



ISBN: 1934-4244

France and Germany: Communicative Metamorphosis

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Part A:

Europe is undergoing a cultural metamorphosis, a fact that does not cause many to become flabbergasted. The increasing influx of immigration in France, resulting in more than 7 percent of the populace comprising Muslims, conjured images of a cultural metamorphosis¹. Furthermore, the relatively shorter workweek (35 hours) may have portrayed the people as lackadaisical and hedonistic. The growing prominence of Jean-Marie Le Pen, a radical and nationalistic politician, ushered preoccupations about the possibly xenophobic treatment of tourists. And of course, there is the corrupted, yet classic, conception of Parisians as an arrogant, stubborn, and nationalistic people who blatantly refuse to speak to foreigners in French. Because of the salient importance that formality and respect hold in the French culture, it would be very easy to erroneously dismiss the people as overly hierarchical and rigid. Along with this “cultural metamorphosis” are facets of business that have been radically altered.

Germany’s preconceptions were more mechanical and visceral. Frequently decorated as a rather monochronic people, Germans would be perceived as determined to perform a task to the best of their ability; that is, instead of performing two or more actions simultaneously, they would focus on one so as to optimize the quality of it. Images encompassing luxurious cars and that precise, efficient engineering are ubiquitous, accentuating the perception of Germans as an orderly and efficient people. Unfortunately, negative connotations shower Germans as cold, calculated, and distant – a preconception that is derived from their idiosyncratic, communicative style and their history. To foreigners, this idiosyncratic style of communication could be interpreted as curt and calculated². The findings, preconceptions, visits, and pertinent information

¹ "Contacts: Langue Et Culture Françaises, 8th Edition." *Contacts: Langue Et Culture Françaises, 8th Edition, 0547172842*. Web. 28 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.coursesmart.com/contacts-langue-et-culture-fran-aises-8th/valette-valette/dp/0547172842>>.

² Ferraro, Gary. "The Cultural Dimension of International Business, Sixth Edition." , 9780205645305. Web. 30 Mar. 2012. <<http://www.coursesmart.com/the-cultural-dimension-of-international-business/gary-p-ferraro/dp/9780205645305>>.

will be assimilated into two sections, one comprising each city. The studies of anthropological characteristics and nuances is absolutely imperative for a businessperson to conduct himself or herself appropriately in this fluctuating environment. During the trajectory of this study, many approaches will be delineated for proper communication in the mentioned countries. These approaches will be based on empirical evidence through the visits and interaction with the populace. Part B focuses on the methodologies to be employed by MNEs (multinational enterprises) in the European milieu.

Berlin:

The opportunity to visit students at BEST-Sabel University in Berlin provided an alarming insight into the human capital that the curriculum attempts to cultivate. The students present were pursuing a degree in Business Travel Management & Event Management; they were already fluent in the English language, possessing a distinct advantage over their American counterparts with this innate bilingualism. To illustrate the extent of their fluency in this idiom, a group of German students presented the proper protocol of handling customer complaints in tourism. Yet elucidation on German camaraderie and universities did not end there. Upon talking to the students after the presentation had adjourned, a peculiar fact germane to social dynamics came into mind: the group of students, comprising circa five people, was living together; in fact, some of these students had known each other since early infancy. This fact allowed them to incorporate a synergy that was quite remarkable in their presentation. Pertaining to the frank and direct communication that characterized German culture, they expounded that indirect talk depicts an individual as wasting time and possessing ulterior motives. Earnestness was to be strived for, not the superficial and sometimes insincere formalities that characterize other cultures' communication. The explanation reinforced the notion of the direct style of communication prevalent in Germany. After devising strategies and conducting empirical studies, it is recommended that a businessperson refrain from touching subjects that deviate from the topic at hand, such as family, sports, and other mediums.

The visit to the headquarters of Axel Springer, one of the leaders in German media, illustrated the dramatic effects of brand diversification and consequent saturation of the market. The company possesses a wide variety of brands, such as Bild, Zanox, the German edition of Rolling Stone, Digital Window, etc³. The plethora of brands may sometimes lead to saturation of the market, with concerns being raised about the possible cannibalization of the firm's products. Such a tactic was justified, however, in attempting to steal the sales of a specific brand before a competitor arrived at such a premise. The multinational enterprise veritably displayed the bureaucratic transformation that illustrates today's corporations: corporate social responsibility. Florian Nehm, the company's CSO (corporate sustainability officer), described the company's emphasis on the use of post-consumer recyclables, the preferable alternative to post-manufacturer recyclables.⁴ He ascertained Axel Springer's broader view of corporate responsibility in its plan, breaking it down into three steps: listening to expectations, steering the adjustment process, and articulating goals, setbacks, and expectations. Emphasizing what had already been witnessed at BEST-Sabel University, Mr. Nehm suggested that the presentation could be in Spanish in that very language to the predominantly Hispanic group.

