

Three Peoples Divided by a Common Language: Cultural Pitfalls in International Negotiations Between the United States and the United Kingdom and Ireland

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Abstract: There is a general assumption that there is no serious communication barrier among speakers of a common language. This action research study examines that assumption in the context of intercultural communication among three English-speaking teams, with each team representing a major national travel organization located in the USA, Ireland, and the UK respectively. The results of an online survey sent to all participants (N = 82) indicate stark differences between the US and the UK/Ireland respondents' perceptions of the quality of communication and the effectiveness of their cooperation on a day-to-day basis. The causes of these differences are examined, recommendations are offered for ways in which cultural pitfalls can be avoided, and suggestions are provided for avenues for future research.

Keywords: common language, negotiation, action research.

1. Introduction

The English and Americans are two peoples divided by a common language.

This statement is widely attributed to Ireland's George Bernard Shaw, even though this observation never appeared in any of his writings. Yet most English-speaking peoples do not realize just how great the differences can be between British, Irish and American English. According to Swaab, Postmes, and Spears (2008), there are over 4,000 words used every day in the United States that are not in the lexicon of British and Irish English. For example, "bleachers", "busboy", "podiatrist", "odometer", and "valance" are not used at all in the UK or Ireland, while British English terms such as "over the moon", "flyover", "dual carriageway" and "slip road" are meaningless to most Americans. Similarly, "blackguard", "craic", and "Taoiseach" are generally meaningless to non-Irish speakers of English (the latter two being Irish words that are commonly used by English speakers in Ireland).

However, the three countries are close trading partners, and both the UK and Ireland are major recipients of foreign direct investment by US-based firms. The Republic of Ireland, in particular, has emerged as a key stakeholder in relations between US firms and their operations in the United Kingdom and the rest of the European Union, with many US-based multinationals having established primary or support facilities in Ireland.

Since good communication among trading partners is essential to successful business relationships, it is appropriate to identify factors that may create barriers to effective communication, especially within a common language, and to consider ways of mitigating them. As Shenkar notes in a testimonial on the back cover to Piekkari, Welch and Welch (2015), the quality of communication between a firm and its employees, customers, suppliers and partners overseas is crucial to the firm's success:

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[Language is] a key international business variable that we all too often take for granted. Language is and will remain a critical component of business performance in a global environment.

Although much research has been done on intercultural communication among organizations that do not share a common language (e.g., Brannen, Piekkari & Tietze 2014; Feely & Harzing 2003; Harzing & Pudelko 2013; Neeley & Dumas 2015), there is a general assumption that there is no serious communication barrier among speakers of a common language. This assumption has been reinforced in the international business literature by studies that have found similar cultural values among Anglophones (e.g. Hofstede 1983, 2001; Ronen & Shenkar 1985; Schwartz 1992). Yet even though cultural values in the USA, the UK and the Republic of Ireland are thought to be similar, subtle differences persist that spill over into both linguistic and non-linguistic behaviors. Anecdotal evidence suggests that US executives, for example, often find it difficult to adjust to living in the UK or Ireland, since they arrive with the expectation that life in these countries will be similar to life at home; over time, the subtle differences in both cultural values and language use can create cognitive dissonance, triggering culture shock. Even short-term trips across the Atlantic can cause confusion as Americans mistake the ground floor for the first floor, a subway for an entrance to the Underground, and look for the animal at the zebra crossing or the circus in Piccadilly. The difference between hoods and bonnets, trunks and boots can make even negotiating one's way around a rental car more difficult. In business meetings, further confusion occurs when the British/Irish party wants to table a topic on the agenda while the US party agrees and then, contrary to expectations, refuses to discuss the topic further.

This empirical study examines intercultural communication among marketing teams within the travel sector of three key international motor club associations, based in the USA, the UK, and the Republic of Ireland. Hereafter, the employees in Ireland will be referred to as Irish; the employees in the UK will be referred to as British, to include English, Welsh and Scots. This article is structured as follows: first, we present a background to the marketing alliance, the research questions that motivated this study, and a discussion of the research design. Then we review the literature on cultural values and intercultural communication, and specifically on communication and negotiation between the USA, the UK and Ireland, followed by a section on the research method. The results of the data analysis are then presented and discussed, and we conclude with the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

In 1988, the three travel organizations covered by the study signed a mutual alliance agreement to share best practices in order to cross-sell one another's travel services and align their business unit strategies. Later, the agreement included promoting one another's online products. In terms of revenue performance, this international relationship has been very strong for 30 years. The teams communicate with one another at least weekly via email, telephone and, occasionally, video conferencing.

