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Exploring Public Speaking: 2nd Revision

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Appendix A

Cultural Diversity in Public Speaking

It goes without saying that the United States is becoming more and more diverse. The millennial generation, those born between 1980 and 2000, are described the most diverse generation in American history. Forty-three percent are "non-white" due to increased immigration from Asia and Latin America in the recent past (Lilley, 2014). Even more, news stories and research indicate that the majority in the U.S. is not White, male, Protestant, and middle class, but multi-racial and ethnic, of different religions, 51% female, and of varying socio-economic groups. The population of Dalton State College is particularly affected by these long-term trends. Dalton's Latino population is about 50% and the College's Latino student enrollment is above 24% and rising.

Some issues related to the U.S.'s growing diversity were addressed in Chapter 2. In this appendix, we will look at how diversity can be a help and sometimes a challenge to a speaker.

Benefits and Challenges

The first way that diversity can be a help is if the speaker himself or herself has been exposed to diverse groups of people. Diversity should also be understood as not just ethnic or racial, although those tend to be in the forefront of many minds. Diversity of thought is often a more important type of diversity than what might appear on the surface. Your audience may "look" and "sound" like you, but have a completely different world view.

However, diversity can be a challenge because the more diverse an audience, the harder audience analysis and accommodating one's speech to the audience become. Also, one must be sure that he or she truly understands the diversity of a group. For example, it is assumed that all Arabs are Muslims; persons of Lebanese and Palestinian background may be of a Christian faith. As mentioned in Chapter 2, "Latino" is a broad term that involves many distinct cultures that often observe or utilize very different customs, holidays, political views, foods, and practices. The historical experience of African-Americans is not that of Afro-Caribbeans. A white person from South Africa considers herself "African," although we in the U.S. might scratch our heads at that because of how we traditionally think of "African."

The more one can study cross-cultural communication issues, the more sensitive one can become. It is, of course, next to impossible to know every culture intimately; some of us are still working on learning our own! What one should recognize is the

basic ways that cultures are categorized or grouped, based on certain characteristics, while at the same time appreciating cultural uniqueness. Even more, appreciating cultural uniqueness leads one to see predominant communication styles.

One common method for categorizing or discussing cultures is by "collectivist" or "individualistic." The United States, Germany,   Israel, and a few other countries are highly individualistic, while Asian, some Latino, and some African cultures are highly collectivistic. While we in the U.S. value family, we generally are expected and encouraged to make our own life choices in career, education, marriage, and living arrangements. In more collectivist cultures, the family or larger community would primarily decide those life choices. In some cases, the individual makes decisions based on what is better for the community as a whole rather than what he or she would personally prefer.

Closely related to the distinction between collectivistic and individualistic cultures is the distinction between high-context and low-context. High-context cultures are so closely tied together that behavioral norms are implicit, or not talked about clearly; they are just understood and have been learned through close observation. For example, if you and your friends have a routine of watching football every Sunday, saying, "I'll see you guys this weekend for the game" implies that the "when" and "where" of the game is so ingrained that it doesn't even need to be explicitly stated. Variations from the norms are so rare that learning them is easy; there is no confusion.

Low-context cultures have to be more explicit because individual freedoms and wider diversity of behavioral norms make learning through observations more difficult. Continuing the example from above, in these cases you might be gathering with a new group of friends who need explicit, high-context communication to know what is going on: "We'll meet at Jay's house on Bleaker Street at 11:30 on Sunday morning."

High-context cultures are described as more

> . . . relational, collectivist, intuitive, and contemplative. This means that people in these cultures emphasize interpersonal relationships. Developing trust is an important first step to any business transaction. . . . These cultures are collectivist, preferring group harmony and consensus to individual achievement. And people in these cultures are less governed by reason than by intuition or feelings. (Wilson, n.d.)

Unfortunately, due to cultural biases, this description may make individuals from high-context cultures sound "less than" in some ways compared to Western cultures, which are low-context cultures. Low-context cultures are often described as more rational, action-oriented, practical, clear in their communication, efficient, precise, and factual. In contrast, high-context cultures spend more time on interpersonal trust, are less direct and straightforward, and may use more polite and flowery language. Let us be clear that these descriptions are about differences, but not about "better" or "worse."

Another way to distinguish cultural groups is how decisions are made and the predominant communication modes. As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 3, public speaking—a logical, rational, straightforward, individualistic mode of communication, where traditionally one person attempts to exert power over others through verbal means—is at the core of Western communication history. Public speaking exists in the context of debate, two opposing views being   presented either for one side to "win" or for the audience to choose a compromised, hybrid position. Other cultures have traditionally taken a more narrative communication mode, with storytelling being the way the important information is conveyed, more indirectly. Others value group discussion and keeping the harmony of the group, while others value almost exclusively the advice of elders in decision making. They believe the past and those who have experienced more of it have a wisdom all their own and are worthy of more respect.

In reference to cultural differences, we see the differences most obviously in nonverbal communication. While we Westerners may think of these nonverbal communication differences (such as the traditional Asian practice of greeting with a bow instead of shaking hands) as simply quaint or only superficial, they reveal deep difference in the world views of each culture. It would be worth your time to look into (easily done on the Internet) why Asians traditionally bow and Westerners shake hands. The practices say a lot about our shared histories and our views of the past, religion, and interpersonal trust. Likewise, it is not unusual for adult men friends of the same age to walk hand-in-hand in some Middle Eastern countries, but that is pretty uncommon in the United States and has a totally different interpretation. In the two places, the same practice means two entirely different things.

