

What Did You Say?

Intercultural Expectations, Misunderstandings, and
Communication

*Greetings! I am pleased
to see that we are different.
May we together become greater
than the sum of both of us.*

Surak in the Savage Curtain episode of Star Trek

Frederick Zarndt

Why (better) communication is necessary

A recent survey of 752 IEEE members conducted by IEEE Spectrum and The New York Times discovered that "just 9 percent of 133 respondents whose organizations currently offshore R&D reported 'No problem'. The biggest headache was 'Language, communication, or culture' barriers, as reported by 54.1 percent of respondents." (<http://www.spectrum.ieee.org/feb07/4881>)

In a March 2007 web poll conducted by the Computing Technology Industry Association "nearly 28 percent of the more than 1,000 respondents singled out poor communications as the number one cause of project failure". (http://www.comptia.org/pressroom/get_pr.aspx?prid=1227)

Nilay Oza et. al. in their study [*Critical Factors in Software Outsourcing: A Pilot Study*](#) of top Indian outsourcing firms named cultural differences and language as the 2 most difficult among the 5 difficulty factors identified in outsourcing relationships.

In their 2006 study [*Critical factors in establishing and maintaining trust in software outsourcing relationships*](#) presented at the International Conference on Software Engineering, Nguyen, Babar, and Verner identified communication and cultural understanding as the 2 factors most critical to maintaining trust relationships.

Huang and Trauth identified three themes as major cross-cultural challenges: "...the complexity of language issues in global virtual work, culture and communication styles and work behaviors, and cultural understandings at different levels." ([*Cultural influences and globally distributed information systems development: Experiences from chinese IT professionals*](#))

Definitions of culture

Culture Any knowledge passed from one generation to the next, not necessarily with respect to human beings.

Culture is a collective phenomenon shared with people within the same social environment.

Culture is learned, it is not innate.

Culture is different from personality but the border between culture and personality is fuzzy.

Culture is like the color of your eyes: You cannot change it or hide it, and although you yourself cannot see it, it is always visible to others when you interact with them.

More definitions of culture

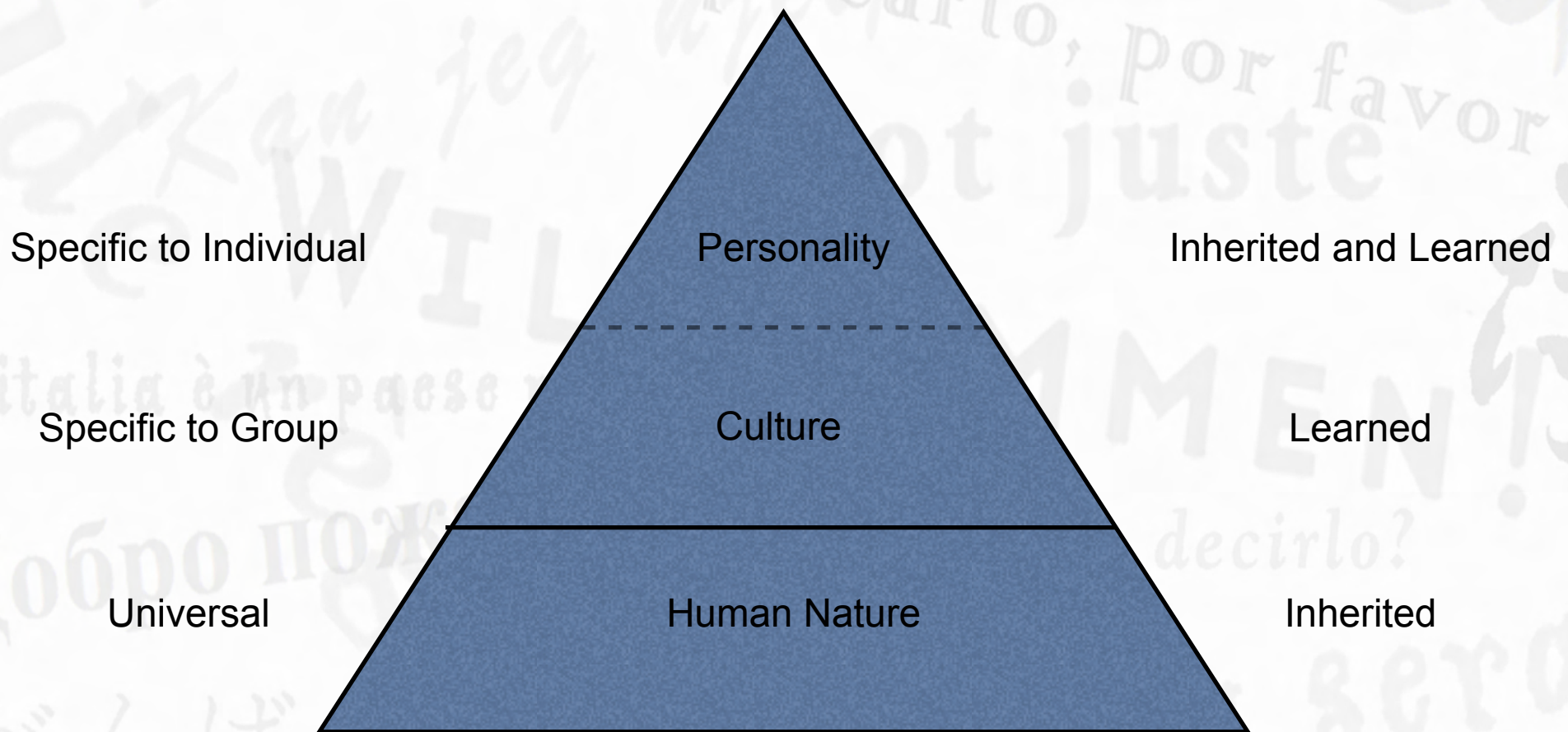
Culture The attitudes and behavior characteristics of a particular social group (from the Latin cultura stemming from colere “to cultivate”). *Oxford American Dictionary*