However, there have been a number of communication issues and challenges with product development based on review guidelines. The supervisor of the American team received contradictory feedback from the teams: while the American team expressed satisfaction with the conduct of the regular meetings, the British and Irish teams expressed dissatisfaction and frustration with the American team and complained that the Americans were sometimes difficult to understand. Even though the Americans, Irish and British speak a mostly common language, there appeared to be an opportunity to improve the understanding of each organization's needs and project initiatives by promoting cultural awareness and clearer verbal communication. In addition, the initial feedback received by the supervisor of the US marketing team indicated that many US team members viewed these as minor issues

while their counterparts in the UK and Ireland considered them to be a potential threat to the alliance, so there was a need to investigate further to confirm that the partnership continued to be beneficial to all three parties.

The following research questions drove this study:

1. Does the use of a common language affect the quality of communication with the participants' counterparts in the USA or UK/Ireland?
2. To what extent has the relationship with the partner(s) in USA or UK/Ireland been beneficial for the participants' organization?
3. To what extent do the participants enjoy working with their counterparts in the USA or UK/Ireland?

The impetus for this study was the perception by the British and Irish teams that the communication issues with the US team posed a threat to the alliance, so action research was determined to be the most effective way to clearly identify the issues and to design appropriate action to remedy the situation. Action research is a commonly used paradigm for management research (Eden & Huxham 1996); it is intended to focus on changing the organization by reflecting on the data that is gathered, designing appropriate action and developing theory based on the research findings. Action research differs from academic research in that practitioners need to gather data quickly in order to make timely decisions but, like academic research, it should be grounded in theory. Because the investigator is seeking an answer to a specific problem or issue, the method used to gather data is often specific to the situation and cannot be applied to a different population, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. In this case, the supervisor of the US team was in the position to involve the members of all three teams in the research study, putting him in the role of both an investigator and a consumer of the research output. The next section reviews the literature that underpins this research study.

2. Intercultural communication and negotiation

2.1 Theoretical background

This study is based on two theoretical streams of research: intercultural communication Gudykunst (2003) and cultural values (Hofstede 1983, 2001; House et al. 2004; Meyer 2014). Gudykunst identified intercultural communication as exchanges in interpersonal settings between individuals from different cultures: for example, how a Japanese executive greets a German executive. Successful intercultural communication requires knowledge of cross-cultural communication: that is, understanding the differences in business customs, beliefs and values, and communication strategies between one's own culture and another culture. Language differences, high-context vs. low-context cultures (Hall 1976), and nonverbal differences such as power distance (Hofstede 1983, 2001), time orientation and attitudes towards negotiation and business meetings (Hall 1976) are all major factors that can affect intercultural communication (Samovar & Porter 2013). These are discussed in detail in the following sub-sections.

2.2 Cultural values and communication

In low-context cultures, which include most English-speaking nations, in-group and out-group relationships are flexible, there is little ambiguity in the spoken language, and decisions are made on the basis of facts rather than intuition. The UK, Ireland and the USA are generally regarded as low-context cultures. All three national cultures score highly on Hofstede's (1983) *Individualism* dimension (≥ 70) and low on the *Power Distance* dimension (≤ 40), suggesting that in all three national cultures hierarchy in the workplace is established for convenience, superiors are accessible, and managers rely on individual employees and teams

for their expertise. Furthermore, both managers and employees expect to be consulted, information is shared frequently, and communication is informal, direct and participative (Hofstede et al. 2010). However, Martin (2005: 237) comments on the “indirectness, face, lack of confrontation and non-assertiveness” that has been observed of communication among Irish speakers of English, while the GLOBE study of national cultures (House et al. 2004) recorded a relatively low score for Ireland on the equivalent of the *Individualism* dimension, and a relatively high score for perceptions of *Power Distance*; these findings indicate a greater importance of the context of communication among English speakers in Ireland.

2.3 Time orientation

The perception of time is another aspect of culture that can affect communication styles (Hall 1976). The monochronic approach views time as a precious resource that is linear and sequential, with a focus on scheduling activities and completing them one at a time; monochronic cultures include the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic nations, such as the USA, UK, Germany and the Netherlands. Polychronic orientations, as in much of southern Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, view time as an abundant resource that allows the simultaneous occurrence of many things and the involvement of many people. Although most scholars include English-speaking Ireland among the monochronic cultures, some view Ireland as being closer to the polychronic cultures of southern Europe, such as Portugal, Spain and Italy (Tuleja 2009).

