they are very logical and trained since childhood to sustain a perfectly self-contained argumentation. Their presentations are meant to demonstrate and persuade.

They will organize their topics, if possible no more than three, so as to be properly followed and understood by the audience. The topics will be dealt with in a logical order with the most important at the very beginning if the audience is already persuaded or at the end if the audience needs convincing. Each point will logically lead to the following one. Each point will be supported with arguments. The first argument will be irrefutable or else it can ruin the whole demonstration, the last one will be the strongest so as to lead to an obvious conclusion. As a whole,

arguments will be more logical than practical and will apply more to reason than to the common sense observation of facts.

As Bojin and Dunard put it “la structure constitue l’un des facteurs les plus importants de la réussite de l’exposé. Elle doit être tellement simple, logique et naturelle aux yeux des auditeurs, qu’il ne leur semble pas possible qu’il puisse en exister une autre.” (1993: 203), *logical* being the key word here.

Such being the case, the French do not need to mark the end of one topic or to lead the audience into the following one. They will use linking words not to separate the parts of their presentation, but to disclose the structure of their argumentation: sequencing devices to signal the order of arguments similar in form but different in role from the English ones (Premièrement... deuxièmement...dernièrement; D’abord...ensuite...enfin; En premier lieu... en second lieu... en dernier lieu), linguistic devices showing the logical connections between arguments which are much more numerous and much more used in French than in English or Romanian (to express cause, result, opposition, addition, etc.)

The structure of their presentation will not be disclosed from the start, but made known gradually so as to create suspense.

Summarising, which is compulsory in English, is only recommended in French with a view to reminding the audience about the main points of the argumentation, but is by no means a “must”.

➤ **The tone of the presentation**

The tone of the presentation is dictated by power distance and neutral/emotional features.

The British presentation should be useful and entertaining. “Every effective presentation mixes useful, practical information with entertainment.” (Dulek and Fielden, 1990: 380). The latter appears in anecdotes which “should be lighthearted and interesting, but more importantly, [...] used to reinforce, clarify, or support a point the speaker is making.” (id: 381). Moreover, the audience should be involved in the discussion, they should ask and be asked questions or, if they are staff members, even be given exercises to do. This is meant to diminish the distance

between the speaker, whose position in space is designed to show authority, and the audience.

The emotional side of the presentation is represented, on the one hand, by the speaker's nervousness and, on the other hand, by the feelings he/she is trying to convey. Nervousness should be controlled and the best way to do so is to be very well prepared and acquainted with the topic. The feeling to convey, especially in business presentations which are designed to persuade, is enthusiasm and the speaker is instructed to show it. According to the topic, he may also have a choice between:

- a forceful style suggesting confidence and authority;
- a passive style, relaxed and non-demanding, appropriate to negative situations;
- a personal style, conversational and relying on personal anecdotes and stories;
- an impersonal style, which indicates that the speaker is completely detached from the topic;
- a colourful style, relying on metaphors, which, as Dulek and Fielden point out "can be entertaining at times" (1990: 390);
- a colourless style, which leads to a dry, straight-to-the-point kind of presentation.

As the British are not used to expressing their emotions, such styles are learned and practised, with the casual, personal one prevailing in business.

The French speaker will also seek questions and, above all, will try to generate a debate with and among the members of the audience. However, contrary to the British, he/she will not welcome interruptions, which challenge his/her authority, but attempt to provoke a debate at the end of the presentation.

As an emotional culture, the French do not go as far as denying the insertion of feelings into their business communication. "Les sentiments vivent en vous et les gens veulent comprendre ce que vous expliquez, et pour le comprendre ils devront vivre vos connaissances de la même manière que vous, par les sentiments." (Boucher and Doyon, 1990: 59). So, instead of hiding their feelings or controlling them, as the British dominate their nervousness, the French will turn them into another weapon in their attempt to control and persuade the audience, using the energy they stir as an argument.

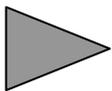
➤ **Ending a presentation**

The ending of a British presentation is a summary of the key points made.

David Cotton has described the golden rule of a good presentation: “tell your audience what you’re going to say, say it, then tell the audience what you’ve said.” (1996: 38). This successfully closes the last sequence, dissipates uncertainty and reassures the audience.

This style appears dull and repetitive to the French. Their ending will summarise the conclusions they have reached about each topic, but will include a reformulation of the most important point of the presentation, i.e. the one they have tried to persuade the audience about, and will introduce the debate, thus reminding the audience what is expected of them (Bojin and Dunard, 1993: 213). It may also underline the information the audience has acquired during the presentation and the way in which this information fulfils the audience’s needs.

The French speakers are also recommended to conclude their speech by a “shocking remark” (énoncé choc) (id: 54) which appeals to the emotional side of the audience.



