When East Meets West: Polish Business Communication from a Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract: This paper investigates how foreign nationals living and working in Poland evaluate Polish colleagues' communication in English and its effectiveness in international business. It identifies features of linguistic behaviour attributed to Polish business interactions. Five dimensions of cultural variability (directness, emotionality, power distance, confrontation, critical evaluation) are used as benchmarks and offer an observational framework for examining Polish communication patterns. The attitudes that foreign business professionals expressed towards their Polish colleagues' style of interaction are measured using a Likert scale and interpreted based on the results of qualitative interviews and secondary research. The article highlights the pragmatic dangers of misunderstanding or underestimating culturally-driven behaviours in the global setting.

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1. Introduction

The last decades have witnessed profound changes in the scale and nature of intercultural communication. Growth in social mobility and international recruitment has led to an increase in multilingualism and an even stronger position of English as a lingua franca of international business (Camerer & Mader, 2017). Amongst European states, one country especially has emerged as a confident global player. Due to its central location, attractive market size, and educated labour force, particularly in STEM fields, Poland has attracted substantial investment from top western economies. According to the International Group of Chamber of Commerce report from 2020 (IGCC 2020), the value of assets owned by foreign companies in Poland grew by 70% from 2010-2018, which represents 24.5% of foreign capital invested in all Central and Eastern Europe. Germany, France, the UK and the US firms are among the largest investors operating in Poland, jointly managing 48% of Polish foreign capital assets, whilst, in 2018, 107 foreign countries were present on the Polish market contributing to 15% of total private-sector employment (Ibid.). Given the scale and speed of business developments in Poland, there is seemingly a need to explore the complex interplay of pragmatic and socio-cultural factors which influence professional interactions between Poles and their foreign partners.

2. Background

The belief that the adoption of English as the lingua franca will eliminate communication difficulties in the global setting has already been disputed as an "*ethnocentric illusion*" (Wierzbicka, 1991). Numerous studies and accounts of interethnic encounters by cross-cultural researchers and trainers provide evidence that the use of a common language does not protect its speakers from the impact of their cultural environments (Gunthner, 2008; Lewis, 2006; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Direct contact with members of other cultures brings to light all kinds of culturally informed habits, beliefs, sentiments and conventions, which shape the style and interpretations of linguistic behaviour (Kilianska-Przybylo, 2017). Research on cross-cultural management suggests profound differences in interactional patterns pertaining to diverse features of communication, including the use of vocabulary, rhetorical strategies, figures of speech, tone, pitch, loudness and pausing, as well as non-verbal language (Hall, 1976; Hofstede 1991, 2001; Scollon et al. 2012; Schneider & Barsoux 2003; Spencer-Oatey 2008; Tannen, 1995; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012).

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Such variously conditioned preferences underpinning people's styles of speech and behaviour causes them not only to project their norms onto others but also to judge them harshly when their expectations cannot be met. These judgements and misinterpretations have a direct bearing on the success or failure of business interactions: from who gets employed through who receives a credit to who stays in their job. Because Polish professionals have arrived on the global business landscape significantly later than their Western counterparts, we find it especially important to examine how they are perceived by their foreign-born colleagues. Our study is thus an examination of ways of observing (Bennett, 2013; Chudnovskaya & Millette, 2023; Hamilton & Kuchinka, 2022). We analyse the characteristics of linguistic behaviour that foreign professionals working in Poland attribute to their Polish colleagues based on their frame of reference. We acknowledge that both cultural proximity and context have a direct influence on the respondents´ assessments of the Polish culture and the values assigned to them (Cronen et al. 1988; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1989; Spencer-Oatey, 2008). So, while Israelis may regard Poles as indirect and circuitous, the Japanese will see them as blunt and ruthlessly honest. Furthermore, similar to the position of the respondents, our position as researchers has also been informed by our own socio-cultural environment. Following Applegate & Sypher (1988) and Cronen et al. (1988), and we argue that intercultural communication is situated and should be seen as inseparable from people´s interpretations of their experiences. By analysing the characteristics of Polish communication in intercultural settings, we orient ourselves to three research questions:

- How do business professionals of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds view Polish communicative behaviour and evaluate its global effectiveness?
- What features are attributed to the Polish style of communicating?
- What situations, language habits and speech events are likely to result in clashes or misunderstandings between Polish and foreign professionals?

3. Methods

In order to map out perceptions of Polish communication from a non-native speaker's perspective, we have merged two prominent approaches to cross-cultural research: the cultural dimensions frameworks developed by ethnographers, social psychologists and communication consultants (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1991, 2001; Meyer, 2014; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012), and the linguistic studies of pragmatics and discourse analysis (Camerer & Mader 2017; House, 2007; Scollon et al. 2012; Wierzbicka, 1999). Our integrative approach reflects the principles of constructionism, relativism and post-structuralist, according to which culture is a product of viewing and co-constructing, a description of patterns of speech and behaviour derived from foreign professionals´ interpretations of workplace interactions (Bennett, 2013).

We have selected five main dimensions of cultural variability on which Polish communication behaviour in the workplace is evaluated and measured. The categories, known as communication dimensions (Meyer 2014), are "*stylistic modes of interaction*" (Ting-Toomey, 1999: 103) which comprise the following aspects of communication: "*directness*" (direct vs. indirect), "*emotionality*" (emotional vs. reserved), "*power distance*" (hierarchical vs. egalitarian), "*confrontation*" (confrontational vs. non-confrontational) and "*critical evaluation*" (direct negative feedback vs. indirect negative feedback). By using concepts which are generally agreed on and used by scholars in different disciplines (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2003; Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1991; Meyer, 2014; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 2012), we hope to enable further comparisons of findings (Bennett, 2013). Equally, we acknowledge that communication cannot be properly examined without addressing culture-specific factors (Wierzbicka, 1999). Therefore, this study includes an examination of cultural norms, scripts and values, along with historical factors, which are the products of localised contexts and practices.