3. Negotiation and the communication process

Even within the same culture, misunderstandings can occur in negotiations if the parties are unaware of each other’s goals, assumptions, and preferred communication and negotiation style. In an international business context, the potential for miscommunication and incorrect assumptions is magnified, since culture can have a profound influence on people’s preferred negotiating style.

3.1 Cultural values and negotiation

Negotiators from low *Power Distance* cultures tend to be comfortable with democratic structures and flat organizational hierarchies, shared authority, and the right to use power only in limited circumstances and for legitimate purposes (Minkov & Hofstede 2011). The US, UK and Ireland all fall into this category, with the caveat, as noted above, that the GLOBE study gives Ireland a higher score on *Power Distance*. Yet researchers have identified differences in negotiating styles between Europe and the USA. European dealmakers, in general, prefer to exchange information first, while negotiators from the United States tend to trade offers at the beginning (Lewis 2010). Gunia and his colleagues suggest that cultural attitudes toward interpersonal trust explain the differences in negotiating styles (Gunia, Brett, Nandkeolyar & Kamdar 2011). They found that American managers were more likely than their British counterparts to believe that an opposing negotiator was being honest with them. They also found that British negotiators were less likely than Americans to trust their negotiation partner, which resulted in lower joint gains. Meyer (2014) noted that although the USA and the UK are both classified as task-based societies, as opposed to relationship-based, the UK falls lower on her *Trusting* scale than the USA. Gunia and colleagues (2011) also state that the impact of a negotiator’s mindset (linear versus holistic) affects the successful use of the substantiation-and-offer strategy to negotiate joint gains. Linear thinkers tend to settle one issue at a time, while holistic thinkers delay agreement on single issues until they can see how all of the issues fit together. The British and Irish are considered more holistic thinkers than Americans and are continuously looking at “the big picture” compared with their American counterparts (Gunia et al. 2011).

Compared with many other cultures, Irish and British business professionals appear to approach their work in a more detached and emotionless way. Lewis (2010) observes that the Irish, compared to Americans, tend to be more low-key and inclined to seek harmony. Referring specifically to the people of England, and excluding the Welsh, Scots and Northern Irish who make up the rest of the UK, he notes that the English tend to look for objective facts and solid evidence, rendering emotional persuasion techniques futile. Similarly, facial expressions tend to be kept to a minimum in the UK, thus making it difficult to guess the thoughts and opinions of British negotiators. This behavior is not suspicious or mistrustful; it is just the typical professional approach in the UK. While Americans tend to use aggressive selling techniques, such as derogatory remarks about the competition, such a tactic would probably have very little positive influence on British and Irish business partners and actually be counterproductive (Katz 2006).

Although British and Irish negotiators are rated as moderately aggressive, US negotiators are amongst the highest rated in perceived aggressiveness (Gunia et al. 2011). Katz (2006) observed that while US negotiators tend to seek a win-win proposition, they may be very competitive in their approach to negotiations, starting out with a firm bargaining position; they tend to be energetic, confident, and persistent; they enjoy arguing their positions and see things universally: i.e., they like to talk about broad applications of ideas; they tend to concentrate on one issue at a time; they focus on areas of disagreement, not areas of commonality or agreement; they prefer closure and certainty to open-endedness or fuzziness.

Negotiators from monochronic cultures such as the USA and the UK tend to prefer prompt beginnings and endings, deal with one agenda item at a time, prefer to talk in sequence, and view lateness as devaluing or as evidence of a lack of respect toward the overall business environment (Minkov & Hofstede 2011). Another dimension of time relevant to negotiations is the focus on past, present, or future. The United States tends to be oriented to the present and the near future (Hofstede et al. 2010); indeed, the US and Ireland both score low on Hofstede's *Long-Term Orientation* (LTO) dimension, indicating a focus on the present and short term. In contrast, the UK's score on LTO is in the middle of the scale, so no clear determination is possible.

3.2 Business meetings

As in the United States, business meetings in the UK and Ireland are an intrinsic feature of corporate life. They vary in their style and content compared to the United States in terms of overall demeanor but are seen as a key element of business communications. In the United States, the structure of meetings tends to be looser, while the British and Irish tend to focus more on the end goal. It is a standard practice in all three cultures to ensure that agendas are circulated in advance of any meeting, to enable everyone to be fully prepared to provide feedback prior to each meeting (Katz 2006). Technology has extended its influence into the world of meetings; video conferencing and conference calls mean that managers do not have to travel too far to attend a meeting. Telecommuting saves organizations the costs of travel and time but does not allow face-to-face personal contact, which some cultures may find unsatisfactory, like the United States (Gunia et al. 2011).

