

CULTURE AND UX



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On my first trip to India, I landed in Mumbai and got on the airport bus. I was soon disconcerted to notice that the driver was busily disassembling the motor. “Excuse me,” I said. “Will the bus leave on time?” And was told, “Oh yes, sir.” About 90 minutes later, we finally pulled out of the airport.

How many cross-cultural slips and gaps does that small anecdote hold? Attitudes toward time, expectations about appropriate activities, communication style, just to name a few. Aaron Marcus told us that story to illustrate the sort of cultural differences that cause heartaches, conflicts, and misunderstandings all the time. What is acceptable in one culture can be unthinkable in another.

We talk about “cross-cultural design” or “bridging cultures”—what does that mean for UX? User experience is based on understanding users. And users can now seem more diverse than ever. The UX challenges for this new, connected world are based on its biggest benefit: we are more connected.

This chapter looks at questions about culture and what it means for UX

- What do we need to know about cultures to do good UX?
- Are differences or similarities between cultures more important for UX design?
- Are there models that will help us understand culture and apply it in our UX work?
- How much does language matter in design and other UX work?

Delving into Culture

The word “culture” is used in both formal and casual ways. People talk about cross-cultural communication or design that bridges cultures. When we do so, we are usually focused on differences and the difficulties in understanding people who are different from us in some way, and how this affects how they will experience something we design.

Culture is always relative to our own experience. Just as fish don’t think about water—they just swim in it—it is only by thinking about how two cultures are similar or different that we can talk about what is unique about each of them. This is important for UX because we always have the challenge of understanding not only our own culture, but other cultures clearly. In the contrasts between cultures, we can see both the similarities and differences that we must design for.

When we think about culture, we have to look beyond individuals to see the whole ecosystem around them. What are the things and the people who surround them and shape their experiences in ways that are relevant to your product? If you were designing a product for school children, you might also need to consider their classmates, family, teachers, and others in their school. A middle class Indian family might also include domestic help, chauffeurs for various family cars, and several generations of family members, forming a collection of overlapping communities and cultural influences.

Culture We Share

Definitions of culture from anthropologists focus on knowledge, attitudes, and customs shared by a group of people, including:

- **Knowledge:** Their patterns of information and knowledge
- **Language:** How they communicate within the group and with outsiders
- **Beliefs:** The customary beliefs and social norms
- **Attitudes:** Shared attitudes, values, and goals
- **Practices:** Values, conventions, or social practices
- **Customs:** Behavior and habits
- **Learned patterns:** Values and behaviors acquired both intentionally and unintentionally

There is one other important criterion: that a culture is shaped by the people within it. As ethnographic researchers Bas Rajmakers and Geke van Dijk put it, “it’s something that’s being created and re-created by people all the time—not just by certain people, but by everyone as they shape their own daily life.” This

means that culture is never finished, static. It is always in flux as people adapt to the changes in the world around them.

A Deep Layer

One important aspect of the definition of culture for UX is that we are talking about the deeper aspects that change more slowly than customs, habits, or fashion. Those deeper layers are part of our core cultural identities, usually acquired through our early experiences.

Stewart Brand, the editor of the Whole Earth Catalog and head of the Long Now Foundation, introduced the concept of pace layering. The idea is that different aspects of human civilization change at different rates. Those in the outer layers move quickly, changing often, while the center layers move much less so.