Culture is the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas. *Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner*

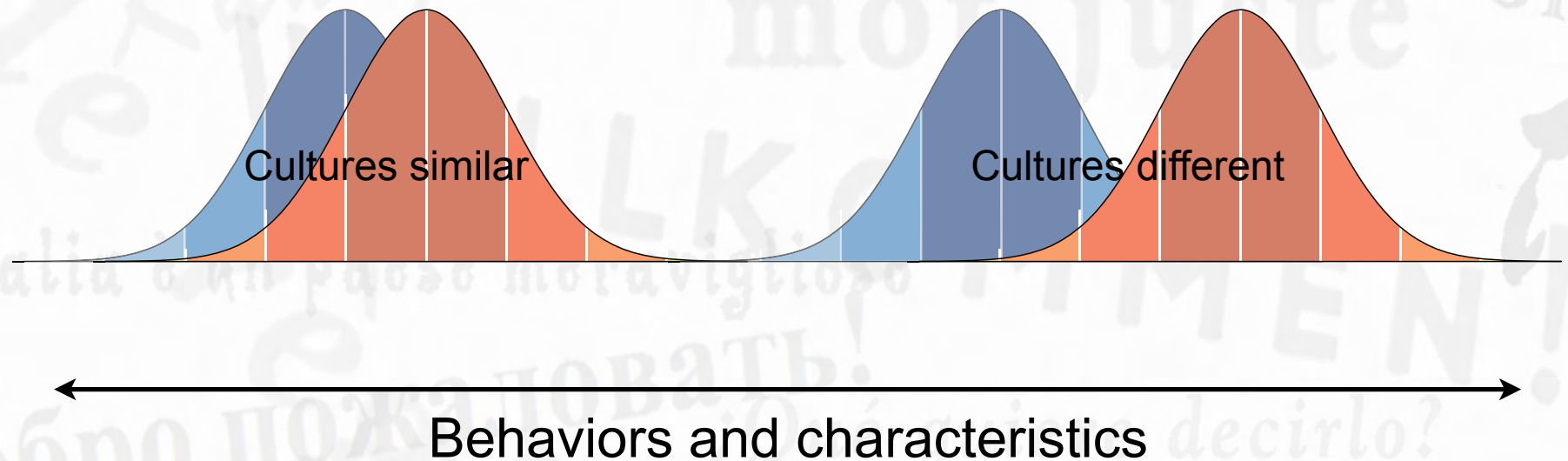
Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others. *Hofstede and Hofstede*

Culture means the total body of tradition borne by a society and transmitted from generation to generation. It ... refers to the norms, values, standards by which people act, and it includes the ways distinctive in each society of ordering the world and rendering it intelligible. Culture is...a set of mechanisms for survival, but it provides us also with a definition of reality. It is the matrix into which we are born, it is the anvil upon which our persons and destinies are forged. *Murphy*

Levels of Mental Programming



Cultural expectations



Culture stereotypes

Ability to put things in conceptual categories is fundamental to perception.