To summarize, the literature indicates that while there are many cultural similarities between the US, the UK and Ireland, very few studies focus specifically on cultural differences between the three. Nevertheless, subtle cultural differences do exist that may have an impact on the effectiveness of intercultural communication, such as differences in intonation, register and pitch (Crystal 2003), as well as differences in assumptions and expectations about the purpose of business meetings and how they should be conducted. Those differences that do exist are not clearly defined and, in many cases, there is no

consensus among researchers about the nature of the differences or their impact, if any, on effective intercultural communication. Therefore, we chose to conduct an exploratory study to elucidate these differences in the convenience sample available. In the following section, we explain how we developed and administered an online survey to the employees of the three travel companies who communicate regularly with one another.

4. Method

The research questions sought information about the respondents' perceptions and opinions of, and attitudes towards, the alliance and their own interactions with their transatlantic counterparts, so a descriptive research design was used within an action-research paradigm. The goal was to identify aspects of the alliance where there was incongruity between the US team on one side and the UK and Irish teams on the other and, based on the data gathered, to develop action items to realign goals and improve communication. Two online surveys were prepared, each consisting of nineteen items with responses on a five-point Likert-type scale (1-*Strongly Disagree* to 5-*Strongly Agree*) related primarily to communication and negotiation. Due to the relatively small population available ($N = 83$), the survey was not pretested, but the two versions were reviewed by an academic third party to ensure face validity and the absence of ambiguous or confusing items.

The items were presented in random order and several items were reverse scored to reduce the possibility of common-method variance (Chang, Witteloostuijn & Eden 2010). Five items asked about the respondents' perceptions of the ease of communicating with their counterparts in the partner organization(s) across the Atlantic; four items focused on their perceptions of negotiating with those counterparts; six items asked about the perceived benefits of the partnership with the other organization(s); three items asked about their satisfaction with interpersonal interactions with the counterparts. A further item, not reported here, asked about the respondents' favorite aspect of working with the partner organization(s), and additional questions gathered data on the respondents' length of service with their employer and demographic data. The instructions for completing the survey are attached in the appendix.

One survey was sent via email, with a brief cover letter asking for voluntary participation, to the 39 British employees and 23 Irish employees ($N = 62$) who handle the day-to-day relationship between their motor club organization and the American partner. The second survey, also with a brief cover letter asking for voluntary participation, was sent to the 21 employees of the American motor club in the USA, and for these employees the British and Irish clubs were identified as the partner organization. The survey for the US employees contained identical items about their perceptions of the quality of communication and negotiation with the British and Irish teams and of the benefit of the partnership to their own organization.

5. Analysis and results

5.1 British/Irish views of the alliance

Only one person did not respond to the survey that was sent to the British and Irish teams, which resulted in an overall 98.4% response rate ($N = 61$). Of the respondents, 70% had worked with their respective motor club for over five years and 59% had interacted directly with the US partner for more than two years. As expected, all 38 of the British team resided in Great Britain, and all 23 of the Irish team lived in Ireland, but there were several differences in national origin: 39 team members were of British origin, 21 of Irish origin, and 1 of American origin. Fifty-three respondents (87%) had visited the USA at least once. The percentage of males to females was 56% to 44% and the majority of the respondents (84%)

were under 55 years of age. Table 1 lists the survey items and summary results; for convenience and clarity, the items in Table 1 are grouped into four general categories: (1) communication, (2) negotiation, (3) benefits of the alliance and (4) personal interaction. However, as noted above, the items on the administered survey were in random order.

Table 1: Survey items and summary results.[‡]