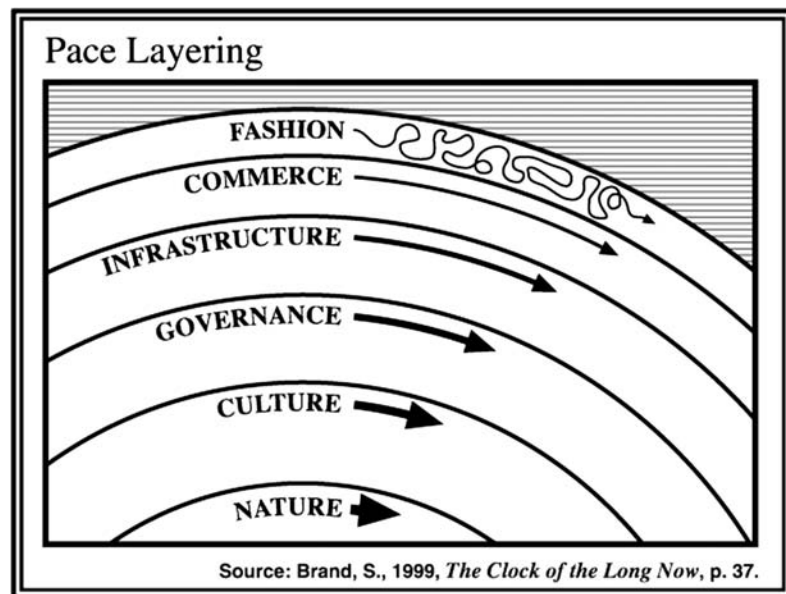


Figure 3.1 Pace Layering. “The fast parts learn, propose, and absorb shocks; the slow parts remember, integrate, and constrain. The fast parts get all the attention. The slow parts have all the power.” Stewart Brand <http://blog.longnow.org/2005/04/11/stewart-brand-cities-and-time/><http://longnow.org/seminars/02005/apr/08/cities-and-time/>.

Applying this to UX, fashions for social networks or preferences for colors in web site design can change quickly. Patterns in how we communicate or interact with friends, colleagues, and family change more slowly and survive changes in government or commerce.

Nationality and Culture

Nationality—the collection of characteristics we see as similarities among people who grow up in the same country at the same time—is often used as a shorthand way to define cultural identity. There are three problems with using nationality as a shorthand for cultural identity.

First, countries are not a single culture. They are made up of many subcultures, based on region, language, or religion. These subcultures may be very different from each other. This is especially true in large, diverse countries like India, but all countries have subcultures.

Second, in the new, smaller, more mobile, more connected world, values and behaviors cross national boundaries more easily; people and data both travel more widely and more often. Geographical configurations can still matter and affect how easily it is to see new cultures. For example, you might live in some parts of the United States or China and be able to travel for a long way without seeing a substantially different culture, but in Europe, a train ride of just a few hours can cross many borders. Our digital connections, however, can erase distance entirely with instant access and communications.

Third, individuals may be connected to a general national culture, but they are also members of cultures based on their interests, their employer, or the type of technologies they use. Jhumkee Iyengar, a UX design consultant with User In Design in India, summed it up this way.

“In many ways, India is like a little globe on its own because of all the languages and cultures we have in one country. It’s a very old multicultural country, with lots of layers. For a project in India, it would be important to think about differences between rural and urban users. People in my generation in cities have grown up with British and other Western influences. Even on a project for something basic like a banking ATM, I would consider these differences.”

Jhumkee Iyengar

Technology and Culture

Cultural differences that are particularly relevant in many UX projects may also be based on differences in the adoption of technology. For example, there are generational differences in how people use and think about technologies, depending on whether they are *digital natives*, who grew up after digital technology came into general use, or whether they adopted it as an new way of

Digital Natives

Marc Prensky used the term digital natives in his 2001 work, *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*, to describe students who grew up with technology, rather than those who learned to use it as an adult. (Prensky 2001)

doing something. For a simple example, think about what your first phone looked like. Did you have to learn to wrap your head around the idea of using a phone for short text messages?

Companies and Culture

Like any group of people, companies can also develop a culture. That culture can be created intentionally, or grow up as a result of circumstances. Geert Hofstede wrote that every organization has its symbols, heroes, rituals, and values (Hofstede 1994).

- Symbols are words and objects that have particular meaning to the people within the culture. They include the jargon, fashion, and status symbols recognized by the insiders.
- Heroes may be real people—a founder or industry leader—or an ideal, such as the goal for employee behavior.
- Rituals are the group activities. They include celebrations, but also rules of behavior that govern the social norms for the group.
- Values are deeply held beliefs or feelings. They are often unconscious and set the baseline for what is expected or normal.