A cultural finding that was embedded in the language itself was formality. In the German language, there are two ways of addressing a person ("you"): *Sie* and *Du*. What is the difference? Whereas the former is used for politeness, respect, and formality, the latter is utilized in contingencies characterized by intimacy, friendship, and familiarity⁵. Aside from the golden

³ "Axel Springer and PubliGroupe Acquire AOL-subsiary Buy.at." *Axel Springer AG*. Web. 30 Mar. 2012. <http://www.axelspringer.de/en/presse/Axel-Springer-and-PubliGroupe-acquire-AOL-subsiary-Buy.at_1212570.html>.

⁴ Mintzer, Richard. *101 Ways to Turn Your Business Green: The Business Guide to Eco-Friendly Profits*. [Irvine, CA]: Entrepreneur, 2008. Print.

⁵ "German You - Du, Ihr, & Sie." *About.com German Language*. Web. 31 Mar. 2012. <<http://german.about.com/od/grammar/a/Germanyou.htm>>.

leaves that showered the brick-laden sidewalks of Berlin, the hybrid of a direct form of communication with formality seems idiosyncratic. It is imperative that businesspeople address their German counterparts with *Herr* (Mister) or *Frau* (Miss/Mrs.), instead of employing the first name; such a strategy should complement the aforementioned statute of direct communication. In other words, the optimal policy for conducting business in Germany should encompass formality with little, if any, talk that is not germane to trade. Whether such customs shift with the increasing influx of immigrants remains to be seen, but this formality was pervasive in the country's culture. Such an approach is augmented by a low-touch culture (Ferraro 99). Pertaining to proxemics, the study of the ramifications of personal space, an entrepreneur must be cognizant that he or she must keep at least three feet of separation with the counterpart.

Upon visiting the U.S. Embassy, a new role seemed to weave itself into the standard procedures. The U.S. Embassy was now providing import/export data to companies wishing to enter the German sovereignty and to German companies delving into the American markets. This service has been partitioned into its own department, the U.S. Commercial Service. The U.S. Commercial Service is the "trade promotion arm" of the Department of Commerce's International Trade Administration⁶. Companies wishing to establish joint ventures or engage in foreign direct investment in Germany possess a particular advantage in utilizing the U.S. Commercial Service as a means of conducting SWOT analysis. Aside from the obvious role as a provider and purveyor of information, this branch is symptomatic of the falling barriers of communication, as information becomes more accessible and transparent. This characteristic was reflected in its personnel; Mathias Köckeritz, commercial specialist, explained the diversity inherent in the staff itself. One of the interns, a young lady of German birth, was a U.S. citizen finishing her tenure in the company. By assimilating American and German culture in its staff, the branch establishes the marriage of local responsiveness and efficiency as its bailiwick.

The cultural visit was the darkest and most salient, culminating to a visit to Sachsenhausen, a concentration camp located in the outskirts of Berlin. One of the main sources

⁶ "U.S. Commercial Service." *International Trade Administration*. Web. 31 Mar. 2012. <<http://trade.gov/cs/>>.

of taboo for any German pertains to World War II (Ferraro 88). The unusual frost within the gas chambers, lined with the coldest of ceramics and located below the dissecting room, echoed harrowing images through the concrete arches that supported the infrastructure. The metallic engraving that adorned the entrance to this bastion illuminated the entire philosophy behind this dark piece of history: *Arbeit Macht Frei* (“Work makes one free”). Contemporary Germany, a land welcoming of immigrants and new ideas, stands in stark contrast to this totalitarian and visceral memory. The diffusion of responsibility that engendered such atrocities is not mutually exclusive to a specific country, and the progress that has been exhibited by Germany to ameliorate its image and history have been nothing short of remarkable⁷. The indelibility of this massacre is so vividly branded in the minds of Germans that – according to Patrick Keefe, the tour guide – it is considered distasteful to name one’s child Adolf. A successful protocol for business dealings requires that the individual be aware of the country’s history and its externalities, thereby mitigating the impact of ethnocentrism - the primary peril to foreign communication.

Paris:

Being stationed in *Le Dixième Arrondissement* (tenth district), the group was exposed to the melting pot of ethnicities and religions that have characterized latter-day Paris. This district details the growing and eventual integration of the French populace. This conglomeration of ethnicities and religions is peculiar due to its effects on the traditional communicative style of the French.