Item (* = reverse-scored item)	Mean/mode Britain/Ireland	Mean/mode USA
*I have difficulty understanding my American counterparts.	4.0 / 5.0	2.1 / 2.0
*Language is the most difficult barrier when it comes to working with my American counterparts.	4.8 / 5.0	1.9 / 2.0
I enjoy the communication style of my American counterparts.	3.1 / 3.0	5.0 / 5.0
I can clearly understand my American counterparts.	3.3 / 3.0	4.2 / 5.0
My communication style matches my American counterparts.	3.1 / 3.0	4.4 / 5.0
I enjoy negotiating with the American team on various projects and deliverables.	3.8 / 4.0	5.0 / 5.0
My motor club has equal footing when it comes to negotiating or discussing topics with the American team.	4.8 / 5.0	4.6 / 5.0
Mutual negotiations with all three teams have been ultimately successful.	4.5 / 5.0	4.7 / 5.0
Weekly meetings between all three partners are conducted in an effective manner.	2.5 / 2.0	5.0 / 5.0
The American team provides insights that my motor club did not think of.	4.2 / 5.0	4.1 / 5.0
My motor club has benefited from working directly with the American partner.	4.3 / 5.0	4.4 / 5.0
My expectations have been met while working with the American team.	3.7 / 4.0	4.2 / 5.0
I consider the American team open-minded.	4.1 / 4.0	4.4 / 5.0
I consider the American team innovative.	4.3 / 4.0	3.9 / 4.0
I consider working with the American partner as a benefit to my organization.	4.2 / 4.0	4.6 / 5.0
In general, I enjoy working with the American partner and its American staff.	4.5 / 5.0	4.7 / 5.0
The American partner is very flexible company to work with.	3.7 / 3.0	4.8 / 5.0
I enjoy our partnership with the American partner.	4.8 / 5.0	4.9 / 5.0

[‡] Survey items sent to British and Irish teams; the US survey was similarly worded.

The results in Table 1 include the mean and mode scores for each item. They indicate positive feedback on the five-point scale in terms of personal interaction with the US team on the items *In general, I enjoy working with the American partner and its American staff* (mean 4.5) and *I enjoy our partnership with the American partner* (mean 4.8). However, the US team was viewed as somewhat inflexible (mean 3.7). Similarly, although most respondents had a positive view of the benefits of the alliance on most items (means >4.1), the mean score for *My expectations have been met while working with the American team* dropped to 3.7. In terms of negotiation with their US counterparts, most respondents expressed satisfaction with the outcomes of negotiation (mean 4.5) and with their organization being viewed as an equal by the American team (mean 4.8), but there was general dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of weekly meetings (mean 2.5), with 85% of the respondents scoring this item 3 or lower.

When asked what they enjoyed most about working with the US team, the most common answers were the revenue results (46%) and the American people (28%). The pattern of scores reflected general satisfaction with the outcomes of the alliance with the US partner, but some dissatisfaction with processes, in particular the perceived inflexibility on the US side, unmet expectations, and ineffective weekly meetings. The scores on communication items reflected further dissatisfaction with processes, including strong agreement with *Language is the most difficult barrier when it comes to working with my American counterparts* (mean 4.8) and *I have difficulty understanding my American counterparts* (mean 4.0). The scores on the three other *Communication* items also reflected perceived difficulties in communicating with the US team: *I enjoy the communication style of my American counterparts* and *My communication style matches that of my American counterparts* (both means 3.1); *I can clearly understand my American counterparts* (mean 3.3).

5.1 US views of the alliance

The second online survey was sent via email to the 21 employees of the US team, with all 21 returning completed surveys (100% response rate). Nineteen of the 21 team members were born and raised in United States, and 20 out of 21 members had worked with the alliance since its inception in 1988. The US team was significantly older than the UK/Ireland teams, with 76% falling into the 55 to 70 age bracket, versus only 16% in UK/Ireland; and 71% of the respondents had visited the UK or Ireland at least once. The general perspective from the US team was that everything was going extremely well with the alliance. All 21 US employees expressed strong agreement (5 on the scale) for the following three items: *I enjoy the communication style of my British and Irish counterparts*; *I enjoy negotiating with the British and Irish teams*; and *Weekly meetings with all three partners are conducted in an effective manner*.

Interestingly, the lowest score on the US survey was for the reverse-scored item *Language is the most difficult barrier when it comes to working with my British and Irish counterparts* with a score of 1.9, indicating strong disagreement with the statement. This compared with a score of 4.8 on the same item from the British and Irish teams. The only other item that scored below 3.9 was another reverse-scored item, *I have difficulty understanding my British and Irish counterparts*. Taken together, the scores on *Communication* indicate that the US team perceived few barriers to communication with their British and Irish counterparts. The US perspective on negotiation was similarly positive, with no items scoring below 4.6 on the five-point scale. There was convergence, too, among all teams' perspectives of the benefit of the alliance, although the US team viewed their counterparts as more flexible and less innovative than the British and Irish teams viewed them. When asked about the best part of working with their counterparts, the US results differed again, with 46% selecting "people (the team)" and 17% selecting "revenue results", in contrast to the British/Irish teams who preferred the revenue results (46%), followed by the US team (28%).