Our research relies on two types of data; a survey (Tables 1-6) and qualitative interviews. The survey (Table 6) was distributed online and completed by 100 foreign business professionals working across a variety of industry sectors, including commerce, construction, pharma, energy, media, consulting or financial services. The respondents (Table 7) all lived in Poland at the time of the study (2020-2021) and were employed in international companies in different commercial roles as associates (11%), specialists (27%), experts (12%), managers (26%), senior leaders (15%) and freelancers (9%). In total, 35 nationalities were featured in our study, 64% of which represent European countries – the largest investors in Poland (IGCC 2020). The objective of the survey was to measure their attitudes to the above-mentioned five communication dimensions using a Likert scale method (Likert, 1932; Warmbrod, 2014). The figures derived from the scale (Tables 1-5) consist of single-question and summated scores indicating the extent to which the respondents agree or disagree with the statements describing communication dimensions. Next, for each of the dimensions, we marked the median of sums of the responses, which we then represented visually on a 13-point rating scale, known as a semantic differential (Figures 1-5), where 9 denotes the middle point between the opposite values (Bradley & Lang 1994). In addition to the quantitative element, qualitative interviews were conducted with 30 professionals who were available and willing to provide more detailed and contextualized responses to their answers. Here, we were principally concerned with understanding our participants' constructions of Polish colleagues' communication from the perspective of their own "*lived*" experiences.

4. Results

4.1 Directness

Verbal directness refers to the extent to which participants in an interaction convey their messages explicitly and thus reveal their "*wants, needs, and desires*" in the process (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1990: 100). As Spencer-

Oatey (2008) explains, when a speaker adopts a direct style of communication, they openly state what they think and feel using clear and simple language. By contrast, in indirect speech patterns, the speaker´s or writer´s true intentions remain hidden behind implicitly coded messages. Direct and indirect styles of verbal interaction are closely related to Hall´s (1976) low-context and high-context dimensions. In low-context cultures, the meaning is carried almost exclusively by verbal messages, whereas in high-context cultures, it must be inferred from subtle non-verbal signals, such as hints, pauses, implicature or silence (Hall, 1976; Katriel 1986).

The quantitative results obtained from our survey (Table 1), measured by calculating a summated median-item score from responses to all three questions pertaining to the scale, show that Poland occupies the lower end of the direct side of the directness-indirectness spectrum (Figure 1). The composite score reveals that 42% of the respondents described the Polish style of business interaction as direct, while 33% of respondents defined it as indirect.
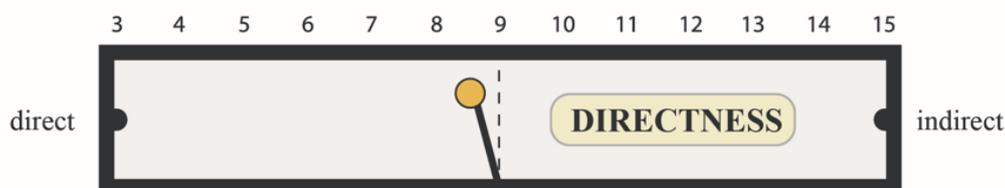

Figure 1: Semantic differential displaying perceptions of Polish communication patterns on the scale of verbal directness (Bradley and Lang 1994).

Table 1: Scores for the dimension of directness measured on a Likert scale (Warmbrod, 2014)

Directness	Median score 8,5					agree 42% (N=126)	neutral 26% (N=74)	disagree 33% (N=100)
Likert scale (1-5)	Single-item scores:					Total-item scores		
Survey questions:	1 strongly agree	2 agree	3 neutral	4 disagree	5 strongly disagree	agree	neutral	disagree
Q1:	11% (N=11)	39% (N=39)	20% (N=20)	24% (N=24)	6% (N=6)	50% (N=50)	20% (N=20)	30% (N=30)
Q2:	7% (N=7)	35% (N=35)	26% (N=26)	30% (N=30)	2% (N=2)	42% (N=42)	26% (N=26)	32% (N=32)
Q2:	7% (N=7)	27% (N=27)	28% (N=28)	28% (N=28)	10% (N=10)	34 % (N=34)	28% (N=28)	38% (N=38)

Source: Own research.

According to our interlocutors, Polish directness in communication manifests itself in clarity and honesty in both speech and behaviour. This is best captured in the statement of a Belarusian manager working for a world energy supplier: "*Polish people are extremely open. They don't hide anything and feel free to share any opinion. And they don't seek to understand what is on the other side of the argument and then decide whether they should speak or not. They are kind of straightforward and authentic*". For the respondent, Polish professionals thus come across as genuine and non-manipulative. Rather than trying to gauge the position of the speaker before revealing their true intentions, they remain authentic and open throughout the conversation. This view is shared by a German senior leader employed in a global consumer goods corporation: "*For me, Poles are very effective, but I like straight talk. When I speak with Polish colleagues, there are rarely any misunderstandings between us because I know I can come to the point fast, and they know it too. So, for me and my team, this style of communicating really makes things easy*". According to this German speaker, Polish directness in professional settings promotes understanding and clarity, which leads to effectiveness.