Professions also have cultures, with shared attitudes, values, and language that connect people in a field. Specialized symbols, heroes, rituals, and values are easy to see in professions like financial services, health care, and other specialized fields, including UX.

In some cases, the basics of the work are the same everywhere in the world, although there can also be local regulations and practices, such as variations in banking practices or insurance regulations. In others, the profession can feel like a whole different world. Working in those fields can be as challenging as working across any cultural divide.

When I was working in financial services, I honestly felt like my users were from a completely different culture. We walk down the streets shoulder to shoulder but we live in parallel universes; the New York financial world and the New York world I grew up in. Traders speak a language all their own. They'll talk about the movement of a stock during the day and they are using English but if you don't know the lingo, you have no idea what they're talking about. It's a very specialized professional dialect. It's not that it's a technical language. It's just the way they talk in slang. They'll say things like the stock is getting hammered right now, and you have to know what that means.

Josh Seiden

For someone designing an application for civil engineers, the biggest challenge is getting to know the details of the technical field. On Itamar Medeiros' team at AutoDesk in Shanghai, "No one on our team has first-hand knowledge of, for example, designing high voltage power lines. When a designer first joins the team, the engineering drawings look like *The Matrix*—just numbers. It makes it even more important that we go into the field and immerse ourselves in their world."

Will Evans, who is currently leading a UX group at a new startup, says that communicating across the different disciplines in the product team can also be a challenge. He's working on ways to create sustained collaboration between developers, product managers, graphic designers and all the rest of the roles. His goal is to create enough cross-cultural learning that anyone can participate in any activity and in creating any artifact in their process.

ZAPPOS COMPANY CULTURE

At Zappos, Tony Hsei set out to build a corporate culture that would support his brand vision. He wrote in his blog, "At Zappos, our belief is that if you get the culture right, most of the other stuff—like great customer service, or building a great long-term brand, or passionate employees and customers—will happen naturally on its own. We believe that your company's culture and your company's brand are really just two sides of the same coin. The brand may lag the culture at first, but eventually it will catch up. Your culture is your brand."

You can read about the Zappos training process and their 10 cultural values at Zappos.com. (Hsei 2009)

UX and Layers of Culture

As important as culture is, some of the issues that UX considers are not, strictly speaking, cultural. UX design has to consider not only the characteristics of users, but also the technical or business environment and the nature of the tasks or interaction. For some products, the task itself may be relatively consistent. For example, in working on hotel-booking web sites around the world, Giles Colborne, from the UK consultancy, xpartners, found that the basic task is very similar across cultures. "People go through the same fundamental steps. The things that make it different in each country operate on a number of levels. The challenge is the unexpected things that make a difference. Nuances in color and tone of voice turn out to matter a great deal internationally."

One way to organize the issues in global UX work is by how easy or hard it is to predict the issues that users will experience for a specific product. For example, some aspects of a task may be affected by objective facts—the technical infrastructure, legal rules, or competitive products available in a market. Anyone who takes the time to ask the right questions can identify these issues. Language and cultural issues, on the other hand, are more difficult for someone from outside the culture to identify, as they are often based on subtle differences. The implications of this affect the kind of research you need to do, from a simple phone call or web search to contextual user research. It also suggests that you can organize your research efforts so that you can begin with simpler methods that collect information that is easier to discover and then build to more extensive immersive research, addressing subtler issues.

At first, we thought this was just good research planning, not particularly relevant to the question of *global UX*. But then we started to notice stories about gaps in understanding basic aspects of the user experience in specific markets. For example, when Jhilmil Jain was in China, leading a team’s first user research project there, she noticed that entering text using Chinese characters was “almost impossible” with her company’s netbooks. Her good personal experience of using similar products in Hindi (also an alphabetic language) had led her to assume that the design issues in creating keyboards for other scripts were “basically solved” so she was surprised to find out how little they knew about making it easy to use standard keyboards for nonalphabetic languages.