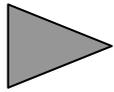
Similarities in French and British presentations

Having stressed the main differences between the French and the British presentation and attempted to explain them by the differences in the national cultures, I will now briefly outline the similarities between these two communicating styles which are due to speakers’ sharing the same professional culture.

Similarities appear mostly in the way speakers prepare their speeches (objective, content, parts, arguments), rehearse their presentations paying attention to both verbal and non-verbal language, collect information about their audience, inspect the venue of the presentation (room, equipment, etc) and prepare visual aids.

Visual aids are indeed an essential auxiliary to presentations. In both countries, they consist of flipcharts, transparencies, slides, films and videos, as well as more and more of power point. It should be pointed out, however, that the British insist on preparing handouts, meant to help the audience remember the key points of the

presentation, whereas the French favour note-taking and are less keen on handouts. So, in Britain, the speaker tries to accommodate the audience, while in France it is incumbent on the audience to accommodate the speaker. This habit is a reflection of power distance.



Teaching presentations

The method used for teaching presentations is the usual one used for teaching business communication in a foreign language: exposure to authentic or simulated samples of presentations, teacher assisted and controlled examination of the samples, exercises on the main parts of the presentation and last, but by no means least, presentations given by the students on a topic preferably of their own choice, with their colleagues playing the part of the audience. Each presentation is followed by a class discussion in which the speaker's performance is examined and assessed.

Time devoted in the curriculum to presentation teaching depends on the frequency and importance this form of communication has in the respective business environment, that is a longer time in the English curriculum and a shorter time in the French one.

In both cases the main difficulties occur in the areas where the students' and the foreign cultures most differ.

There are two main differences between the French and the Romanian cultures: the former is feminine and the latter masculine, the former emphasizes logics much more than the latter. The masculinity of their culture makes Romanians forget to mention their audience's needs in the introduction to the presentation. This is not an important drawback as speaking about needs is one of the options the speaker has for his/her introduction. The real difficulty for Romanian students is building a strong logical French-like argumentation, as this skill is not sufficiently practised in school. From a language point of view, the difficulty lies in the proper use of linking devices as these are much more numerous and widely used in French than in Romanian. The French curriculum is therefore designed so as to provide extensive training in these areas: one term for the study of linking devices and

logical connections in the discourse, another term for the study of oral argumentation and a third one dedicated to written argumentation.

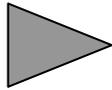
As the table on page 134 shows, British and Romanian cultures stand farther apart, that is they differ in the following features: universalism/particularism, neutral/affective, achieved/ascribed status, sequential/synchronic and group/individual management.

As a result of the particularist nature of their culture combined with individual management, the French prefer reports to presentations and give presentations mostly for the benefit of the board of directors. The Romanians, on the other hand, especially those working for North-American and British companies, find themselves in the position of giving more and more presentations, this form of communication starting to creep its way into the Romanian business culture. Hence, the need for the students to become acquainted with this particular type of professional communication and develop the necessary skills to do it successfully. The influence of ascribed status can mostly be seen in the content of the introduction to a French presentation. This is not likely to cause problems as content is more easily learned than form. Also, Romania is an affective culture and students are likely to show their feelings more than a British person would in a similar situation. In the case of a presentation, their feelings can however be taken for enthusiasm which, as we have seen, is recommended in British-style presentations.

In my experience, the main problem faced by students in business communication is learning and applying the appropriate English structure in the communicative act. Romania is a diffuse synchronic culture, more diffuse than France, while Britain is a highly sequential one. The English structure of discourse appears as an unnecessary repetition to a Romanian speaker, and strict sequencing tends to be forgotten when giving presentations.

The only possible remedy is stronger emphasis placed on sequential structure when teaching presentations, as well as on assessing those given by the students. Awareness of the specific English structure is also raised by pointing it out in all other situations of communication, such as meetings and business negotiation. I have found that by having the students simulate various situations of business communication and paying special attention to structure when discussing their

performance is likely to limit, if not completely remove, this error. As I have stated, our culture is a kind of “software” which is deeply embedded in our minds and deleting it appears to be a painful and virtually impossible process.



Conclusion

In this article, I have pointed out that presentation-giving, like any other form of business communication, is highly influenced by the speaker’s culture, the national level of which being responsible for the differences between communicating styles, and the professional one for their similarities. Differences between presentations in French and English have been described and explained by the specific features of the respective cultures.

I have also tried to prove that interferences between the British, French and Romanian communicating styles occur mostly in connection with features where these cultures differ and have suggested some means of dealing with them.

This article is part of a series of studies concerned with the examination of the various situations of business communication our students are taught at university and will encounter in their future career. Its purpose, like that of the whole series, is to bring some clarifications as to the origin of mistakes and interferences, thus hoping to diminish, if not completely remove, them.



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