Since the 1950’s there has been an increasing interest in intercultural communication as a field of multidisciplinary research, which has probably been strengthened by today’s globalisation process, as well as by the process of European convergence and the current social phenomenon of massive immigration to the Western world. Intercultural communication focuses on face-to-face or person-to-person interaction and takes place between people who are operating within different cultural systems. The study of intercultural communication has tried to throw light on the question of how people from diverse cultural backgrounds understand one another. On the doorstep of European convergence, the issue of intercultural competence is a crucial one. In this discussion we would like to analyse in detail the underlying reasons that might explain the emergence of social distance in intercultural communicative encounters.

To achieve our purpose, we will draw on three key concepts: (a) the cultural frame, (b) the cultural unconscious and (c) the silent language. Four variables are suggested as a core around which to explore the emergence of social distance: (a) time, (b) space, (c) context and (d) communication.

KEY WORDS: intercultural communication, social distance, cultural frame, cultural unconscious, silent language

1. Introduction.

Since the 1950’s there has been an increasing interest in intercultural communication as a field of multidisciplinary research, which has probably been strengthened by today’s
globalisation process, as well as by the process of European convergence and the current social phenomenon of massive immigration to the Western world. Since the end of the Second World War up to the middle of 20th century, much theoretical background came from a variety of sources, especially from the USA. The US army, which had been operating in many different countries and faced numerous cultural problems, provided the first information about the significance of cultural awareness. Relevant contributions were also made by US entrepreneurs, who began to be aware of the fact that the USA needed to know more about other cultures if it was to increase its overseas trade. And finally, information came from multinational companies which began to face the problem of cultural clash in multicultural work teams. Some of the most relevant publications on intercultural communication are: the investigation done by the anthropologist E. T. Hall and published in his famous books *The Silent Language* (1959) and *The Hidden Dimension* (1966); the research conducted by another two anthropologists, F. Kluckhohn and F. Strodtbeck and published in their well-known book *Variations in Value Orientations* (1961); the study carried out by the Dutch social psychologist and engineer, G. Hofstede and published in his groundbreaking book *Culture’s Consequences* (1980); E. C. Stewart and M. J. Bennett’s *American Patterns: An Intercultural Perspective* (1991); the investigation done by other Dutch scholars, F. Trompenaars and Ch. Hampden-Turner whose findings were published in their very successful books, *The Seven Cultures of Capitalism* (1993) and *Riding the Waves of Culture* (1997); and more recently, D. Walker, Th. Walker and J. Schmitz presented their comprehensive cultural orientations model in *Doing Business Internationally* (2003).

The study of intercultural communication has tried to throw light on the question of how people from different cultural backgrounds understand one another. «Just a few decades ago», says M. J. Bennett (1998: 1), «this question was one faced mainly by diplomats, expatriates, and the occasional international traveller. Today, living in multicultural societies within a global village, we all face the question every day». In the last few decades, multiculturalism has spread like wildfire in America, Asia, Africa, Australia and Europe. For example, in the United States, «African American, Hispanic and other ethnic groups are
actively defending the validity of their identities while the Anglo population has begun to sense an urgency for understanding these perceptions. (Singer 1998: 104). In Australian society, different Anglo-Celtic, aboriginal and ethnic cultural values systems coexist. British society offers another vivid example of multiculturalism: the Anglo population lives together with Indians, Muslims, Asians, Africans, and more recently Eastern Europeans have added themselves to the list. And even Spanish society, which was preserved from foreign influence during Franco’s dictatorship, has been experiencing the effects of massive immigration from Northern Africa, South America, Eastern Europe and Asia since the second half of the 1990’s.

Cultural diversity may be experienced at two different levels by modern societies, *i.e.* intranational and international. For example, at an intranational level, Spanish society may face *intercultural communication* in a variety of ways. Firstly, we should consider intercultural communication between the different Spanish cultural groups making up the Spanish nation, *i.e.* Castilians, Galicians, Catalans, Andalusians, Basques, etc. Secondly, we should bear in mind intercultural communication between the Spanish population and the diverse groups of immigrants from Northern Africa, Asia, South America and Eastern Europe that have settled in Spain, especially in the last two decades. Likewise, in British society, intercultural communication may occur in different ways too. On the one hand, the United Kingdom is also a multicultural nation, *i.e.*, the English, the Welsh, the Scots and the Northern Irish have long been living together. On the other hand, intercultural communication also takes place between the Anglo population and the Asian, African, American, and other ethnic groups that have emigrated to the UK. Nevertheless, at an international level, *cross-cultural communication* will occur between the British and the Spanish. In the former example, the term *intercultural communication* is preferable because people live together in the same society and are in regular contact with one another. In the latter illustration, however, the word *cross-cultural communication* seems to be more appropriate because people are operating within two different major cultural systems and are not in regular contact with each other. The process of European convergence and the global
village may contribute to people’s widening their cultural horizons more and more; therefore, the term cross-cultural communication may be replaced by that of intercultural communication in many cases in the near future.