Advantages of stereotypes

Prediction of cultural behaviors

Illuminates intent

Helps one avoid giving offense

Disadvantages of stereotypes

Stereotypical behavior does not match real behavior

Expected intent disguises real intent

Cross-cultural proficiency

- Develop **awareness** of your own mental software and cultural assumptions.
- Refine your **perception** of others' mental software and cultural background.
- Increase your **knowledge** of other cultures, countries, and languages.
- Acquire **skills** in interacting with people from other cultures: Practice!
- Be **mindful!**

Basic human nature

Regardless of culture humans have 4 basic natures. With only slight differences ($\pm 0.05\%$ genetic difference between 2 random humans), the **physical** body is the same for all cultures. How humans meet their **physical** needs -- water, food, shelter, procreation -- and fulfill their **emotional**, **mental**, and **spiritual** natures differs from culture to culture and from person to person.

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Physical | Vehicle comprised of “meat” body and its needs. (Latin <i>physica</i> ‘things relating to nature’.) |
| Emotional | Motivational force for human activities. (Latin <i>emovere</i> ‘move’.) |
| Mental | Sets goals, creates problems, solves problems. (Latin <i>mens</i> ‘mind’, Indo-European / Sanskrit ‘revolve in the mind, think’.) |
| Spiritual | Relationship to creator. (Latin <i>spirare</i> ‘breathe’.) |

Basic human activities

Basic physical needs -- water, food, shelter, procreation -- are fulfilled in variety of culture specific ways. Once these needs are met, humans from every culture engage in 4 basic activities.

Relationship

Manner in which one connects to and interacts with other humans. (Latin *referre* 'bring back'.)

Work

Physical and mental activity intended to achieve a purpose or result.

Recreation

Activities done for enjoyment and to *re - create* oneself. (Latin *recreare* 'to create again, renew'.)

Devotion

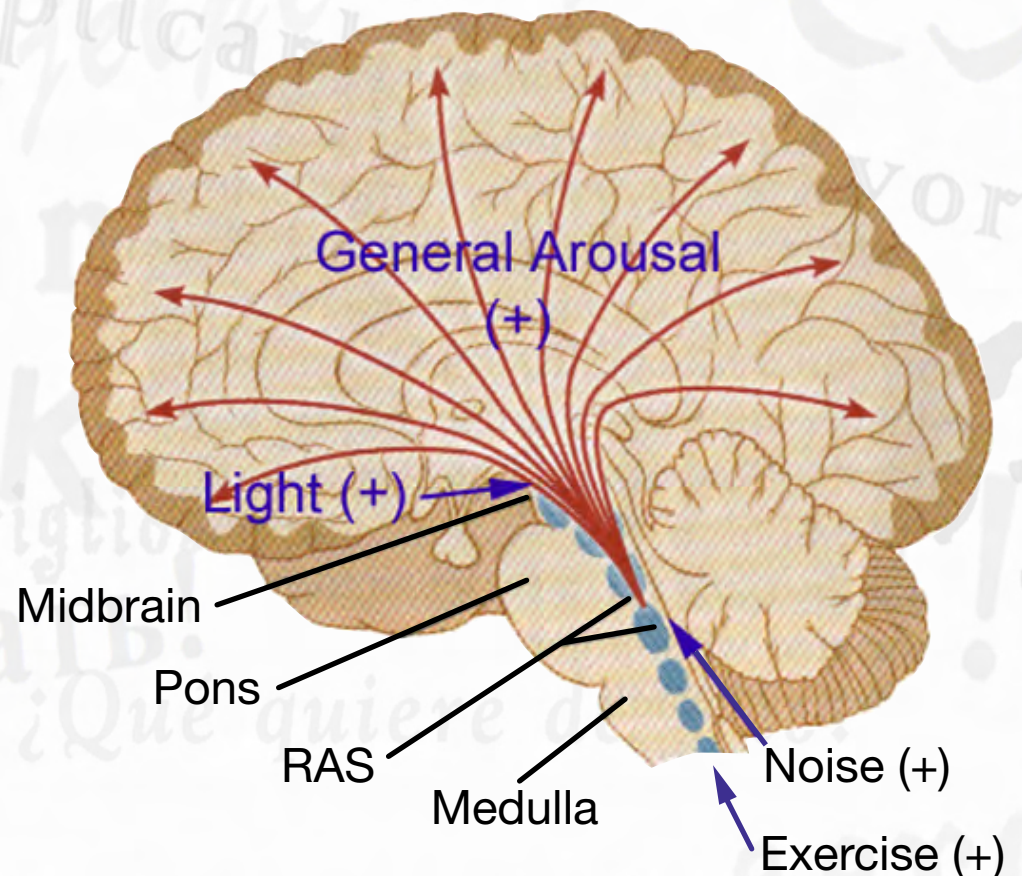
Activities to fulfill and develop spiritual nature. (Latin *devotionem* 'to dedicate by a vow'.)