Nonverbal communication, which is what is most obvious and visible to us when we experience a new culture, is divided into types such as:

- Oculesics (eye behavior)
- Haptics (touch behavior)
- Proxemics (distance from others)
- Vocalics (voice characteristics)
- Chronemics (use of time in communication)
- Kinesics (use of the arms, legs, and posture)
- Olfactics (the meaning of smell in communication)
- Objectics (the use of objects to convey or interpret meaning)

Each of these has unique patterns in various cultures, and the differences in nonverbal communication behavior are often not understood to have deeper cultural meanings. Some cultures may avoid eye contact out of respect; their high-context nature means direct confrontation is discouraged. Westerners, however, tend to judge low eye contact rather harshly, as either dishonest, disinterest, or low self-esteem. Likewise, Westerners value punctuality sometimes over relationships, although the higher the status of the individual, the more tolerant we can be of tardiness. Other cultures simply do not understand the Western love affair with the hands on the clock. People from the United States are sometimes seen by other cultures as loud (vocalics), too direct and forward (oculesics), taking up too much space (kinesics and proxemics), and uncomfortable with touch or close spaces (haptics and proxemics).

Of course, most audiences of different cultural backgrounds may include those for whom English is a second (or third or fourth) language. Humor columnist Dave Barry ironically wrote, "Americans who travel abroad for the first time are often shocked to discover that, despite all the progress that has been made in the last 30 years, many foreign people still speak in foreign languages" ("Dave Barry Quotes," 2013). Often second language speakers' use of correct English is as good as or better than some Americans[1], but there will be some areas of concern here.

Watch out for metaphors, slang, and figurative language that simply have no meaning to non-native speakers of English. Many American expressions have to do with sports—everything from poker to football—and have no meaning to those who have not grown up around those sports.[2] Some of our expressions are

borderline racist without our knowing or recognizing it because we do not know the origin of the phrase. When we say "bury the hatchet." "go on the warpath," or "put you in the paddy wagon," or "I was gipped," we are inadvertently referring to stereotypes as well as using references those of non-U.S. cultures would not understand.

Implications

What does all this mean to you, a college student taking a public speaking class? Well, as emerging technology makes communicating with people around the world easier and more common, there is a good chance you might find yourself communicating or interacting with persons from other cultures in your future careers. The ten items that follow should help you successfully navigate any such situations more effectively.

- Dealing with persons of other cultures may mean that the straightforward, supposedly rational approach expected from traditional public speaking may be too forceful for other cultures. More descriptive, more narrative, and more relational forms of communication may be of service. As mentioned in chapter 1, stories may be your most powerful form of communication, especially with audiences of diverse cultures. At the same time, choose your stories carefully (see the next bullet point below).

- Primarily, recognize the underlying values of the culture. The value and place of family stands out here. You would want to be sure to show respect to parents and grandparents in everything you say; if you cannot do that, do not mention them at all. Other values may have to do with how genders are treated, modesty in clothing, or criticism of the government.

- Do not jump to judge speakers of other cultures by Western standards. Time limits are a good example. While this book stresses speaking within time limits, a speaker from a high context culture may not see strict time limits as a standard for speaking and may go overtime.

- Know your audience. Know what they appreciate (positive) and what would concern them (negative).

- Approach humor very carefully. Humor is highly contextual, personal, and cultural. Test your humor on a group representative before the presentation.

- Show knowledge of their culture. If speaking to an audience made up predominantly of persons who speak a certain

language, learning a greeting or phrase in that language is a way to gain rapport. You could also use appropriate holiday references. Two presidents known for their oratorical abilities used this technique. When John F. Kennedy spoke in Berlin in 1963, he famously said, "*Ich bin ein Berliner.*" (Although many have claimed he was actually saying the equivalent of "I am a Danish pastry" instead of "I am a person from Berlin," that myth has been debunked.) Either way, it did not matter; the crowd appreciated it. Ronald Reagan did much the same at the beginning of his historic "Tear Down This Wall" speech at the Brandenburg Gate in 1986. His accent was not great, but his grammar and message were clear.

- If the group is diverse, don't leave out or marginalize someone by assuming all share exactly the same values or practices.

- Never "tokenize" someone by drawing attention to his or her difference, at least not without asking permission.

- Use the term preferred by the group to refer to them. Not all persons of Latin American descent want to be called "Latino/a," according to the Pew Research Center (Lopez, 2013). In fact, more prefer Hispanic, which is the term used by the U.S. Census Bureau since the 1970.

- Always seek for commonalities over differences.

Endnotes

1. Notice that I have not used the term "Americans" to refer to citizens of the United States. All persons living in this hemisphere are Americans. Unfortunately, we do not have a word like "Unitedstatesians" to clarify. Even "North Americans" is insufficient because that includes Canada and Mexico.
2. This is generally known as "sportspeak." Telling someone your presentation in class was a "home run" is only effective if they are familiar with baseball and aware that you are using that term as a metaphor for "doing a good job."