At the turn of the 20th century, when national fences in Europe were bound to disappear, we claimed in a discussion that if people, especially Europeans, did not want to be separated by cultural barriers in the future, the new challenge for language teachers and trainers was cross-cultural communication together with large doses of cooperation and agreement between countries from all over the world. (Guillén Nieto 1996: 101-104). Today, on the doorstep of European convergence, at the beginning of the 21st century, the issue of cross-cultural competence is still a crucial one, since it is difficult to say whether «the erosion of cultural boundaries through technology will bring the realization of a dream or a nightmare». (Barnlund 1998: 36). The dream projects the image of a true community of people capable of respecting cultural diversity; by contrast, the nightmare, shows the vision of «clusters of strangers living in ghettos and united only in their antipathies for others». (Barnlund 1998: 36).

In this discussion we would like to analyse in detail the underlying reasons that might explain the emergence of a particular cultural barrier in intercultural encounters: social distance. This enquiry is partly based on our findings in two recent discussions: «The invisible face of culture: why do Spanish toy manufacturers believe the British are most peculiar in business?» and «Intercultural pragmatics: why does miscommunication arise between Spaniards using English as the lingua franca in business and British speakers?» (Paper proposal for the XXIII AESLA Conference, 2005).

To achieve our purpose, we will draw on three key concepts: the cultural frame, the cultural unconscious and the silent language. Four variables are suggested as a core around which to explore social distance: (a) time, (b) space, (c) context, and (d) communication. Throughout this discussion, we will try to answer the following research questions:

a) What does intercultural/cross-cultural communication involve?

b) How does cultural diversity affect interactive talk?
c) Which are the implications of the cultural unconscious in intercultural/cross-cultural communication?
d) What do we mean by social distance?
e) How does social distance emerge in intercultural/cross-cultural communication?
f) How can social distance be overcome?

2. Intercultural/cross-cultural communication.

Intercultural/cross-cultural communication focuses on both face-to-face and person-to-person interaction between human beings and takes place between people who are operating within two different cultural systems. This means that the interlocutors involved in conversation do not share the same cultural frames or frames of cultural reference, although they may be using a lingua franca such as English, Spanish, French, etc., as a means of interpersonal communication.

For the purpose of analysis, a cultural frame may be defined as the perceptual lens through which an individual filters the information provided by our physical senses and comes to grips with the world. In other words, our physical senses provide us with information, and we can make meaningful sense of it all only by passing it through the selective filters derived from our system of attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviour embedded in our cultural frame. (Cf. Walker et. al., 2003: 206).

When explaining the nature of cultural frames, D. Barnlund (1998: 45) stresses the fact that we achieve our cultural frames rather unconsciously from early childhood. Although the family and school play an important role in giving explicit instruction in the system of beliefs in force in a particular culture by praising or criticizing certain ways of dressing, of thinking, of gesturing, of responding to the acts of others, of reacting, of behaving, etc., «the most significant aspects of any cultural code», argues D. Barnlund (1998: 45) «may be conveyed implicitly, not by rule or lesson but through modelling behaviour […] Thus the grammar of any culture is sent and received largely unconsciously, making one’s own cultural assumptions and biases difficult to recognize».
The worldwide famous anthropologist, E. T. Hall (1998: 59) refers to cultural frames in similar terms when he says that they are: «the tacit frames of reference, the rules for living which vary from culture to culture and which can be traced to acquired culture». E. T. Hall’s use of the adjective *tacit* draws our attention to what we have called elsewhere the *invisible face* of culture, which refers to the inner expression of culture, the core beliefs, that is, how people make sense of the world, their principles, their attitudes, their values, etc. This hidden face may well represent 70% of the dimension of culture and is comparable to the huge mass of the iceberg hidden under the water’s surface. The invisible face of culture is synthesised in E. T. Hall’s reflection (1998: 59): «Culture hides much more than it reveals and, strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants». It is precisely this mysterious and hidden face of culture that may be an important source of miscommunication and misunderstanding in intercultural communication, simply because we cannot be aware of the existence of something that is intangible and hence cannot be seen.