Reticular Activating System

The Reticular Activating System (RAS) is a structure common to mammals that is necessary for consciousness to occur.

RAS filters data coming to your mind so that your perception of events agrees with your past experience.

Everything you see, hear, smell, feel and touch is a message entering your brain. RAS filters through all these messages and decides which ones will get attention from your consciousness.



Effect of Personality on Communication



Effect of Personality on Communication

At the center of **non-violence** stands the principle of love.

Martin Luther King Jr.



Effect of Personality on Communication

At the center of **non-violence** stands the principle of love.

Martin Luther King Jr.



Effect of Personality on Communication

At the center of violence stands the principle of love.

Martin Luther King Jr.



Effect of Culture on Communication



Effect of Culture on Communication

What you do not want done to yourself, **do not** do to others.

Confucius



Effect of Culture on Communication

What you do not want done to yourself, **do not** do to others.

Confucius



Effect of Culture on Communication

What you do not want done to yourself, do to others.

Confucius



How do you communicate?

- Communication is at most 30% verbal!
- Remainder - 70% or more - is comprised of gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, posture, odors, ...
- Telephone communication removes gestures, facial expressions, posture, odors, etc. Only words and tone of voice remain.
- Written communication - email, letters, etc - removes all modes of communication save for words.

Process of Perception

1. Observation
2. Interpretation
3. Evaluation or judgement



Perception: Observation



Perception: Interpretation?



Perception: ~~Judgement~~



Those foreigners
are always in
a hurry!



How do you understand?

*Much of what you think happened or what you think you heard is based on **misperception**.*

Cultural models

- Hofstede's 5 Dimensions of Culture
- Richard Lewis's Cultural Categories
- Trompenaars's 6 Cultural Dimensions

Geert Hofstede's 5 dimensions of culture

- Power distance
- Masculine / feminine
- Individualism / collectivism
- Uncertainty avoidance
- Long-term / short-term orientation

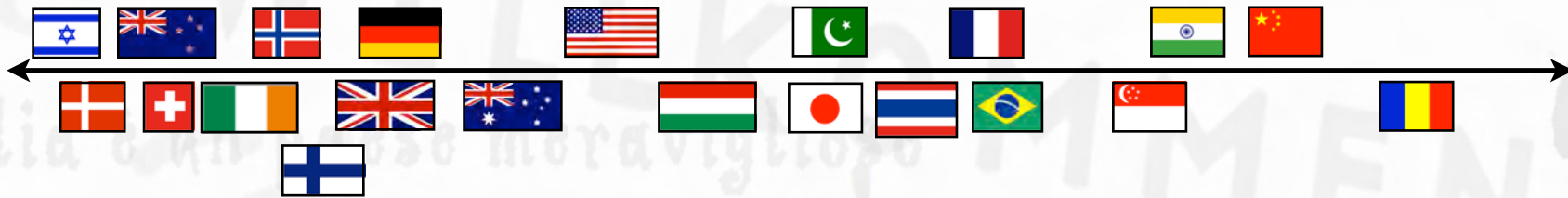
Some more equal than others: Power distance

Power distance is the extent to which the less powerful members of an organization within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.