At the International Chamber of Commerce, one of the few organizations that “sets rules” and acts in an advisory capacity to the United Nations, the challenge of coordinating global, legal compliance was touched upon. Founded in 1919 and headquartered in Paris, this organization possesses a bit of a misnomer; the main purpose behind this institution is ADR, alternative

⁷ Shaw, William H., and Vincent E. Barry. *Moral Issues in Business*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2010. 23. Print.

dispute resolution. What this legal jargon implies is the intentional avoidance of litigation through the protocols of mediation and arbitration. The gravitas of the ICC and its ecumenical importance were hinted at a case that was mentioned briefly, amassing approximately \$600 million. François-Gabriel Ceyrac, the Director of National Committees, partitioned the fees demanded to cover the costs of the parties, arbitrators, and administrative expenses. Of paramount importance was the capacity that MNEs must wield to survive in this new and volatile environment: the ability to coordinate operations in various milieus to streamline efficiency and avoid falling prey to the self-reference criterion⁸. One of the most incredible examples pertained to the logistics department: Mr. Ceyrac spoke about finding an arbitrator that had to be “a non-native Finnish speaker, engaged in a certain type of construction that was not industry standard.” Such a request may have seemed downright asinine and arduous to some, yet the commitment to legal impartiality promoted by the International Chamber of Commerce made it an absolute necessity. Although the enforcement may be lacking in many areas of the world, particularly when standards clash against rule-of-man countries, the ICC also delved into regulations of intellectual property rights⁹. The most distinct initiative promulgated by the nonprofit organization involves the BASCAP, Business Action to Stop Counterfeiting and Piracy. Whether this measure becomes accepted and standardized remains to be seen; the aforementioned rule-of-man countries, in which the *rule* and the *ruler* are synonymous, pose a challenge to establishing such an initiative. This *proactive* characteristic that is endemic in French communication requires a businessperson to be assertive and to depart from timidity, since such a characteristic may be deemed as weak in such a country; this communicative style, however, appears to be in flux due to the growing diversity of the populace.

⁸ Cateora, Philip R., Mary C. Gilly, and John L. Graham. *International Marketing*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill/Irwin, 2011. Print.

⁹ Daniels, John D., Lee H. Radebaugh, and Daniel P. Sullivan. *International Business: Environments and Operations*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009. Print.

An excursion in Paris would not necessarily be complete without a venture to the magnificent Versailles into the city's outskirts. Consuming approximately 35 percent of the country's GNP to maintain in its heyday, the palace is an exquisite amalgamation of various distinct styles in 17th century vigor and a testament to the monarchy that characterized this period. Witnessing the elegant Hall of Mirrors, complete with natural lighting emanating from the windows provided by the elegant gardens, enriched the appreciation toward this now-defunct monarchical system. The pride of the French culture permeated every aspect of the facility, from the duplicated *Coronation of Napoleon* by Jacques-Louis David to the busts of Louis XIV. Whenever an individual chooses to conduct business in the French sovereignty, he or she must be meticulous enough not to confuse French pride for its culture with arrogance or narcissism. Through the use of *physical anthropology* (Ferraro 8), the group was able to debase a widely held view of the French as an arrogant people; such a belief was derived from ethnocentrism, "the tendency for people to evaluate a foreigner's behavior by their standards" (Ferraro 35). The culture manifested in Versailles was of the utmost importance in enlightening about a very proud and sophisticated people. Very much like Germany, France collocates a significant amount of weight in formality and hierarchical position. Businesspersons must be aware of using the appropriate titles (*monsieur* for gentlemen; *mademoiselle* or *madame* for women) when addressing their counterparts, even verbally acknowledging their positions and the importance that these hold in the organization. An enormous caveat must be issued: Foreigners must not obfuscate such an exchange with narcissism or arrogance, since this error is the Achilles' heel of failed business dealings in France.

What could possibly lead people to indoctrinate themselves with such fallacies? At Grant Thornton, one of the top accounting firms in all of France, the answer was granted: When tourists and the like venture to France, the people who live there expect them to possess at least a modicum of knowledge about the intricacies of the country. This organization was more than apt to divulge this working to us; because of its operations in 108 countries and the plethora of specific laws governing accounting and taxation in each, the firm effectively pursues a multidomestic strategy¹⁰. A multidomestic strategy is one that emphasizes local responsiveness.

¹⁰ Bartlett, Christopher A., and Paul W. Beamish. *Transnational Management: Text, Cases, and Readings in Cross-border Management*. New York: McGraw-Hill/Irwin, 2011. Print.

Despite the autonomy of each unit that is inherent in such a strategy, the company does not compromise on efficiency by utilizing its Paris subsidiary as the basis of the “axis”; such a geographic strategy allows it to form a liaison between the subsidiaries through its Parisian division. Mr. Hervé Gohin, International Practice Director, explained the change in strategy the company took after the global credit crisis of 2007-2009.¹¹ The systemic risk - risk that cannot be diversified or mitigated – that was prevalent at the crisis’ core evidenced the externalities of globalization. The preconception that each country is *completely* autonomous and independent of other countries’ influences and practices was debunked swiftly and efficiently. Globalization, while increasing accessibility, exposes participants and nonparticipants alike to the opaque and darker effects of interdependence. Although French business is individualistic and adapted its internal controls following the credit crisis, it refrained from the individualistic “extreme” of the American culture, which is perceived to foster negative consequences (Ferraro 151). The preconception that the French are collectivistic is erroneous and derived from a relativistic, American perspective.