So far we have tried to explain the conceptual nature of intercultural/cross-cultural communication by focusing on the participants’ different cultural systems and tacit frames of reference functioning in intercultural encounters. The question we would like to pose now is: How does cultural diversity affect interactive-talk? As shown in fig. 1 below, a formulation of the communication and interaction processes involved in intercultural encounters may comprise the following stages: (a) the sender formulates the message in terms of a cultural frame, (b) the receiver interprets the message in the light of another cultural frame, (c) the receiver creates feedback based on that frame, and (d) the original sender now interprets that feedback from within his or her original frame.
When speakers’ cultural filters are partially or fully dissimilar, the received and interpreted message will almost certainly be different from the intended one. In this case, we may say that cultural gaps have emerged in interactive language, setting in motion a communication process in which each party is often highly dissatisfied, and leading to the decay of communication. (Cf. Walker et. al., 2003: 206-215). Moreover, this decay may be accelerated by the cultural unconscious to which we shall refer in the next section.

3. The cultural unconscious.

When dealing with cultural diversity, D. Barlnlund (1998: 49) explains the concept of the cultural unconscious in these terms: «[…] every society had its own way of viewing the universe, and each developed from its premises a coherent set of rules of behaviour. Each
tended to be blindly committed to its own style of life and regarded all others as evil». A similar thought is found in this quote from R. D. Lewis (1999 [1996]: 25): «Collective programming in our culture, begun in the cradle and reinforced in school and workplace, convinces us that we are normal, others eccentric». Perceiving those who have different modes of life to that of oneself as evil, peculiar or eccentric is indeed a form of cultural myopia that clouds the perception and understanding of cultural diversity.

The cultural unconscious may easily lead to the emergence of certain communication barriers, i.e. ethnocentrism and stereotypes. Ethnocentrism involves the evaluation of another culture according to the norms, standards, practices, and expectations of one’s own cultural frame of reference. Ethnocentrism may be of two kinds: (a) negative ethnocentrism and (b) positive ethnocentrism. Negative ethnocentrism is the belief in the inherent superiority and naturalness of one’s own culture and the inferiority of another culture. Positive ethnocentrism is the opposite, since it refers to the elevation of another culture because of a perception that one’s own is inferior or in some way lacking. However, we would like to stress the fact that «[…] Either form of ethnocentrism», as D. Walker, Th. Walker and J. Schmitz (2003: 208) argue, «clouds our ability to truly understand and evaluate another culture or its individual members».

Stereotypes hide a fixed set of ideas about what a particular nationality is like, which is wrongly believed to be true in all cases. Stereotypes are closed categories, resistant vestiges of ethnocentrism, that leave no room for individual differences or exceptions and so make intercultural understanding difficult. According to D. Walker, Th. Walker and J. Schmitz (2003: 209), «any new information is channelled into the existing category and thus strengthens the category and confirms our existing viewpoint». For example, when people say «You are not very Spanish!» or «You don’t behave as if you were German» or «That’s not very English!», what they do not realise is that their statements essentially conceal stereotypes. If people were aware of the fact that we all hold stereotypes of other people and others hold stereotypes of us, they could make the following reflection: «I had one image of Spaniards/Germans/Britons, etc., but I have to revise it based on my experience with you». 
Once we have clarified how the cultural unconscious may lead to the emergence of communication barriers such as ethnocentrism and stereotypes and therefore, increase the possibility of further distortion and misunderstanding in intercultural interactive talk, we will focus on the concept of *social distance*.

4. **Social distance.**

According to D. Barnlund (1998: 42-43), interpersonal understanding is a function of or dependent upon the degree of: (a) similarity in perceptual orientations, (b) similarity in systems of belief, and (c) similarity of communicative styles.

a) Similarity in Perceptual Orientations refers to people’s prevailing approaches to reality and the degree of flexibility they manifest in organising it.

b) Similarity in systems of belief refers not to the way people view the world but to the conclusions they draw from their experiences.

c) Similarity of communicative styles refers to the topics people prefer to discuss, their favourite forms of interaction –ritual, repartee, argument, self-disclosure –and the depth of involvement they demand of each other.