Power distance cultural differences

Small Power Distance

Large Power Distance



I, we and they: Individualism and collectivism

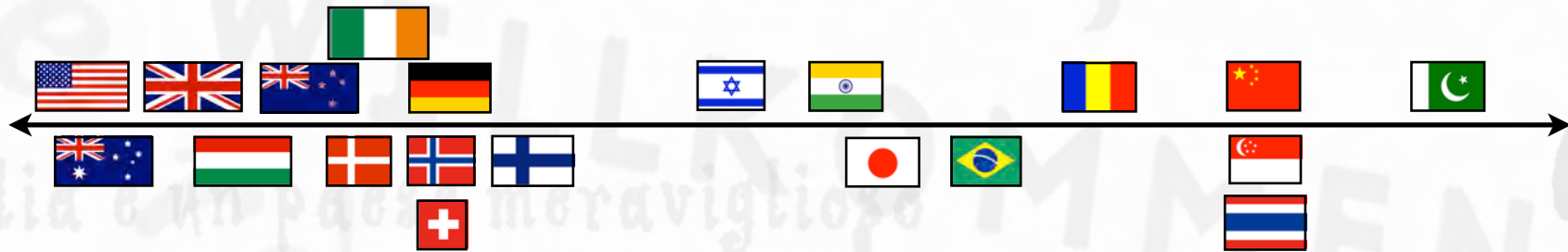
In **individualistic** cultures ties between individuals are loose, everyone is expected to look after himself or herself.

In **collectivistic** cultures people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetimes continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.

Individual / collective cultural differences

More individualism

More collectivism

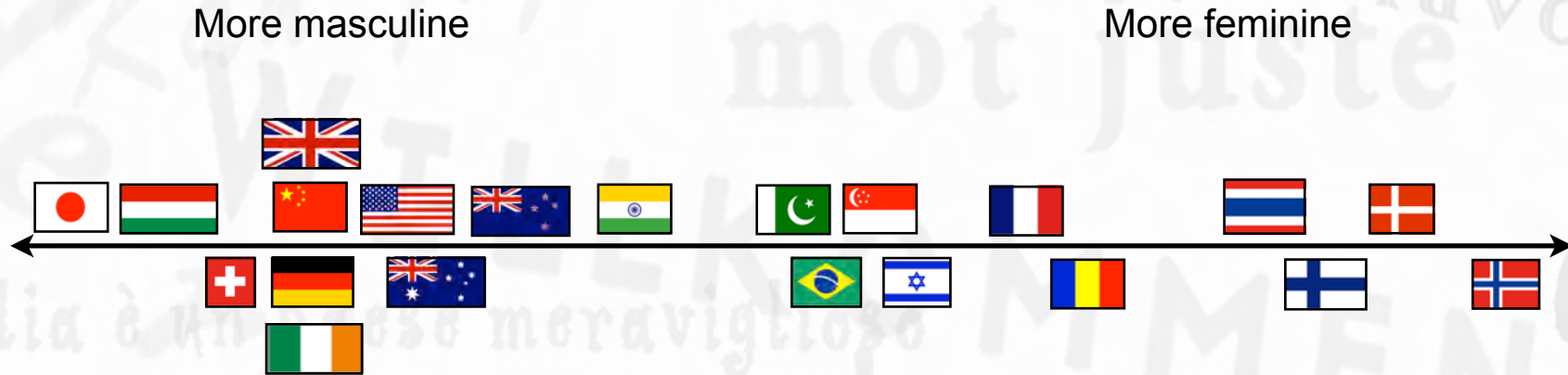


He and she, masculine and feminine, tough and tender

A culture is **masculine** (tough) when emotional gender roles are clearly distinct; men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life.

A culture is **feminine** (tender) when emotional gender roles overlap: both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life.

Masculine / feminine cultural differences



What is different is dangerous: Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations, often expressed through nervous stress (anxiety) and in a need for predictability.