The evaluation of Polish professionals as direct and honest speakers reaffirms an important cultural norm described by Wierzbicka (1999) as a "*script of sincerity*". The script emphasises the value of presenting one's feelings truthfully, that is, of saying and showing, what one really feels, and not saying, or showing, that one feels something that one does not feel "(Ibid.: 241)". Wierzbicka (Ibid.: 247) attributes this norm to Polish culture in general and contrasts it with the American "*script of enthusiasm*", which celebrates and demands ongoing positivity. Although the majority of foreign professionals interviewed in our study identified the Polish style of communicating with verbal directness, there are also examples in our data that point to the use of ambiguous and high-context language. In such instances, the emphasis on pragmatic efficiency and honesty has given way to relational concerns for which politeness and indirectness are the primary linguistic mechanisms (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). In the words of a French financial analyst: "*Poles are direct but equally very polite. It's what makes them sound professional, though sometimes their style really borders on indirectness. For example, my colleagues are always asking me if I have time for them. They ask me if they can ask me. So, I then ask them if they have time to ask me (laughter)*". According to a cross-cultural specialist, Lewis (2012), the Polish pursuit of politeness often precludes too much directness in interaction, and although Poles are themselves used to a certain degree of ambiguity and circumlocution, their understated style can be a source of confusion in encounters with people who are used to "*reading the air*", an observation shared by an American lecturer and business consultant:

"*I have frequently experienced mixed signals in Poland where you thought one thing, but it was really another thing. I find that Polish people don't want to say no to you. They find another way to agree with you where the no really means yes. It is not only in Poland, but here I felt it was because people simply don't want to disappoint you. Yet to me, it comes across as a lack of follow-through. Like they don't comply with their commitments*".

Here, the reluctance of Polish people to say no directly poses a major barrier to trust building and effective communication because, in the eyes of North Americans and North-West Europeans, such behaviour comes across as unreliable. Gesteland (2012) reports on similar experiences faced by Danes and other nationals, who noticed the difficulty that Polish professionals have with saying no, particularly to their foreign partners. He points to the Polish optimistic nature and can-do attitude as a plausible explanation. We would argue that the reason why Poles often opt for indirectness in communication, apart from the polite urge to please and satisfy, is the need to be recognised as a credible business partner.

4.2 Emotionality

Aside from varied attitudes towards directness, cultural norms define also expectations for emotional expressivity. The emotional vs. reserved dimension is closely modelled on Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner´s (2012) emotional vs. neutral distinctions and describes the type and intensity of emotions which are considered appropriate in specific contexts. For instance, whether the nature of our interactions should be objective and detached or emotionally involved and expressive (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 2012: 29). In emotional or affective cultures, such as Greece, Italy or the US, people learn to openly show their emotions in verbal and non-verbal ways, through facial expressions, body movement, tone of voice or active involvement in a heated debate (Ting-Toomey, 1999). By contrast, in reserved cultures such as Japan, Finland or the UK, unrestrained emotional outbursts can be a source of discomfort, while excessive emotionality displayed in the workplace is equated with a lack of professionalism (Lewis, 2006; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 2012).

The total median-item results obtained from responses to our survey statements show that with regard to emotionality, Poland is towards the middle of the scale (Figure 2). The composite score (Table 2) summing up answers to all three questions reveals that 41% of the respondents characterised the Polish style of interaction as emotional, while 39% of respondents defined it as reserved.
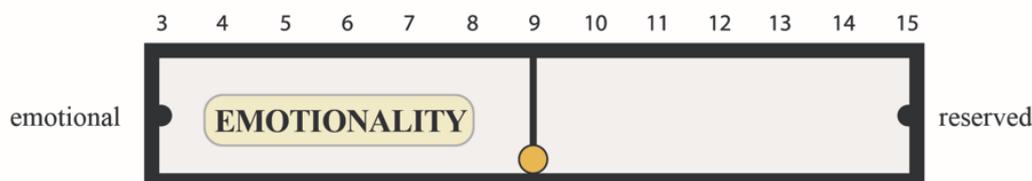

Figure 2: Semantic differential displaying perceptions of Polish communication patterns on the scale of emotionality (Bradley & Lang 1994).

Table 2: Scores for the dimension of emotionality measured on a Likert scale (Warmbrod, 2014).

Emotionality	Median score 9					agree 41% (N=123)	neutral 20% (N=60)	disagree 39% (N=117)
Likert scale (1-5)	Single-item scores:					Total-item scores		
Survey questions:	1 strongly agree	2 agree	3 neutral	4 disagree	5 strongly disagree	agree	neutral	Disagree
Q4:	9% (N=9)	31% (N=31)	13% (N=13)	39% (N=39)	8% (N=8)	40% (N=40)	13% (N=13)	47% (N=47)
Q5:	8% (N=8)	38% (N=38)	22% (N=22)	23% (N=23)	9% (N=9)	46% (N=46)	22% (N=22)	32% (N=32)
Q6:	10% (N=10)	27% (N=27)	25% (N=25)	28% (N=28)	10% (N=10)	37 % (N=37)	25% (N=25)	38% (N=38)

Source: Own research

The quantitative analysis confirms the classification of Poland as a culture which is "*variably expressive*". This term, coined by Gesteland (2012: 264), captures the unpredictability of reactions and a wide spectrum of attitudes ranging from withdrawn, reflective and patient to loud, flamboyant and dramatic, which, as Gesteland asserts, can all be displayed by Poles at any moment during the interaction. Evidence from our interviews shows that both contextual features and culturally varied expectations influence the assessment of Polish emotional expressivity. In the eyes of an American business consultant, Polish people come across as "*standoffish*" through their body language and facial expression: "*When surrounded by strangers, Poles seem particularly mindful and are carefully watching their boundaries. You may call it stoic or neutral – no eye contact, very little loud noise, almost like blending into the wallpaper*". Likewise, for a British HR executive who has mentored Polish managers from across the country since Poland joined the EU, Polish restraint in communication is an example of a dry social convention:

"*From the Western perspective, Poles are polite but not very emotional. It is a learned art, and I would not read anything into it. Germans are reserved too. They have a blank look on their face and are totally unemotive. But the Brits, they can be reserved and at the same time dig your grave. You don't really read anything from them. Technically they can stonewall you. And they would be positive throughout the entire space*".