Contrasting the buildings and facilities in Berlin, the Parisian architecture paid homage to the Gothic and earlier epochs. Upon inquiry about Berlin’s “contemporary” style, people attributed it to the reconstruction of the capital after World War II. Paris, however, displays a hodgepodge of eras within its buildings and parks. *Les Jardins de Trocadéro* (The Gardens of Trocadéro) encompasses a rectangular body of water, known as the Fountain of Warsaw, that cuts the park in two. When our group asked about the layout of the city and for general information near this area, we had to be aware of the formality embedded in the French language. Very much like the German language, there are two words for “you”: *tu* and *vous*. Due to this recurring linguistic pattern that mirrored the cultural values extolling formality and status, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis came into play (Ferraro 62). This idea states that language is not just a vehicle for rudimentary communication but the “shaper” of ideas. The intrinsic nature of the idiom, therefore, is the cornerstone of communication. France’s style differed remarkably from the terse,

¹¹ Rose, Peter S., and Sylvia Conway Hudgins. *Bank Management & Financial Services*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2010. Print.

German style due to its roots as a Romance language. The edifices around Paris exuded such a culture, from the elegance of the shopping district in Châtelet to the natural splendor of the aforementioned Trocadéro. A businessperson is afforded some leniency in terms of topic deviation; that is, the nature of the language may provide an individual with a chance to approach a business deal from a seemingly unrelated topic.

Although the variables of Hofstede that were used to prescribe characteristics to these cultures were valid in certain facets, the influx of immigrants in Paris may serve to alter these dimensions. Judging from the empirical evidence obtained by interacting with the general populace, Paris is currently undergoing a transformation in values and is in a state of flux. Because cultural borrowing is a two-way process, vestiges of French culture will gradually be influenced by, and influence, the increasingly diverse populace (Ferraro 34).

Part B:

The stringent curriculum of the German students at BEST-Sabel University accentuated the need to master different idioms. For example, the students were required to take two languages out of three offered options: French, Russian, and Spanish. It is now a necessity to delve into foreign languages. To advance a career, meticulous study of selected languages is an imperative. The sheer proliferation of language learning and dissemination has depicted that such knowledge is no longer a competitive advantage, but a standard. This perfectly complements the theorem of globalization that, as communication barriers go down, the need to be cognizant of idiomatic intricacies becomes exponentially important. While speaking to many of Berlin's inhabitants in English, the group had to abstain from using colloquial expressions or slang. Such expressions (e.g. "all that jazz") acted as noise to the communicative process, distorting significantly the message that the group (the sender) was attempting to encode (Ferraro 72). In order to mitigate any communicative fallacies that may occur in potential deals, the receiver and his or her cultural background must be taken into account when designing the message.

The process of diversification has also been manifested in new ways. No longer is this term tailored to the discussion of securities and portfolios, but encompasses a perennial role in the strategy for contemporary exporters. By facilitating potential exporters' attempts in foreign markets through the granting of information and demographic studies, the U.S. Embassy in Berlin demonstrated that the strategy of the traditional company is both inefficient and perilous. Companies can no longer rely on one niche or market to provide optimal growth; instead, firms must employ proactive strategies that span various countries, with the possible presence of different brands to leverage such a tactic. Axel Springer AG, for example, encompasses a robust portfolio of brands (Bild, Die Welt, the German edition of Rolling Stone, &c.) to capture and retain 23.6 percent of the newspaper market in Germany; its strategy also makes the company one of the largest multimedia companies in all of Europe, permitting it to exploit economies of scale and scope in the process. Employing an overly formalized and stable strategy, or what is known by Miles and Snow as a *defender*, would render a multinational enterprise unable to adapt

to the volatile, yet contiguous, nature of the European market¹². A *prospective* strategy is much more conducive to success in this market.

Of the utmost importance is the business person's ability to adapt to local responsiveness and set aside his or her self-reference criterion. Having visited Grant Thornton, an accounting firm with a subsidiary in Paris, knowledge of local laws and protocols were assiduously emphasized. For example, the amalgamation of IFRS (International Financial Reporting Standards) with national laws must be clearly understood for the individual to operate seamlessly in such a milieu. In terms of multinational strategy, the company would be obliged to utilize either a multidomestic or transnational approach.

¹² "Managing Human Resources, 6th Edition." *Alibris*. Web. 24 Mar. 2012.
<<http://www.alibris.com/search/books/qwork/-812034122/used/Managing%20Human%20Resources%2C%206th%20Edition>>.