6. Discussion

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has occurred. – attributed to George Bernard Shaw

All three parties to the alliance found it to be beneficial to their own organization and reported that they enjoyed working with their transatlantic counterparts. However, there was a marked difference in their perceptions of the quality of communication with their partner organization(s), with the British/Irish teams viewing the mutual language as a

barrier to effective communication and the US team perceiving few problems in communicating with their counterparts.

6.1 Implications for managers

Key takeaways from the British/Irish survey show that three areas in particular scored low on the survey: negotiating with the US team; language as a means of communication; and the conduct of meetings. Supplementary written responses confirmed the general perception that that the US team members were too eager to launch products without proper quality assurance, would plan meetings for a shorter duration than needed, and were very shrewd negotiators.

Out of the 61 British/Irish surveys, 25 respondents (41%) stated that the Americans wanted everything done “too fast”. Several respondents also stated that American slang terms were used too often in meetings and caused confusion when US team members were presenting to the key travel executives of the British and Irish teams. According to the British and Irish travel executives who attended one such meeting, plans to launch marketing campaigns in the UK and Ireland that had been successful in the United States were hindered due to a lack of understanding of the information that was presented by the American team. Additionally, there were concerns surrounding the implementation and execution of each process presented by the Americans since there was a perception that “items tend to be rushed”.

The combined survey results indicate that all three teams appreciated the positive benefits and interactions of the alliance, with only minor differences in the scores on most items in these areas. Two areas of difference were *My expectations have been met while working with the [partner] team[s]* and *Our partner is very flexible to work with*; on both these items, the aggregate score of the US team was significantly higher than that of the British/Irish teams: 4.2 versus 3.7 and 4.8 versus 3.7, respectively.

It is evident from the survey results that there is a clear gap between the American team members’ perceptions of their own communication and negotiation styles and the perceptions of their British and Irish colleagues. As noted in the previous section, the British and Irish team members have strong reservations about the communication style of the US team, which one British respondent referred to as a “massive” struggle when working with the Americans, whereas the US team’s perceptions were that there were few barriers to effective communication. This disparity spills over to the teams’ perceptions of negotiation. Two negotiation items that stand out are *I enjoy negotiating with [partner] on various projects and deliverables* and *Weekly meetings between the partners are conducted in an effective manner*. Again, the US perceptions of these items were very positive, with an aggregate score of 5.0 for both items, while the British/Irish teams scored only 3.8 and 2.5 respectively.

Kimmel (1994) describes United States negotiators as hard to understand due to variance in word usage, and he ascribes this to a lack of racial or cultural homogeneity in the USA. While it is difficult to truly characterize any national or cultural approach to negotiation, generalizations can be helpful to the extent that they act as guides to working effectively with other cultures. Any generalization, however, depends on multiple contextual factors, including time, location, situation, goals, history between the parties, nature of the issue, individual preferences, interpersonal dynamics and mood.

There is an assumption that the common language shared by all three teams in our study should facilitate communication and collaboration on projects, but there is evidently a communication gap and a different perception of the negotiation process between the US team on one side and the British/Irish teams on the other. Some of the

differences could be ascribed to a generational gap between the US team and the British/Irish teams. However, research suggests that cultural factors might provide a better explanation of these differences. Hofstede (1983) found differences among the three countries in several cultural dimensions, including *Power Distance*, *Individualism*, and *Uncertainty Avoidance*. The lower scores on *Uncertainty Avoidance* and *Power Distance* for the UK and Ireland, compared to the USA, reflect a preference for flexibility and consensus building in negotiations.

Although both the UK and Ireland are classified as low-context cultures, researchers suggest that they are not as low context as the USA (Hall 1976, Martin 2005). Lewis (2010) noted that the Irish tend to be more low key than Americans and more inclined to seek harmony; Lewis further observed that the English prefer to avoid confrontation, often using understatement and humor in a way that is lost on Americans. These differences may explain why the British/Irish teams view the US negotiation style as aggressive, since their own preference is to avoid confrontation. Similarly, although both the UK and Ireland are classified as monochronic cultures, the UK is viewed as less monochronic than the USA (Hall 1976), while Ireland has been likened more to polychronic southern Europe (Tuleja 2009). Differences in perceptions of time can explain the British/Irish perceptions that Americans tend to rush things. The difference in attitude to time could also help to explain the different approach that Americans take to the negotiation process, preferring to deal with items sequentially whereas the British/Irish teams might prefer a more holistic approach (Gunia et al. 2011).