Interpersonal understanding unravels an underlying narcissistic predisposition in human societies that draws similar people together. «They seek to find in others», says D. Barnlund (1998: 45), «a reflection of themselves, those who view the world as they do, who interpret it as they do, and who express themselves in a similar way». Therefore, it is not surprising that people tend to avoid those who challenge their assumptions and beliefs, and who communicate in peculiar and incomprehensible ways. Answering the question why it is that contact with persons from other cultures is so often frustrating and burdened with misunderstanding. L. M. Barna (1998: 173-189) suggests six *stumbling blocks* in cross-cultural communication that may lead to wrong interpretations of intent and evaluations of insincerity, aggressiveness, deceitfulness, or arrogance. These are: (a) wrong assumption of similarities, (b) language differences and styles, (c) nonverbal misinterpretations, (d) preconceptions and stereotypes, (e) tendency to evaluate, (f) culture shock and high anxiety.
Speakers’ mismatched cultural frames and the cultural unconscious set in motion a process of interaction and communication in which each party may experience a wide range of negative feelings such as displeasure, discontent, disappointment and, above all, frustration. When the participants in conversation suffer from this mixed feeling of dissatisfaction and are unaware of the underlying reasons that have caused it, we may say that they experience social distance.

Social distance may also emerge between those who share the same language. As we have already mentioned elsewhere, people often assume that sharing a language involves sharing the same beliefs, thoughts and attitudes toward life. The use of a lingua franca may serve in principle to oil the wheels of intercultural communication, however in practice it may turn out to be no more than a mere illusion. When people speak the same language, they may get the wrong impression that they share the same problems, aspirations, and values. People expect to be readily understood, even when discussing complex topics of conversation. Later on when they find out that this was not the case, the may feel hurt, cheated and frustrated. «Because of the outward appearance of similarity based on common perceptions which they share […]», says Singer (1998: 105), «people may not have taken into account the fact that there are a myriad of other group identities –and consequently many other patterns of perception and behaviour –which they do not have in common».

Consequently, social distance may be experienced by participants in conversation as a result of their mismatched frames of cultural reference, i.e. their differing cultural orientations toward a number of dimensions that have been identified as crucial for understanding human behaviour all over the world. According to Walker et. al. (2003: 56-90), the world dimensions affecting human behaviour can be summarised as follows: (a) environment, (b) time, (c) space, (d) action, (e) structure, (f) communication, (g) power, (h) individualism, (i) competitiveness, and (j) thinking. The vast majority of researchers seem to share a similar opinion as regards cultural diversity when they reach the conclusion that people from different cultures may show a wide range of cultural perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, values and strategies concerning the management of the above mentioned world dimensions. (Hall, 1959;
Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961; Hall, 1966; Hofstede, 1980; Stewart and Bennett, 1991; Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 1993; Stewart et al., 1998; Walker et al., 2003, etc.

5. The silent language.

On examining world dimensions and cultural orientations, D. Barnlund (1998: 38) reflects upon cultural unawareness stressing the fact that although we may have extensive knowledge of some cultural codes such as language and only rudimentary knowledge of nonverbal language, «[…] On many others –rules governing topical appropriateness, customs regulating physical contact, time and space codes, strategies for the management of conflict– we have almost no systematic knowledge». A similar thought seems to be shared by M. J. Bennett (1998: 17) when he argues that «There is an entire universe of behaviour that is unexplored, unexamined, and very much taken for granted. It functions outside conscious awareness and in juxtaposition to words».

Similarly, E. T. Hall (1998: 53-67) stresses the power of hidden cultural differences and highlights the concept of the unconscious culture to which we have already referred above. Hidden cultural differences make up what this anthropologist has called the silent language which refers to the management of four world dimensions: (a) time, (b) space, (c) context, and (d) communication. The world dimension of time makes reference to people’s concept of time and the use they make of it. The world dimension of space considers the way people delimit their physical and psychological space. The world dimension of context refers to people’s view of environmental elements and the type of relationship that is established and maintained with them. And the world dimension of communication looks at how people express and convey meaning.

In this discussion, a world dimension will be described as a continuum between two opposite strategic cultural orientations along which individual members from different cultures may show their preference, to a greater or lesser degree, for one orientation or the other when they have to face the daily problems associated with such world dimension. For example, the world dimension of context may be shown as a continuum between two opposite
strategic cultural orientations, i.e. high context and low context, along which different cultures may show divergent or similar preferred orientations. In what follows we will analyse the way social distance may arise in different intercultural encounters as a result of mismatched cultural perceptions concerning the world dimensions making up the so-called silent language.

