

“Are You Talking to ME?”

By Mal Warwick

The Silent Language

Edward T. Hall

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If you're an American, born and bred, and you've lived in any non-Anglophone country, you may have realized after a time that the local people you met didn't just speak a different language—they were really *weird*. They acted in all sorts of ways that struck you as irrational, frustrating, and eventually annoying. They stood too closely to you, or too far away. Their voices were too loud, or too soft. They could never seem to get to the point. They were vague about such basics as time, distance, and probabilities. And after months of this disorienting behavior all around you, you may have wondered whether you were going mad.

In a sense, you were. You were suffering from what has come to be called “culture shock”—a sometimes traumatic condition that results from the removal of familiar cultural cues. In its worst manifestations, culture shock can make you feel as though you've been detached from reality. Crazy, in other words.

This concept was brought home to hundreds of thousands of Americans by the experiences of returning Peace Corps Volunteers in the 1960s, 1970s, and later. Because Volunteers had been immersed by design in local cultures, they brought culture shock to light for many Americans even though legions of U.S. soldiers, sailors, aid officials, and diplomats had returned from overseas stints virtually unscathed.

Fortunately, even before the first Peace Corps Volunteers were posted overseas in 1962, a persistent and methodical cultural anthropologist named Edward T. Hall (known as Ned to friends and colleagues) had studied the roots of culture shock in great detail and published his findings in a compelling little book called *The Silent Language*. Those of us who served in the early years of Peace Corps benefited directly from Hall's insight. In my training program in Puerto Rico in 1965, *The Silent Language* was required reading.

Hall spent years exploring nonverbal communication with a focus on the culturally disparate concepts of time and space. With examples drawn from the U.S. military in World War II and Point 4 technicians in the 1950s as well as from his own researches in Southwestern Indian communities, the South Pacific, and Iran, Hall helped us understand “the broad extent to which culture controls our lives.” He made us accept the sad reality that communication is about a lot more than simply words:

“When someone says ‘yes’ it often doesn’t mean yes at all, and when people smile it doesn’t always mean that they’re pleased. When American visitors make a helpful gesture they may be rebuffed; when they try to be friendly nothing happens. People tell them they will do things and don’t. The longer they stay, the more enigmatic the new country looks . . .” [p. 35]

As Hall noted, “almost everyone has difficulty believing that behavior they have always associated with ‘human nature’ is not human nature at all but learned behavior . . .” [p. 43] For this imaginative anthropologist, “time talks” and “space speaks.”

For example, chances are you were raised to feel, as I was, that being five or ten minutes late to an appointment is occasion for an apology. But let’s say you’re kept waiting for an hour by a bureaucrat in the country where you’re working. Wouldn’t you be tempted to complain to the official’s gatekeeper long before the hour is up? I know I would . . . even understanding, as I do now, that I’m probably ensuring the bureaucrat will feel equally insulted because for him an hour is only a normal wait in his country. That’s the sort of thing Hall means by time as a key element of intercultural communication.

Space works a lot that way, too. Most Americans get at least a little twitchy if someone crowds us—“invades our space”—in a conversation. Yet people in many other cultures feel offended if you back away.

These were the principal lessons I learned from *The Silent Language*. In the more than three years I worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ecuador (1966-69), I thought of that book alarmingly often: when every queue I entered dissolved into a mob; when perfect strangers crowding close to me during casual conversations made me wonder whether they were hitting on me; when I was given directions to a destination and told it was either “near” or “far” even though it wasn’t; when a pledge I’d taken for a promise was instantly forgotten.

Truth to tell, though, comprehending the underlying logic of this sort of cultural clash didn’t help me feel any more relaxed. I went just as crazy as anyone, adrift from my

moorings in the comfort of middle-class America. (So much for knowledge as a balm to the soul!)

Still, familiarity with Hall's teachings continued to help me through the years. Those insights made it possible for me to get outside my white, middle-class skin during my later years of work in community organizing and running political campaigns in districts with heavy ethnic minority populations.

All this experience came rushing back to me this summer when I read Edward T. Hall's obituary in the *New York Times*. Hall passed away July 20 at the age of 95. The article prompted me to search for my original copy of *The Silent Language*. Either it had decomposed into dust from over-handling or had simply been mislaid somewhere through the decades, so I bought a new copy and sat down to re-read it a half century after its publication.

Boy, was I surprised!

My recollections of *The Silent Language* were way off base. To be sure, Hall had placed great emphasis on time and space as elements in intercultural communication, devoting three of eleven chapters to those topics. But I'd completely forgotten about the rest of the book, which lays out a complex and detailed anthropological theory about the nature and "vocabulary" of culture. Hall and his collaborator, George L. Trager, had developed a typology of ten "Primary Message Systems," only one of which involves language. Culture, they posited, could be analyzed in terms of the multifaceted ways that human beings conveyed meaning to one another in ten dimensions [pp. 37-38]:

- 1) Interaction (including language)
- 2) Association
- 3) Subsistence
- 4) Bisexuality (meaning two sexes, not what you think)
- 5) Territoriality
- 6) Temporality
- 7) Learning
- 8) Play
- 9) Defense
- 10) Exploitation (use of materials)

Once Hall launched into a discussion of these ten often overlapping and interacting categories, he started losing me. And when he drilled down further and suggested that "culture has three levels" — formal, informal, and technical, also overlapping and

interacting—I became completely lost. I did actually manage to wade through the remainder of this 200-page book, including Hall’s lengthy discussion of yet another triad (“sets, isolates, and patterns”). But even now, mere days after finishing it, I couldn’t begin to explain Hall’s theory. When I put the book down I felt a little like the puzzlement I experience when I’ve tried unsuccessfully to follow the instructions to operating some cheap electronic gadget from China, transliterated from the Mandarin.

So, what we’ve got here, it would seem, is a failure to communicate. And, not to put too fine an edge on things, in a book about *communication*.

Now, by way of background, you should know that before entering Peace Corps training I had under my belt both four years at an elite university studying history and political science and two years in a leading graduate school of international affairs. Presumably, then, I was perfectly well equipped to understand Edward T. Hall. And I was fairly confident that my IQ hadn’t dramatically shrunk through the years.

So, I stewed over this conundrum for several days. Then it hit me, all of a sudden: There’s yet an eleventh dimension, or Primary Message System, to Hall and Trager’s typology.

Intention.

The simple truth is that Ned Hall *never intended for me to read or understand his theory!*

To grasp this concept, we need to explore the murky realm of intentionality. Naturally, that requires us to apply Hall’s analytical triad. Thus, a speaker’s *intention* may be characterized in any one of the following three ways, depending on his or her use of language:

- *Informal* – language used in an easy, conversational manner, intended to be understood by all
- *Formal* – language employing complex sentences and ten-dollar words, clearly meant to be understood only by a well-educated elite
- *Technical* – language using obscure terms and constructions understandable only to those who have been initiated into a particular academic discipline

This analysis helps me understand what has long puzzled me: why social scientists' findings are so rarely reported in plain English. It's because they have no intention of making themselves understood except to a limited academic audience!

I feel a lot better now. Finally I understand how communication really works. Or doesn't, as the case may be.

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