We may conclude that, although the cultural differences appear to be relatively small and in the case of low/high context not very well defined, they are sufficient to create different expectations and perceptions of communication and negotiation processes. This is useful information for the many US-based multinationals that have invested in Ireland recently. The American Chamber of Commerce in Dublin reported that over 700 US firms had established operations there by 2018, employing over 130,000 people (Holden, 2018). They include hi-tech firms such as Intel, Hewlett Packard, Apple, and Dell; pharmaceutical firms such as Boston Scientific, Medtronic, and Pfizer; and social media firms PayPal, Air BnB, Google and Facebook. In many cases, the Irish subsidiary is integrated closely into the company's worldwide operations, making the need for clear intercultural communication essential. With the UK having withdrawn from the European Union February 1, 2020, it is likely that more US multinational corporations will move part or all their operations from the UK to Ireland.

The results of this study suggest that there are dangers in grouping cultures together based on similarities in language or in values (e.g., Hofstede 1983; Hofstede et al. 2010; Ronen & Shenkar 1985). While such groupings may be conceptually appealing, they can overlook the subtle differences in speech (accents and dialects) and values that may create barriers to effective communication and different approaches to negotiation. Such groupings may reinforce the false perception that barriers to communication are minimal in cultures that share a common language. Social identity theory suggests that those who have a common linguistic identity share a sense of familiarity and find it easy to create and maintain interpersonal relationships and exchange knowledge (Fredriksson, Barner-Rasmussen & Piekkari 2006), but the results of this study suggest that a common native language is not a panacea for problems in effective cross-cultural communication.

Intercultural communication problems often occur simply because participants are not aware of potential cultural pitfalls or do not perceive that others fail to understand or appreciate their style of communication. In addition, as noted above, cultural differences

can result in different expectations and assumptions among the parties about how the communication and negotiation process should work. This seems to have been the case here since the US team was unaware of the frustrations experienced by the British/Irish team members, or the fact that their British/Irish colleagues viewed them as aggressive and over-demanding.

For decades, international business researchers and practitioners have urged the inclusion of cross-cultural training as part of the curriculum in business schools. Cross-cultural training within organizations, however, is typically reserved for employees who are about to undertake a foreign assignment, even though it is just as relevant for employees who deal on a regular basis with foreign customers, suppliers or partners – and even with co-resident colleagues who are from a different cultural background. The results of this study suggest that cross-cultural training is also appropriate for those employees who interact on a regular basis with customers, suppliers or partners who share a common language, but who are culturally distinct. In the present case, a relatively short (half-day) training program was sufficient to create awareness of the cultural differences as well as the communication and negotiation preferences of all parties to the alliance. The goal of such a training program is not to force one or other party to think or behave like another, but instead to identify areas of similarity and difference so that communication and negotiation can become more effective.

6.2 Limitations of the study and directions for future research

The first limitation concerns the descriptive action-research design, which is not as robust as testing hypotheses derived from the literature with the use of inferential statistics. However, the literature was not clear about the extent of the expected cultural differences between the USA, UK and Ireland. Therefore, the authors opted for a descriptive approach that would help identify the causes of the dysfunctional communication and allow swift remedial action to be taken.

This relates to the second limitation: the generalizability of the findings. Since the participants in the study were not a random sample of a larger population, it might be argued that other factors, such as organizational culture or the personal characteristics of the respondents, biased the responses and that the results cannot be generalized to the wider national populations. Although this is possible, it is unlikely since the respondents represented three separate, autonomous national travel organizations and, although the respondents were not selected at random, they represented the entire population of the three teams involved in the alliance. Furthermore, since the differences in communication and negotiation styles were supported at least in part by the literature on national cultural characteristics, there is no reason to infer that teams in a similar tri-national alliance in a different industry would not experience similar problems.

The third limitation concerns the possibility of social-desirability bias (Grimm 2010): the tendency of research subjects to give socially desirable responses instead of choosing responses that are reflective of their true feelings. It is possible that the US team members did not want to offend their international colleagues due to their perception that doing so might damage relationships within the alliance. Also, since one of the researchers was the immediate supervisor of the US team, it is possible that the US team members provided the answers that they thought he would wish to see. Again, both explanations are possible but unlikely. When their supervisor shared the results of the survey with them, the members of the US team were surprised that their British/Irish colleagues viewed the communication and negotiation processes much more negatively than they did and wanted to know why that was so. They appeared to have had no inkling of the frustration and dissatisfaction experienced by their

British/Irish counterparts. If they had provided socially desirable responses to the survey, it is very unlikely that they would have feigned surprise.

