



Achieving synchrony: A foundational dimension of intercultural communication competence



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ABSTRACT

A substantial amount of research evidence exists to indicate that, synchrony, a state of symmetric or complementary nonverbal configurations and rhythms in face-to-face interactions, engenders a cohesive and cooperative communicative relationship between interactants. This theoretical essay examines the pertinent literature in psychology, anthropology, and communication to observe that: (a) synchrony is a universal phenomenon rooted in both biopsychological and sociocultural forces of entrainment; (b) differences in cultural synchronic systems render at least some level of stress-producing dyssynchrony in intercultural interactions; and (c) the challenge of dyssynchrony, in turn, presents an opportunity for individual communicators to initiate and facilitate synchrony in their intercultural interactions. Based on these observations, the author argues that a person's ability to foster synchrony is a basic dimension of intercultural communication competence, and explicates four theorems in which two categories of communication behaviors, individuation and consonance, and two identity orientations, inclusivity and security, are identified as key factors contributing to an individual's ability to foster intercultural synchrony.

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1. Introduction

The nature of social existence, for animals as well as humans, compels each individual to change his or her patterns of interaction, as the particular people with whom the interaction takes place come and go. In each encounter, the individual selects certain communication behaviors out of a wide range of possibilities, thereby succeeding or failing to achieve agreement with the interaction partner as to what is and what is not to take place subsequently. More often than not, the process of coming to a positive relational term is meta-communicated through implicit, nonverbal messages of interest, pleasure, respect, and cooperation, whereas interactants' sense of withdrawal, control, and conflict in each other's nonverbal messages tend to form a negative relational term, leading to a less than satisfactory outcome for either or both sides.

Synchrony, the focal concept in this theoretical essay, captures the state of a positive communicative relationship formed by the coming-together of the interactants' nonverbal behaviors. Arguing that an individual's ability to foster synchrony as a foundational dimension of what it takes to be a competent intercultural communicator, the author presents a detailed description of synchrony and its biopsychological and sociocultural origins, followed by an examination of cross-cultural variations in synchrony systems underlying the common problem of dyssynchrony in intercultural encounters. Building on these discussions, and utilizing some of the concepts pertaining to associative behaviors included in the contextual theory of

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interethnic communication (Kim, 2005), four theorems are explicated to identify a set of behavioral and psychological factors that increase the chances of achieving synchrony and, thereby, a positive relational term in intercultural communication.

1.1. Synchrony: definition

Synchrony is an interactional state that occurs when the participants' nonverbal behaviors, including kinesic behaviors (such as facial, hand, and bodily movements) and paralinguistic behaviors (such as the volume, pitch, and speed of vocal speech utterances) are coordinated smoothly both in form and in timing. The synchronic state of nonverbal configurations and rhythms reflects mutuality of attention, interest, and resonance, as well as perceived relational "entitativity" (Lakens, 2010), the sense of being together as a unit in a solid communicative relationship. The entitative occurrence is often hidden from the conscious awareness of individual communicators. Just as the sound from a radio station becomes crystal clear at the correct frequency level, the state of synchrony provides an immediate milieu that allows the interactants to comprehend and respond to each other's messages with fidelity. Each party brings forth a "baseline synchrony" or "self-synchrony," in which the normal physical and vocal configurations and rhythms constitute an internally congruent personal communication system. When two such baseline systems are meshed in a dynamic equilibrium, "no particular person is overburdened with or completely relieved of work, and, thus, the exchange of messages become efficient, clear, economical, and well timed" (Ruesch, 1951/1968, p. 34).

1.2. Synchrony and positive communicative relationship

An extensive body of empirical research provides evidence for a clear and consistent link between synchrony and a positive communicative relationship between interactants. Among the specific facets of a positive communicative relationship examined by researchers include: smooth and efficient interpersonal coordination (Bernieri, Reznick, & Rosenthal, 1988) and a "focused encounter" (Kendon, 1982) that enhance "coherence" and "rapport" (Field, Healy, Goldstein, & Guthertz, 1990; Miles, Nind, & Macrae, 2009; Sadler, Ethier, Gunn, Duong, & Woody, 2009; Trout & Rosenthal, 1980; Valdesolo, Ouyang, & DeSteno, 2010). Synchrony has been also demonstrated to increase perceived "personality similarity" (Feldstein & Welkowitz, 1978), "positive interpersonal judgment" (Cappella, 1981), "interpersonal warmth" (Feldstein & Welkowitz, 1978), "contact enjoyment" (Feldstein & Welkowitz, 1978), "emotional contagion" (Dallimore, Sparks, & Butcher, 2007; Rueff-Lopes, Navarro, Caetano, & Silva, 2014), "perceived persuasiveness" (Van Swol, 2013), and "perceived confidence" (Van Swol, 2013). In addition, synchrony has been found to promote the "perceptual sensitivity" or "cooperative ability," allowing individuals to engage in "joint action" directed to achieving shared interactional goals (Valdesolo et al., 2010).

Despite these and many other studies documenting empirical evidence linking synchrony to positive interactional outcomes, synchrony remains largely unaddressed in the intercultural communication competence literature. Accordingly, the present theoretical essay is aimed at beginning the process of bridging the existing gap in the literature. It does so by bringing the phenomenon of synchrony to the attention of interested intercultural communication competence researchers and putting forth an argument that a person's ability to foster synchrony is an important baseline dimension of intercultural communication competence.

2. Synchrony: an elaboration

Synchrony has been investigated mainly in anthropology, psychology, and, to a lesser extent, in communication. Within and across these disciplines, synchrony has been conceived, explained, and observed in different ways depending on the particular focal interests of investigators. Based on an examination of the wide-ranging literature, the author identifies and describes below some key details of the phenomenon of synchrony: (a) differing synchronic forms of nonverbal configurations and rhythms; (b) theoretical accounts explaining the role of biopsychological and sociocultural forces shaping an individual's synchronic forms; and (c) theoretical accounts explaining differences across cultures in synchronic systems.

2.1. Synchronic forms: symmetric and asymmetric

The literature reveals that all indicators of synchrony employed in empirical studies involve some notion of behavior adjustment to another. These behavioral adjustment patterns can be classified into two broad categories according to symmetric and asymmetric forms of nonverbal configurations and rhythms created between interactants (Kim, 2012).

Symmetric synchrony occurs when interactants pick up signals from each other's kinesic and paralinguistic characteristics to create forms that either directly mirror (or match) or converge. Symmetric configurations entail one or more similar non-linguistic forms, intensities, frequencies, and tempos—all of which contribute to cohesive interaction (Webb, 1972). An array of studies have examined specific forms of symmetric synchrony. In analyzing videotaped films of infant-mother interactions, for instance, Bernieri et al. (1988) assess the degree of symmetry based on a similar timing or tempo of movements. Others operationalize symmetric synchrony in terms of "behavioral matching" (Bernieri & Rosenthal, 1991), "congruent limb configurations" (Trout & Rosenthal, 1980), "posture sharing" (LaFrance, 1982), "mirroring" (Schmais & Schmais, 1983; Van Swol, 2013), "mimicry" (Chartrand & van Baaren, 2009; Rueff-Lopes et al., 2014) or "reflection symmetry" (Bavelas, Black,

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