According to the British director, the polite but emotionally monotonous style of Polish nonverbal communication hinders effective interaction because the language of the body does not correlate with the verbal message: "*Poles are slowly learning that communication is not only about words. One can express attitudes by a mere inflection of one's voice. And that all of it significantly improves matters in the business world*".

In the opinion of British and American speakers, Poles are not good at "*small talk*" or "*ice-breaking situations*". They succeed with "*clinical*" English but struggle with "*emotionally-infused communication*", which a senior business consultant from New York blames squarely on a conservative Polish upbringing. He contends that the traditional style of child-rearing practices denies Poles opportunities to learn how to vocalise emotions in stressful situations without falling into extreme states. In his words: "*I often find that Polish people have like an on-and-off switch when it comes to emotions. Either it's off, and everything is neutral and rationally-minded or completely out of control, where it gets to be a major blow-up*". Such behaviour is especially visible in the workplace at times of crises. It might be a missed deadline or a lost deal. The manager observes that Polish speakers have an "*immediate go-to reaction*", which is "*brush it off. There is no problem. Don't worry about it.*". This way of dealing with the situation might seem polite and cooperative – the expression of sympathy does express solidarity with the speaker (Chlopicki, 2017) – however, in the eyes of the American respondent, Polish politeness acts as a defence mechanism for not being able to diffuse the situation and deal with it in a way that is both productive and comfortable for all parties.

The disparity in the verbalisation of emotions between North American and Polish cultures has a solid linguistic foundation. As noticed by Wierzbicka (1999: 263), members of Anglo-Saxon nations typically express emotions by means of active verbs, which assign agency to the speaker (e.g. "*I am feeling ashamed.*" "*I felt sad.*"). Polish speakers instead use more passive forms, which rids them of direct control over their emotions, as expressed by the phrases: "*Jest mi wstyd.*", "*Było mi smutno.*" Wierzbicka (1999: 262) observes that in Polish sentences, "*the involuntary character of feelings is reflected in the grammar*", which in English translates as "*It makes me feel embarrassed.*", "*It makes me feel sad*". The Anglo-Saxon agency and self-awareness thus sharply contrast with the Polish state of emotional subordination, where effective states seem to happen beyond individual control (Boski, 2010). The suppression of feelings or struggles with uncontrollable impulses is two dominant reactions that foreign employees associate with the Polish workplace. Such polarised attitudes have a long historical pedigree, with an origin in romantic models of masculinity that have survived to the present day. As noticed by Santorski (1998), today's Pole is either highly rational, in which case they completely reject feelings, or is emotional beyond self-control.

4.3 Power Distance

Power distance is another dimension which influences which types of reactions are accepted in professional situations. Developed by Hofstede (1980) in his groundbreaking IBM study, the term captures the degree of deference that societies and organisations are expected to display in communication by virtue of their role relationships (Carl et al., 2004). As Hofstede explains, power distance is "*the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally*" (Hofstede 1989: 28). In hierarchical cultures, such as Japan, and Russia or France, people are encouraged to demonstrate humility and servitude in interactions with high-status individuals. The preoccupation with hierarchy is much weaker in egalitarian cultures, such as Denmark, Israel or Canada, where corporate communication is informal and more personal and where employees freely discuss ideas with persons higher in rank (Meyer, 2014). According to Hofstede's power distance index, Poland is a hierarchical society. It accepts larger status differences and an organisational environment in which everybody has a closely defined place (Hofstede, 2001).

The results obtained from our attitudinal survey correlate with the above findings (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004). A total median-item score for all three questions pertaining to the scale shows that Poland occupies the lower end of the hierarchical side of the spectrum (Figure 3). The composite score revealed that as many as 59% of the respondents evaluated Polish organisational behavior in accordance with the hierarchical notion, while 26% of the respondents saw practices in Polish companies reflecting more egalitarian values (Table 3).
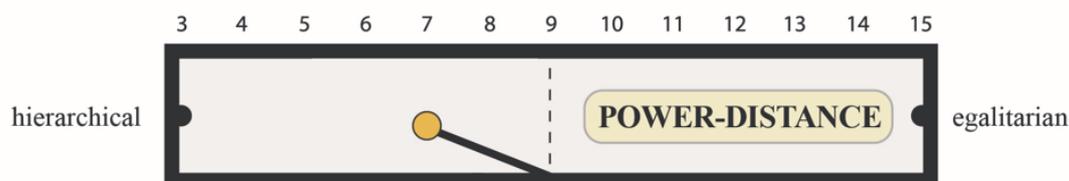

Figure 3: Semantic differential displaying perceptions of Polish communication patterns on the scale of power distance (Bradley & Lang 1994).

Table 3: Scores for the dimension of power distance measured on a Likert scale (Warmbrod, 2014).