5.1 Time: polychronic versus monochronic

E. T. Hall (1959, 1966, 1998) made a distinction between polychronic and monochronic cultures. The polychronic approach to time means being involved with many things at once. On the contrary, the monochronic approach to time refers to paying attention to and doing only one thing at a time. Monochronic and polychronic time systems are placed at opposite ends of the same time continuum. «Like oil and water», says E. T. Hall (1998: 60), «the two systems do not mix». The impossibility of merging would explain the different frames of cultural reference with which humans from different cultures organise their daily living and face their problems. Example 1 will help us to explore how social distance may emerge as the result of different cultural orientations toward time.

Example 1: Ms. Robson, a British businesswoman, has an appointment with her partner, Ms. Martínez, to discuss a project. They are in Spain and English will be used as the lingua franca. The British woman cannot afford to waste any time because she has a tight schedule. The appointment does not start on time and when it does, there are frequent interruptions, with people coming in to get papers signed and Ms. Martínez even answers the mobile phone while they are discussing the project. At the end of the appointment Ms. Robson feels frustrated.

Example 1 illustrates the difference between what E. T. Hall’s (1959, 1966, 1998) calls polychronic and monochronic cultures. On a continuum of monochronic to polychronic, British culture has been recognized as a monochronic culture (Hall, 1998: 60) or linear-active culture (Lewis, 1999 [1996]: 40), beginning in England with the industrial revolution. This may serve to understand Britons’ traditional preference for a single focus strategy, that is, they prefer to do one thing at a time, concentrate on it and do it within a scheduled timescale.
Moreover, Britons seem to favour a fixed approach to time, with great stress being laid on punctuality, meeting deadlines and schedules.

By contrast, Spain has been identified as a polychronic culture or multi-active culture (Lewis, 1999 [1966]: 40). This means that the Spanish in general tend to favour a multifocus strategy when they frequently engage in multiple activities at the same time. Besides, they seem to favour a fluid orientation to time in the sense that they frequently treat schedules and deadlines as approximate, show up late at meetings and turn in work later than expected, as well as expressing a preference for improvisation and a resistance to long-term planning.

As a result of the cultural gap between Spanish and British preferred time orientations, we may begin to understand how social distance emerges. Although neither party says anything in the encounter, the Spanish businesswoman may perceive the British as rigid, cold, and inflexible; similarly the British businesswoman may think her Spanish peer is ill-mannered, lazy and indisciplined. This feeling of dissatisfaction and discomfort produced by cultural gaps concerning time management systems makes the participants in conversation experiment social distance on the behavioural, cognitive and emotional level, and it is in fact one of the hidden consequences of the so-called silent language.

5.2 Space: public versus private.

Each culture has its own concept of the space bubble -the personal space the individual requires to be able to think, talk and gesture in comfort-. (Lewis, 1999 [1996]: 132). The following example may serve to illustrate the emergence of social distance as a result of mismatched cultural orientations toward space management:

Example 2: Ms. Williams, a British lecturer meets Mr. Ferrer, a visiting lecturer from the South of France, on Campus. When he approaches to talk to her, he gets very close and even pats her on the back. Ms Williams looks uneasy and begins to move away. Mr. Ferrer wonders whether Ms Williams does not like him or if he is talking too much, and feels frustrated.

On a continuum of public to private space management, Southern European countries seem to favour a public approach to space when individuals frequently engage in physical contact (touching, embracing, etc.), and stand close to others when interacting with them.
Lewis, 1999 [1996]: 243). By contrast, research has shown that in Northern European countries the «comfort zone», «the space bubble» or «the distance of comfort» (Lewis, 1999 [1996]: 132) is about an arm’s length. Consequently, individuals tend to favour a private approach to space when they avoid close proximity to and physical contact with others, and apologise when they intrude on the space of another, which is clearly shown in linguistic expressions such as «I am sorry to disturb you» or the frequently used «Sorry!» As a result of this, Mediterranean Europeans such as Italians, Greeks, the Portuguese and Spaniards may seem to get too close to Northern Europeans such as Scandinavians, Germans and the British, as they invade their invisible space bubble. The discrepancy between Northern and Southern European space values may serve to explain the reason why the former look uneasy and move away when approached in conversation by the latter and, ultimately, the emergence of social distance. Just as personal distance in Southern Europe may be interpreted as intimate distance in Northern Europe, personal distance in the latter may be interpreted as public distance in the former.

In the example above, neither participant in the conversation says anything but both of them are displeased. On the one hand, Ms Williams may give the wrong impression of herself as distant, aloof, and cold. On the other hand, Mr. Ferrer may be wrongly perceived as impertinent and even brazen, when he is just trying to be friendly and polite to Ms. Williams.