Uncertainty avoidance cultural differences

Strong uncertainty avoidance

Weak uncertainty avoidance



Yesterday, now, or later: Long- and short-term orientation

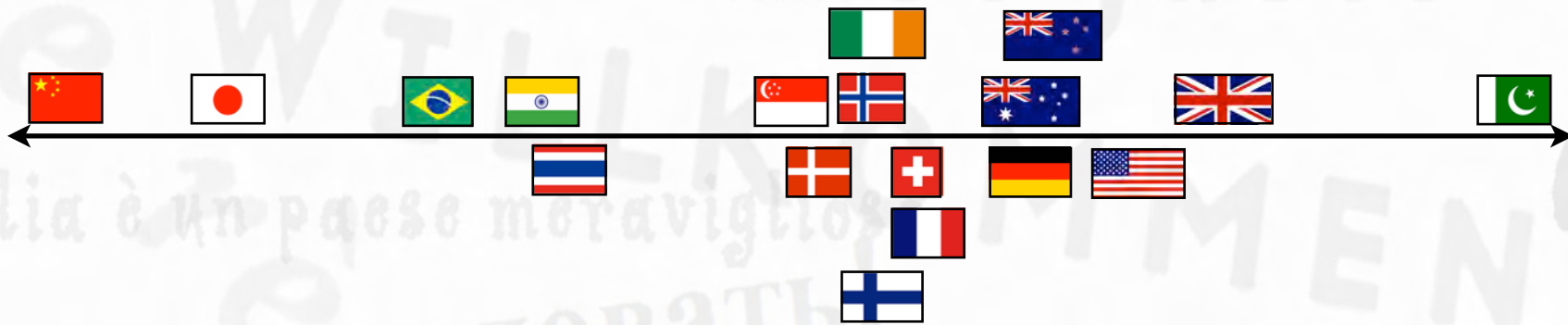
Cultures with **long-term orientation** foster virtues oriented toward future rewards, in particular, perseverance and thrift.

Cultures with **short-term orientation** foster virtues related to the past and present, in particular, respect for tradition and fulfilling social obligations.

Long-term / Short-term orientation

Long-term orientation

Short-term orientation



Richard Lewis's cultural categories

Linear-active cultures tend to be task-oriented, highly organized planners who complete action-chains by doing one thing at a time, preferably in accordance with a linear agenda.

Multi-active cultures are loquacious, impulsive, like to do many things at the same time, and attach great importance to feelings, relationships and people-orientation.

Reactive cultures rarely initiate action or discussion, preferring first to listen to and establish the other's position, then react to it and formulate their own. Reactive cultures listen before they leap.