Power distance	Median score 7	agree 59% (N=176)	neutral 15% (N=45)	disagree 26% (N=79)

Likert scale (1-5)	Single-item scores:					Total-item scores		
Survey questions:	1 strongly agree	2 agree	3 neutral	4 disagree	5 strongly disagree	agree	neutral	Disagree
Q7:	20% (N=20)	29% (N=29)	12% (N=12)	33% (N=33)	6% (N=6)	49% (N=49)	12% (N=12)	39% (N=39)
Q8:	21% (N=21)	41% (N=41)	11% (N=11)	25% (N=25)	2% (N=2)	62% (N=62)	11% (N=11)	27% (N=27)
Q9:	20% (N=20)	45% (N=45)	22% (N=22)	9% (N=9)	4% (N=4)	65 % (N=65)	22% (N=22)	13% (N=13)

Source: Own research

The following descriptions display the views that foreign professionals working in Poland hold on the Polish leadership style:

- "*It is very official and hierarchical and kind of traditional. Not flexible, not empowering*." (Marketing Consultant, US)
- "*Traditional and top-down: the manager is the one who leads, and the manager is the one who is right*." (Quality Inspector, Sweden)
- "*The management style is directive and aggressive. It is one way, like an order. You have to do it, and better don't question it too much. People are used to taking it and living with it whatever the consequences*." (Finance Director, Germany)
- "*Hierarchical, but in a bad way. Anything can happen. Polish corporate culture is chaotic and unpredictable*." (IT Administrator, Belarus: change)
- "*Polish style of leading is old-school, such as: `I am the authority, so you should respect me, no matter what happens*." (Account Executive, France)

Of all the linguistic resources used to impart attitude, adjectives are the most common. Most of them express negative judgements referring to "*capacity*" ("*unpredictable*", "*chaotic*", "*inflexible*"), "*normality*" ("*old-school*", "*traditional*", "*official*") and "*propriety*" ("*aggressive*, "*hierarchical*", "*directive*", "*disempowering*", "*not transparent*") (Martin & White 2005: 53). Such descriptions construe a picture of Polish leadership as coercive and autocratic, reflecting norms and values which the business psychologist Santorski (1998) links with the early stages of ethical business development. Drawing on Starcher's (1997) theory of ethics, Santorski traces the transition in Polish consciousness across three initial stages out of the six posited by the scholar. In stage one, decisions and actions happen according to the "*law of the jungle*" or the "*might makes right*" principle. In stage two, labelled "*anything goes*", business decisions continue to be focused on self-centred gain, with little sensitivity expressed towards the other parties. Finally, stage three refers to a "*short-term maximising of profits*" and higher conformity to the rule of law. It is interesting to see how the language used by foreign professionals describing their experience with Polish management ("*take it and live with it whatever the consequences*", "*no matter what*", and "*anything can happen*") reflects the early stages of ethical awareness, which as Starcher (1997) and Santorski (1998) point out, characterise emerging, command economies.

4.4 Confrontation

Research demonstrates that cultures also differ in their attitudes towards voicing and challenging opinions (Fitzgerald, 2003; Hall, 1976; Lewis, 2006). Meyer (2014), places such attitudes on a "*disagreement*" scale, mapping a continuum of behaviours, from confrontational to non-confrontational, on which northern countries, such as Denmark, Netherlands, and Germany but also Israel, France and Italy, show the highest acceptance of open conflicts. For Germans, who put scientific truth above face concerns, a direct disagreement is a positive demonstration of objectivity ("*sachlichkeit*"). This view does not hold true, however, for members of East Asian cultures, such as China, Korea and Japan, who perceive a strongly worded argument as a form of personal attack and consider it damaging to interpersonal harmony (Nisbett, 2005).

Though research on any uniquely Polish style of disagreement is scarce from a cross-cultural perspective (see Wierzbicka, 1991), evidence from other studies (Fitzgerald 2003, Kurtyka 2019) suggests that in Slavic cultures, strong personal opinions are seen as natural and are expected to be shared "*without any thought for other people's views and feelings*" (Fitzgerald, 2003: 138). The results from our research paint a more varied picture. A total median-item score shows that Poland occupies the middle position on the "*disagreement*" spectrum (Figure 4). The summated score derived from counting responses to multiple items on the scale reveals that 39% of the respondents described the Polish style of interaction as confrontational, while 37% of respondents defined it as non-confrontational (Table 4).
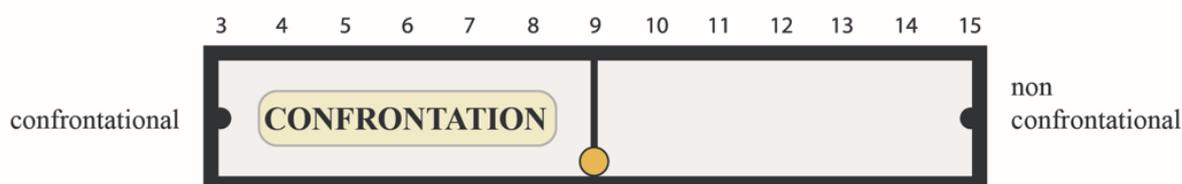
Figure 4: Semantic differential displaying perceptions of Polish communication patterns on the scale of confrontation (Bradley and Lang 1994).

Table 4: Scores for the dimension of confrontation measured on a Likert scale (Warmbrod, 2014).