5.3 Context: high-context versus low-context.

E. T. Hall (1998: 61) studied in detail the effect of context on meaning. The result of his investigations was a scale with high-context communication at one end and low-context communication at the other. To understand how different cultural orientations toward context may lead up to social distance, let us consider the example below which is partly inspired by one of Gibson’s (2000: 32-33) illustrative examples of miscommunication in cross-cultural communication:

Example 3: Mr. Bush, the US marketing manager of a multinational, was finding it increasingly difficult to work in Japan. In meetings, his Japanese colleagues hardly ever said anything. When they were asked if they agreed to his suggestions they always said “yes”, but they did
not do anything to follow up the ideas. The only time they opened up was in a karaoke in the evening, but that was getting stressful for Mr. Bush, as they seemed to expect him to go out with them on a regular basis. Mr. Bush wonders whether the Japanese are not interested in his business proposals and if he is wasting his time. He feels frustrated as they never seem to get down to business.

Cultures such as the Japanese—and to a lesser degree Southern Europeans—that stress analogic communication are referred to as high context. E. T. Hall, who coined that term, defines it as a communication in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. Cultures such as the North American and the Northern European that emphasise digital forms of communication are called low-context, because the mass of information is vested in the explicit code. (M. J. Bennet 1998: 17). This discrepancy between North American and Japanese cultural orientations toward the effect of context in meaning may be useful to understand the emergence of social distance. More specifically, in high-context cultures, such as Japan, meaning does not always have to be put into words. «Non-verbal clues are important», says Gibson (2000: 33), «as is the context in which the situation takes place. Even the meaning of words can depend on the context». In the example above, the word «yes» when said by the Japanese can mean anything from «I am listening to you», «I understand what you mean», «I am interested in your proposal», to «I agree with you». As high-context communicators, the Japanese are people-centred and will observe their business interlocutors and do business with them not so much for what they say but for the good impression they give; they will rely on nonverbal, symbolic, and situational cues more than on spoken and written cues. (Walker et. al. 2003: 223). In contrast, as low context communicators, North Americans are task-centred and tend to believe that written messages and detailed documentation have more value and significance than information that is conveyed orally or personally. They frequently require that meaningful and significant information be recorded meticulously, and ask for and provide explicit confirmation of their understanding of interactions and situations. (Lewis, 1999 [1996]: 184). In the example above, what Mr Bush does not realise is that relationship building—establishing rapport and getting to know one’s business partner-
is important in high-context cultures, since they show preference for «circling around», that is, they prefer to start with the general and then get down to the specifics, while in low-context cultures it is the other way round, i.e. they prefer «getting to the point» or starting with the specifics and then going on to the general. (Cf. Gibson 2000: 34). Likewise, the Japanese seem to be unaware of the fact that for low-context cultures, meaning is made explicit and put into words.

5.4 Communication.

«Every culture», says D. Barnlund (1998: 39), «expresses its purposes and conducts its affairs through the medium of communication». Although the medium of communication is shared by all cultures, each one has its own symbolic codes to exchange and create meaning. Language is perhaps the code that has been most widely studied and of which we have extensive knowledge. The proposition that people speak different languages or pronounce words differently because they are from different places is common knowledge. «If someone addresses me in a foreign language that I don’t speak», argues D. Cameron (2001: 108), «I know immediately that I don’t understand them, and it is obvious why: I may have difficulty decoding their pronunciation, syntactical patterns, lexicon, etc». However, there are other communication codes that may be an important source of misunderstanding and may easily lead to the emergence of social distance. Two examples will help us to clarify how social distance may result from differing cultural orientations toward communication. The first is partly inspired by D. Cameron’s (2001: 94) account of her teaching experience in Sweden:

Example 4: María is an Argentinean student in Sweden. When María takes her speech turn in the master’s course she often finds herself trapped in never ending monologues since no one else seems to be willing to claim the floor from her. She wonders whether her Swedish classmates do not like her or if they think that she always talks nonsense. She feels frustrated and her Swedish classmates also feel unsatisfied because María is the only one who participates actively in the master’s course.

In example 4, María is aware of the fact that she does not understand or is not understood, but she cannot identify the variables which are causing the difficulty, because
those variables are operating at the level of discourse organisation. More precisely, in example 4 cultural gaps emerge as the result of the different turn-taking management systems with which people from Sweden and Argentina operate in interpersonal communication. In some countries it is acceptable, and even desirable to interrupt, whereas in some others you should wait for your partner to finish speaking before you take the floor. Like Latin cultures in general, in Argentina, the turn-taking rule says something like «grab the floor and then talk until someone interrupts you»; in Sweden, by contrast, the rule says something more like: «wait for the other to finish before you start speaking». This would explain the reason why María’s Swedish interlocutors did not say a word while she was speaking; they were just waiting for her to show some sign of finishing so that they could take the floor. As this never happened, they were also frustrated because they could never take a turn when María participated in the master’s course. Example 5 illustrates a different aspect concerning cultural difference in communication styles.