Finally, self-report survey items are open to the possibility of common-method variance (Chang et al. 2010). We sought to minimize this possibility *ex ante* by reverse scoring several items and by putting the items in random order.

Although sociolinguists recognize that how we speak and the choices that we make in vocabulary, syntax and style reflect our cultural values and norms, there is a paucity of research on the barriers to cross-cultural communication in the workplace within a shared language group. Scott (2000) emphasizes the importance of teaching English-language students the differences in vocabulary between US and British English, especially those variations that can impede communication. Academic research appears to be focused more on differences in pronunciation than on other sociolinguistic differences, so there needs to be more research on other linguistic and non-linguistic differences that can create barriers to communication among native speakers of different varieties of English.

There are also opportunities for further research into differences between many other English-speaking nations, such as between the USA and Canada, as well as across distinct cultural groups within a nation state, such as between the English and Scots in the UK, between West and East Coast Americans, and between Hispanic and Anglo Americans. Furthermore, the need to explore cultural differences within a language group applies to other languages that are geographically widespread or are used as a *lingua franca*, such as Spanish in Latin America, French in Francophone Africa, and English in south Asia and southern Africa. For differences at the national level, there are sufficient resources to provide a basic understanding of the cultural differences that exist, and this provides researchers with a wealth of opportunities to examine the potential pitfalls in intercultural communication; for differences at the sub-national level, however, there is much basic research yet to be done.

7. Conclusion

Few studies to date have examined intercultural communication between the USA, the UK and the Republic of Ireland. This study seeks to contribute to the literature by suggesting that subtle differences in cultural values may have a greater impact on effective transatlantic communication than hitherto expected.

The international marketing alliance between the three organizations surveyed has been very strong for thirty years; however, there have been a number of communication issues, challenges with product development, and apparent lack of cross-cultural understanding by all three parties. Even though the Americans, Irish and British speak a mostly common language, there is an opportunity to improve the communication of each team's needs and project initiatives by creating an awareness of cultural differences in communication and negotiation styles. In the initial feedback from the teams in the alliance, many American employees had viewed this as a minor issue; but their counterparts in the UK and Ireland considered it a threat to the alliance.

Therein lies an interesting paradox. The British and Irish consider the US team to be innovative, yet lackadaisical; nimble, but mired in process and committee review; great people, but ineffective at times. The Americans view the British and Irish as too process oriented, but effective in results; energetic, but slow in driving the product being developed. This study demonstrated that cultural and communication differences between Americans on the one hand and British and Irish on the other were present, and that they had an impact on how the three parties communicate with one another.

To paraphrase Shaw, is it correct to say that the British, Irish and Americans are three peoples divided by a common language? It can be argued that they are three peoples who are sometimes confused and distracted by the challenges of different communication styles and

preferences, but not necessarily divided by a common language. Both the British and Irish travel teams value and enjoy the partnership with the US partner, but the introduction of basic cross-cultural training can help to avoid the types of cultural pitfalls that might derail future negotiations between the three partners.

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Appendix: Survey instructions[¥]

Negotiations and discussion among USA, Britain & Ireland

Introduction - this survey will be used to understand the current state of negotiating, meeting, and working with your partners in the USA. In addition, this survey will ask what consistent items that you notice when working with members of the US travel team. Examples of a potential situation include: discussion of international marketing placements among the three companies and sharing best practices social media marketing through the companies' preferred social media networks. To gain further insight, we would like to understand what opportunities you see to improve, continue, or stop various negotiating tactics by your American counterparts. The key benefit of this study is to help guide the researchers toward what makes it easier for the three sister companies to work together more effectively and positively in order to drive more incremental revenue to each respective company. All responses will be anonymous.

How long have you been working at your motor club?

< 2 years 2-5 years 5-10 years > 10 years

How long have you worked directly with the American partner club?

< 2 years 2-5 years 5-10 years > 10 years

On a scale on 1 to 5, with 1 being Strongly Disagree and 5 being Strongly Agree, please provide the following insights on working with the American partner:

1 – Strongly Disagree 2 – Disagree 3 – Neutral 4 – Agree 5 – Strongly Agree

(See Table 1 for the complete survey.)

[¥] (Instructions sent to British and Irish teams; the US version was similarly worded.)