Confrontation	Median score 9					agree 39% (N=117)	neutral 24% (N=71)	disagree 37% (N=112)
Likert scale (1-5)	Single-item scores:					Total-item scores		
Survey questions:	1 strongly agree	2 agree	3 neutral	4 disagree	5 strongly disagree	agree	neutral	disagree
Q10:	4% (N=4)	49% (N=49)	22% (N=22)	22% (N=22)	3% (N=3)	53% (N=53)	22% (N=22)	25% (N=25)
Q11:	5% (N=5)	35% (N=35)	31% (N=31)	23% (N=23)	6% (N=6)	40% (N=40)	31% (N=31)	29% (N=29)
Q12:	4% (N=4)	20% (N=20)	18% (N=18)	48% (N=48)	10% (N=10)	24 % (N=24)	18% (N=18)	58% (N=58)

Source: Own research

The stories collected from the interviews shed more light on the behavior of Poles displayed during discussions and arguments. A Ukrainian project manager for a major tech firm moved to Poland to undertake doctoral research. When asked to share her experience from the academic and corporate sectors, she offered the following observations:

"*Polish people are very open when it comes to expressing ideas. If they have something to say, they are likely to share it openly, and nothing will stop them. Whether it is a one-to-one conversation, a team meeting or a chat with colleagues in a pub – it is irrelevant. I recall a co-worker telling others in the kitchen the other day about his health issues and why he gave up on the sport. All of a sudden, there was a fiery discussion, with people divided into teams shouting vigorously*".

According to a Japanese electronics engineer, Poles do not shy away from stating their opinions, and if there is a small trace of doubt on their part, they are likely to share it with others, including their boss. Such behaviour is a clear path to breaking a relationship in Asian societies where people are accustomed to avoiding conflicts. As he explains:

"*Although one can see that the higher management in Poland is consciously adapting their strong disagreeing habits to match the Japanese norm: that is, expressing their opinions in a subtle or roundabout manner, it is not really their style. Most of my Japanese colleagues would agree that Poles are known for uninhibited emotional expression*".

While in Japanese society, the rules of conversation dictate that one should take account of the feelings of another person, the Polish "*script of spontaneity*" (Wierzbicka, 1999) allows one to voice their opinions and vent negative emotions freely. As Wierzbicka (1999: 262) aptly points out, "*In this cultural universe (..) there is a need to express feelings and to express them now, without thinking about them and without trying to analyse, shape or suppress them*". The observations of the Tokyo-born engineer reflect this behavioural pattern. He states that in the eyes of the Japanese, Poles are impatient, frequently interrupt and leave very little time for the interlocutor to reflect on what had just been said during the conversation: "*I still struggle to get used to the style of meetings where the interlocutors are constantly interrupting each other or where silence is hardly tolerated, while people talk on top of each other. I learned that in Poland, I often have to ask people to let me finish the sentence*".

A different view of Polish behaviour observed during team meetings and public discussions emerges from the account of a British director commuting between Poland, Switzerland and Great Britain. In his account, Polish professionals are often quiet when they are asked to express their opinion. As the executive in charge of global operations recounts, audibly raising his voice: "*You spend hours talking about a subject and when you ask: Are you guys okay with that? – no one returns the answer. So, I try hard to get them into a state where this is a two-way conversation. An engaging conversation, but I do know they do not like to go against the current of things*". According to him, Polish professionals often abstain from voicing their views in public to preserve the impression that they are the experts, and the silence assists them with protecting their face in case they do not know the answer. For many of them, not having the right answer is a sign of failure. In the experience of a media analyst from Sweden, the adherence to workplace hierarchy in Poland shows itself in the style of behaviour accepted during conflict:

"*Between colleagues' Poles tend to be openly critical of the company's flaws, but the second a manager walks in the room, the employees make sure their opinion aligns with that of their superior. It seemed like avoiding a conflict was a higher priority than making yourself heard. I also saw this behaviour between colleagues on the same level. They could loudly discuss a topic, but ultimately would be "in violent agreement" with each other and not often challenge the status quo*".

4.5 Critical Evaluation

Performance reviews, professional development conversations and routine evaluations of employees' behaviours all call for sensitivity to the interlocutor's cultural background. Interestingly, the ease with which people communicate ideas in professional conversations, as measured by the directness scale, does not have a direct

bearing on how they express or respond to criticism. Often, cultures which score high on verbal directness or low contextuality occupy a lower position on the scale of critical evaluation and vice versa (Meyer, 2014). Meyer (Ibid.: 69) contrasts two types of communication styles in which managers typically express criticism: "*direct feedback*", which is communicated forcefully, often in public, with no attention placed on the interlocutor's feelings, and "*indirect feedback*", characterised by reticent and mitigated language, which serves to protect the feelings of the person receiving the critique. The majority of European countries fit squarely on the left side of the scale, led by Russia, Netherlands and Germany, who express their negative views openly. The right side of the spectrum is occupied by Asian countries, of which Thai, Cambodians, Indonesians and Japanese are the least direct evaluators (Ibid.: 70).

The concept of feedback only entered the Polish professional domain following the country's transition to democracy, offering an alternative to the only available approach to expressing critical views known as "*command, criticise, or crush*" (Klos-Sokol, 2015: 74). It is no wonder that in the eyes of researchers and practitioners specialising in the topic of evaluation, Poles are not yet seen as masters of critical finesse; still learning how to wrap critical comments in a language that is frank but non-judgemental, yet all too often oscillating between bluntness and sugar-coated politeness (Ibid.). The data obtained from our attitudinal survey indicates that a typically Polish style of communication is located in the middle of the feedback scale (Figure 5). The summated score reveals that 39% of foreign professionals evaluated the Polish negative feedback style as direct, while 37% of the respondents defined it as indirect (Table 5).
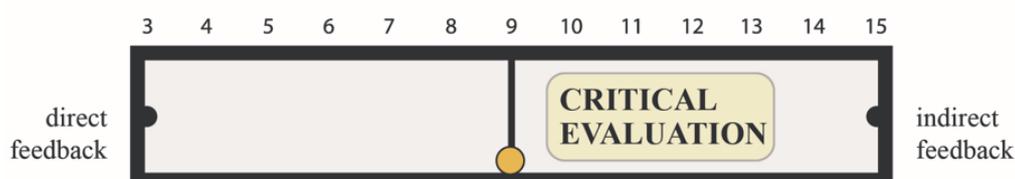

Figure 5: Semantic differential displaying perceptions of Polish communication patterns on the scale of critical evaluation (Bradley & Lang 1994).