Example 5: Mr. Wilson is a US lecturer in Korea. When he addresses his students in class, they look down. Mr. Wilson is suspicious when they do not look him in the eye. He wonders whether they feel guilty because they have not done any work, or if they are not interested in his subject. He feels frustrated.

According to D. Cameron (2001: 108), «In communicative encounters between members of different groups, the smaller and subtler the differences are, the greater their potential to cause problems». In example 5, Mr Wilson has no difficulty in identifying which aspect of the students’ behaviour in question is at odds with his expectations –he would like them to look him in the eye- but he does not realise that the behaviour in question is not intended to mean what he think it means, i.e. the students are dishonest. The length of time that it is acceptable to look directly at someone may differ from one country to the next. We agree with M. J. Bennett (1998: 17) when he claims that «understanding the more important nonverbal aspects of communication is vital to an overall comprehension of intercultural events». In cross-cultural situations such as the one depicted above, we may perceive the appearance of a cue when none was intended or we may correctly perceive that a cue has been
generated but misinterpret its meaning. This is what actually happens in example 5: Mr Wilson makes an ethnocentric interpretation of his students’ gaze behaviour based solely on his own culture, assuming (perhaps unconsciously) that nonverbal behaviour carries the same meaning in every culture. For him to look directly at someone is a sign of interest and honesty. For the Korean students, however, it can be seen a sign of disrespect and thoughtless invasion of privacy.

6. Overcoming social distance.

As globalisation keeps marching on, overcoming social distance has become an essential issue for modern societies. «What seems most critical», according to D. Barnlund (1998: 37), «is to find ways of gaining entrance into the assumptive world of another culture, to identify the norms that govern face-to-face relations, and to equip people to function within a social system that is foreign but no longer incomprehensible». Otherwise, people are condemned to remain foreigners no matter how long they live in another country because its institutions and its customs will be interpreted in the light of their own ethnocentric cultural values and assumptions.

According to Barna (1998: 173-189), cultural awareness is certainly the first step in surpassing social distance, but this is not by any means an easy task, since for most people it takes insight, training, and sometimes an alteration of long-standing habits or thinking patterns before progress can be made. In dealing with the development of cross-cultural competence, a variety of intercultural/cross-cultural communication strategies have been put forward by well-known philosophers, anthropologists, and linguists. In the next few paragraphs we shall refer to some of the most relevant contributions in this field of research.

J. M. Bennett (1998: 215-223) highlights the concept of transition experiences, a subcategory derived from the concept of cultural shock, by means of which cultural divergence is perceived as a constructive challenge to our world view that can stimulate personal growth, flexible communication, and cross-cultural learning. A similar line of thought is found is M. J. Bennett’s The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity
(DMIS), which focuses on the concept of cultural adaptation. This is defined as the strategic process whereby one’s world view is expanded to include behaviour and values appropriate to the host culture. The assumed end result of adaptation is becoming a bicultural or multicultural person. This process of cultural expansion is long and sometimes painful. It comprises, according to M. J. Bennett (1998: 26), several stages: (a) the ethnocentric stage and (b) the ethnorelative stage. The former comprises the following substages:

a) Denial. People at the denial stage are unable to construe cultural differences in complex ways.

b) Defence. People at the defence stage have more ability to construe cultural difference, but they attach negative evaluations to it.

c) Minimization. People at the minimization stage recognise and accept superficial cultural differences such as eating customs and other social norms, but they assume that deep down all people are essentially the same.

d) Acceptance. People at the acceptance stage enjoy recognizing and exploring cultural differences. They are aware that they themselves are cultural beings.

e) Adaptation. People at the adaptation stage use knowledge about their own and others’ cultures to intentionally shift into a different cultural frame of reference.

On the other hand, the ethnorelative stage includes a final substage:

a) Integration People at the integration stage of development are attempting to reconcile the sometimes conflicting cultural frames that they have internalized.

As people move into integration, they may achieve a plural identity allowing them to see themselves as «interculturalists» or «multiculturalists» in addition to their national and ethnic backgrounds.