Cultural types model

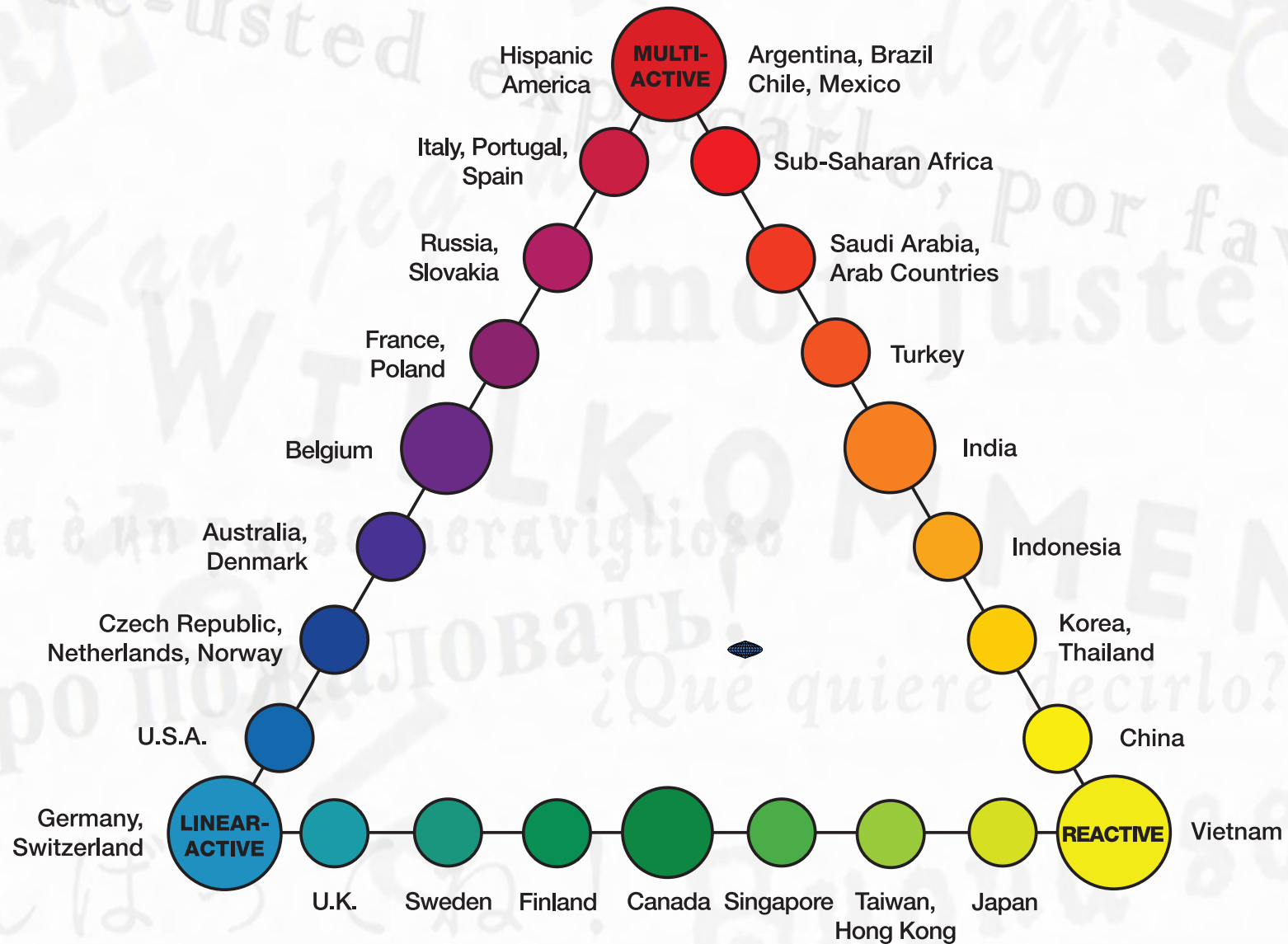


Figure copyright Richard D Lewis

Culture category statistics

| | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Linear-active | 600,000,000 |
| Multi-active | 3,300,000,000 |
| Reactive | 1,700,000,000 |
| Hybrid (multi-active and reactive) | 290,000,000 |
| Total (approx.) | 6,000,000,000 |

Organizing information

- **Open-minded** people seek out (more) information before making a decision
- **Close-minded** people see only a narrow range of possibilities and ignore the rest
- Most cultures produce **close-minded** people!

Processing information

- **Associative thinkers** process information using personal experience. Educational systems that teach by rote learning tend to produce associative thinkers.
- **Abstract thinkers** process information by extrapolating data and considering hypothetical situations. Educational systems that teach by problem-solving tend to produce abstract thinkers.
- No country has more than its share of smart or dull people!

Simple principles, hard to apply

- Be an actor
- Act, don't re-act
- Be mindful

Cross-cultural proficiency

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Basic communication principles

Simple

Keep It Simple (KISS principle)

Respect

Respect yourself and others

Listen

Repeat what you hear

Talk

Say it twice in different ways

More communication principles

- When we speak to others in a language that is not our own, we often unconsciously transfer elements from our own language into the other.
- When someone speaks your language, you tend to assume that they also share your thoughts and assumptions.
- Unless you understand very well proverbs from a language that is not your own, don't use them.
- Humor does not translate well!
- Conversational taboos usually include religion and politics as well as questions about health, age, weight, income.
- Effective verbal communication is expected to be explicit, direct, and unambiguous. Say what you mean as precisely and straightforwardly as possible.
- Some western cultures view a person who is being indirect as tricky, deceptive, and of questionable integrity. At best indirect communication is viewed as a waste of time.
- Some eastern cultures view a person who is being direct as rude and of questionable honor. At best direct communication is viewed as impolite.

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