Table 5: Scores for the dimension of critical evaluation measured on a Likert scale (Warmbrod, 2014).

Critical evaluation	Median score 9					agree 39% (N=117)	neutral 24% (N=73)	disagree 37% (N=110)
Likert scale (1-5)	Single-item scores:					Total-item scores		
Survey questions:	1 strongly agree	2 agree	3 neutral	4 disagree	5 strongly disagree	agree	neutral	disagree
Q13:	9% (N=9)	40% (N=40)	17% (N=17)	20% (N=20)	14% (N=14)	49% (N=49)	17% (N=17)	34% (N=34)
Q14:	9% (N=9)	19% (N=19)	21% (N=21)	39% (N=39)	12% (N=12)	28% (N=28)	21% (N=21)	51% (N=51)
Q15:	10% (N=10)	30% (N=30)	35% (N=35)	18% (N=18)	7% (N=7)	40% (N=40)	35% (N=35)	25% (N=25)

Source: Own research

In the opinion of a German senior manager, the Polish cultural attitude to evaluation is "*peculiar*" and requires a special approach. Though in general, Poles like to share their feedback openly and if something is not good, they will most likely voice their concerns, when faced with criticism, they expect softness and sensitivity: "*In the Polish culture there is allowance towards expressing negative opinions with no distinction being made whether you address men or women. You shouldn't say things too directly, but you are expected to voice criticism*". The manager admitted that over the years of working in Poland, he has learned to express his feedback with caution by using a wrap technique, such as layering negative statements with positive ones or using examples instead of relying on opinions.

In the eyes of a Ukrainian project manager working in IT, Polish managers can be rather direct in their critical assessments. There is a belief that it is better to express opinions bluntly than to sacrifice the truth for the sake of diplomacy. But it is the strong mixture of influences stemming from the U.S and Western Europe which, according to the data analyst, defines the Polish attitude to feedback: "There is a real effort here in Poland to combine direct communication with politeness. Like saying "*there are clear things to improve upon, but generally you are doing fine*". So, I think Poles have merged and adjusted those two styles, which works well in business". Admitting the Polish propensity towards sharing honest opinions, the manager contends that Poles, just like their Ukrainian neighbours, are not used to giving and receiving feedback at work. She points to a strong influence of Soviet-style governance, which suppressed freedom of expression and restricted opportunities for professional development in Slavic countries. In her words: "*We are still learning to work with feedback, but self-defensiveness sits deeply in our roots*".

According to a British marketing specialist in the IT industry, Polish professionals struggle with providing bold or challenging feedback. One of the difficulties he encountered while working with Poles and the Russians was that they would still give a strong impression that they understood what they were asked to deliver despite

not having the faintest idea: "*I think they are trying to preserve the image that they are the best at what they do and feel bad if they say they don't understand it. Admitting openly that they don't know what to do is a sign of failure*". A similar attitude was observed by a German marketing consultant, who noted an almost complete lack of questions during presentations he delivered in Poland, in direct contrast to the fierce conversations he had enjoyed with his Dutch, German and Scandinavian clients. He notes that the Polish "*habit*" of abstaining from contesting his ideas deprives Polish employees of opportunities to learn from his training. He also mentions misunderstandings which occur as a result of withdrawn information. As he recounts:

"*In the last four years that I have worked in Poland, there were hardly a few people who stood up and said publicly ", Sorry, I did not get your point. Can you explain it again?". As nobody is doing that, I have been forced to rely on clarifications every time I deliver for the Polish audience. I have to ask them if everything is clear. Because even if 80% of people are okay with the content, there will still be 20% of those who will keep silent and lead to a misunderstanding*".

According to an Indian engineer and lecturer, most miscommunications arise when Poles who are working in English don't acknowledge whether they have understood the questions. Their reluctance to provide on-the-spot feedback creates a rich ground for misunderstandings because people often go about things in the wrong way instead of doing what they were expected to do.

5. Conclusions

Our findings reaffirm the results obtained by cross-cultural scholars and consultants (Bridgman, 2015; Chlopicki, 2017; Gesteland, 2012; Hofstede, 2001; Lewis, 2006), who, on a scale of language behaviours, place Poland halfway between two extremes. The middle scores have been noted on most communication dimensions examined in our survey. Statistical analysis with the application of boxplots and a semantic differential showed that on most communication aspects, the median responses oscillate around the value of 9 or neutrality. Only in the case of the power-distance dimension can we notice a greater orientation towards the higher end of the scale, denoting a hierarchical approach. An in-depth analysis of discursive stances that foreign speakers construed as participants in professional interactions attend to numerous tensions, contradictions and ambivalences, which characterise the Polish style of communicating. These point to a special position of Poland as a country shaped by diverse norms and traditions – possibly an outcome of its borderline geography and extremely tumultuous history. Situated between Germany and Russia, influenced by the Soviet authority, Catholic conservatism and modern American values, Polish culture incorporates a mix of versatile features, which are puzzling to foreigners and difficult to explain by Poles themselves (Gesteland, 2012; Lewis, 2006). However, this finding is perhaps in considerable part due to the relatively narrow range of cultural groups represented in the sample – 65% of respondents were from Europe, only 11% from Asia, and none from China ¬- and the results are likely conditioned by this. Thus, additional research is needed whereby a more representative and balanced sample of different cultures is included.