Closely related to the concept of cultural adaptation suggested by M. J. Bennett (1998: 191-214) is his concept of communication based on empathy. In his view, empathy is essential to understand multiple-reality and cultural difference in intercultural communication. M. J. Bennett has designed a model for the development of empathy that comprises the following stages: (a) assuming difference, (b) knowing self, (c) suspending self,
(c) allowing guided imagination, (d) allowing empathic experience, (e) re-establishing self. The result being what he has called the *platinum rule*, which characterises the concept of communication based on empathy: *Do unto others as they themselves would have done unto them* instead of the underlying assumption of the Golden rule, which is a characteristic feature of communication based on sympathy: *Other people want to be treated as I do.*

For Ch. Hampden-Turner and F. Trompenaars (2000), building intercultural competence involves making opposite orientations toward world dimensions meet and reconciling values to create wealth. After eighteen years of study they have come to the conclusion that foreign cultures, instead of being arbitrarily or randomly different from one another, are *mirror images* of one another’s values, reversals of the order and sequence of looking and learning. The metaphor of the mirror image would justify the idea that cultures have simply made different initial choices when they show preference for a particular direction as regards world dimensions such as, *universalism vs. particularism, individualism vs. communitarianism, specificity vs. diffusion, achieved status vs. ascribed status, inner direction vs. outer direction, and sequential time vs. synchronous time.* etc. For some people the reversal of one’s own values systems is frightening, for others fascinating. The fright comes about because many of us mistake such reversal for a negation of what we believe in.

7. Conclusions.

Intercultural communication involves the interaction of speakers with different tacit frames of cultural reference. Speakers’ mismatched cultural frames inexorably set in motion a process of interaction and communication in which each party may experience a wide range of unspoken feelings such as *displeasure, discontent, disappointment* and *frustration*. When the participants in conversation suffer from this mixed feeling of *dissatisfaction* and are unaware of the reasons that have caused it, they may be said to experience social distance.

In this discussion we tried to throw some light on the idea of social distance. Two concepts, in particular the cultural unconscious and the silent language, helped us to establish a suitable framework within which to study the different ways in which social distance may
emerge in intercultural encounters and lead to the decay of communication. More specifically, our analysis was based on the different orientations cultures may exhibit toward four world dimensions: (a) time, (b) space, (c) context, and (d) communication.

We reached the conclusion that social distance is one of the hidden consequences of the invisible face of culture that would enlighten why people are sharply repelled by those who do not share the same beliefs. Interpersonal understanding is narcissistic in the sense that human beings are powerfully drawn to those who hold the same beliefs. This narcissistic bias transforms many human encounters into rituals of mutual confirmation of their own beliefs. By contrast, social distance promotes alienation and causes people to regard each other as strange or barbaric. Looking someone in the eye may show honesty in one culture and disrespect in another. Spatial proximity may show friendliness in one culture and thoughtless invasion of privacy in another. When people do only one thing at a time they may be perceived as rigid, when they frequently engage in multiple activities they may be wrongly interpreted as ill-mannered, lazy and indisciplined.

As we are driven toward a global village and intercultural communication becomes part of our daily life and routine, we need more than just greater factual knowledge of each other. More precisely, we need to identify what D. Barnlund (1998: 39-40) has called «the rule books of meaning», i.e. the frames of reference that distinguish one culture from another. In other words, to grasp the way in which other cultures perceive the world and make meaning of it is to gain access to the experience of other human beings. Access to the world views and communicative styles of other cultures may not only enlarge our own way of experiencing the world but enable us to overcome the social distance that separates us from those who hold different cultural frames of reference to our own.

At the beginning of the 21st century, as globalisation marches on across the world converting national identities into multicultural ones, and the World Wide Web brings together people from all over the world, we must face the challenge of transforming our

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1 Research done by Donn Byrne (1961) and replicated by Barnlund (1998: 43) demonstrates how powerfully human beings are drawn to those who hold the same beliefs and how sharply they are repelled by those who do not.
monocultural self into a multicultural one without losing our own cultural identity and cultural roots. Becoming a multicultural person involves a long and to some extent, painful renovation of the inner self. Perhaps we may only have the time to prepare the ground for the dream of seeing ourselves as multiculturalists, but it is worth making the effort so that future generations may see it come true, as they reach a greater mutuality and interpersonal understanding by means of educational systems and programmes that promote cultural empathy: *Do unto others as they themselves would have done unto them.*

8. **References.**


Guillén Nieto, V. (in press): «Intercultural pragmatics: why does miscommunication arise between Spaniards using English as the *lingua franca* in business and British speakers?». 22