The stylistic characteristics that foreign nationals interviewed for our study assigned to Polish professionals reveal the presence of culture-specific norms governing social interactions in Poland, which Anna Wierzbicka (1999) refers to as scripts of "*sincerity*" and "*spontaneity*". As the Polish norms prioritise the feelings of the speaker and not those of the addressee, the risk of relationship-damaging incidents is higher if the interlocutor comes from a culture which values harmony or a display of positive emotions. Consequently, both Japanese and North American respondents interviewed in our study expressed their concerns with the Polish degree of honesty. The appearance of features from the low-context style has been, on the other hand, positively evaluated by German-speaking partners and professionals working with DACH communities. Both groups praised the Polish matter-of-fact tone in professional interactions, equating it with clarity, pragmatism and organisational effectiveness.

On the other hand, our findings also show that instances of veiled or ambivalent language correlate with requests and denials. More research is still needed to establish the exact context where directness and clarity take a less important place than relational concerns. We would claim that the Polish cultural value of sincerity clashes in such instances with the equally important principle of cordiality, which finds its linguistic expression in the form of veiled questions and affirmative answers. The unwillingness of Polish professionals to communicate or deny the request in a direct manner poses a major barrier to trust building and causes irritation among members of Anglo-Saxon cultures.

Many quoted examples of business situations demonstrate that Polish professionals are reluctant to voice their views in public, challenge the prevailing status-quo or admit mistakes in the company of important persons. The Polish leadership style was classified as top-down and autocratic by almost 60% of foreign respondents, while the passive, conforming attitude was attributed to the Communist legacy and correlated with a higher likelihood of misunderstanding. Our analysis confirms the importance of context as the key variable for predicting Polish people's behaviour within professional settings. The way in which those different styles are perceived and interpreted on the international scene depends largely on the degree of cultural proximity, in particular, a hierarchy of values and expectations for appropriateness that members of different cultural backgrounds hold in specific situations.

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Table 6: Survey questions.

Directness
Q1: Polish business professionals say openly what they mean.

Q2: Polish business professionals speak in short sentences and use precise words and terms. Q3: Polish business professionals tend to speak their minds, even if this results in the loss of face or disruption of group harmony.
Emotionality Q4: Polish business professionals value spontaneity and openly express their emotions during business interactions. Q5: It is easy to read the emotions of Polish business professionals from their facial expressions and gestures. Q6: Polish business professionals often lose their temper or react emotionally in stressful situations.
Power distance Q7: Polish business professionals use formal names and official titles when addressing each other. Q8: When Polish business professionals disagree with their boss or a person of a higher rank, they will abstain from voicing their views in public. Q9: Polish business professionals show a lot of respect for formal guidelines and company policies.
Confrontation Q10: When faced with dissent or a different way of thinking, Polish business professionals openly voice their opinions. Q11: When involved in a dispute at work where team members challenge each other Polish business professionals to take a firm stand against their colleagues. Q12: Polish business professionals tend to deal with conflict situations in an aggressive way.
Critical evaluation Q13: When Polish business professionals give negative feedback or express critical comments, they use direct and blunt language as opposed to adopting a diplomatic tone. Q14: It is common for Polish business professionals to deliver negative, critical feedback in public. Q15: In situations requiring voicing negative news or unpopular opinions, Polish business professionals take little notice of peoples' feelings.

Source: Own survey (adapted from Meyer 2014, 2021; Molinsky 2013).

Table 7: Descriptive statistics of the respondents

Variable	Parameter	Overall (N=100)
Age (years)	N	100
	Mean (SD)	35.94 (8.53)
	Median (IQR)	35 (30 - 40)
	Range	21-69
Gender	Male	65% (N=65)
	Female	35% (N=35)
Professional level	Associate	11% (N=11)
	Specialist	27% (N=27)
	Expert	12% (N=12)
	Manager	26% (N=26)
	Senior Leader	15% (N=15)
	Freelancer	9% (N=9)

Nationality				
Africa 8% (N=8) Egyptian 2% (N=2), Mauritian 2% (N=2), Moroccan 1% (N=1), Tunisian 1% (N=), Senegalese1% (N=1), South African 1% (N=1)	**America 16% (N=16)** Argentinian 1% (N=1), Brazilian 4% (N=4), Canadian 2% (N=2), Mexican 3% (N=3), American 6% (N=6)	**Asia 11% (N=11)** Azerbaijani 3% (N=3), Indian 5% (N=5), Japanese 1% (N=1), Taiwanese 1%, (N=1), Vietnamese 1% (N=1)	**Australia 1% (N=1)** Australian 1% (N=1)	**Europe 64% (N=64)** Belarusian 2% (N=2), Belgian 2% (N=2), British 7% (N=7), Dutch 3% (N=3), Estonian 1% (N=1), French 7% (N=7), German 6% (N=6), Greek 1% (N=1), Hungarian 2% (N=2), Italian 6% (N=6), Portuguese 12% (N=12), Romanian 2% (N=2), Russian 1% (N=1), Spanish 6% (N=6), Swiss 1% (N=1), Turkish 3% (N=3), Ukrainian 2% (N=2),

Source: Online survey

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