Kevin Brooks, UX Product Manager at Motorola Mobility, also told us about a situation in which unacknowledged cultural issues affected a project. In this case, the cultural gaps were within the team, which had a research and design group in the United States, engineers in India and Italy, and user interface developers in Russia. The problem was that the team didn’t recognize how culturally sensitive the product really was. The design group had (unfortunately) done little research, instead relying on their own experiences for the design. This meant that they didn’t recognize the extent to which they had expressed their own cultural perspectives, or how different those of developers from other places might be. It also meant that they did not have many detailed stories to share with the UI developers that would explain what they were trying to do. Not surprisingly, the two groups could not agree on what the product could look like. More time understanding their own cultural differences and how they affected the product might have let them work through these issues in the design in advance.

LAYERS OF CULTURE

Thinking about the layers of culture they need to understand for global UX, Giles Colborne and cpartners see them in a spectrum from easy to predict, to hard to predict.

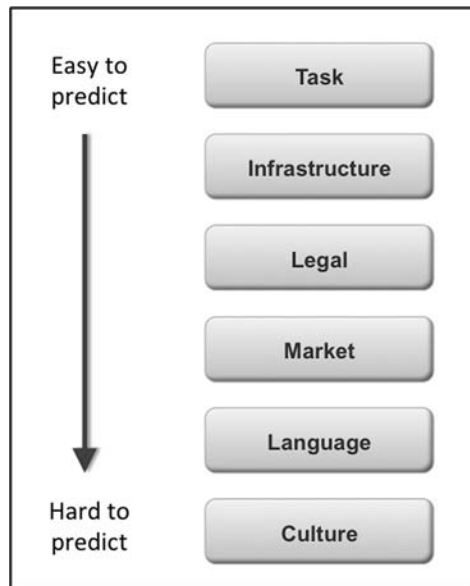


Figure 3.2

Tasks: Booking a hotel, buying a shirt—the users’ template of a task is fairly consistent from country to country. Once you know the task in country A, you’ll have a good idea how people would like to do it in country B. This is the task outside of the technology.

Infrastructure: The infrastructure can affect users’ use of technology. For example, when using the Internet means pay-per-minute, users restrict their access; when broadband speeds are high, users are more tolerant of video and Flash. Statistics on this for different countries are usually available from industry sources and economic monitoring organizations.

Legal: A phone call to your client’s office should make you aware of legal issues such as taxes or tax exemptions, privacy laws, or accessibility regulations. These may have a profound effect on task though, such as a need for internal travel visas in Russia that makes hotel booking more complex.

Market: Market norms can change users’ expectations of task. For instance in one market it may be the norm for cars to come packaged with lots of features; in another, cars may be basic and the features available as add-ons.

Language: Although translations of words may appear simple, subtleties in meaning can have a profound influence. For example, on the Lexus site, German users expected “technical specifications” to be more “engineering” than UK users who expected “performance and dimensions.”

Culture: Everything else. Social attitudes to betting (acceptable or not), role of family, social status of roles, what is considered to be “clean,” food rituals, holidays, justice, public and personal morality, society vs. individual, good manners, tone of voice, cultural icons, hopes and fears.

Finding Difference and Sameness

We asked everyone we interviewed about differences and similarities between cultures. A funny thing happened: most people wanted to talk about what was the same, or universal, challenging the notion that “global” automatically implies differences. The fundamental things, they said, don’t change, or change slowly.

The things we value: children, education, the ability to laugh at yourself. Some of these things are very human. That doesn’t change because of where you live.

Jhumkee Iyengar

At the end of the day, we all breathe, we all worry about our family. Maybe there are different degrees, but I’m sure that if we did similar research in Thailand or Germany or South Africa, many of the same issues would come up. Some things are just core.

Janna DeVlyder

That doesn’t mean there is not variety around the world. In fact, many people who go into UX *like* the variations and textures of different cultures. People we interviewed described, with some dismay, the degree to which some of the variation seems to be disappearing. When you land in Beijing and the first thing you see is a gigantic Starbucks sign (as Whitney did), or US food chains and even a 1950s style American Diner in South America (as Jim Hudson did), you might start to wonder why you flew all that way. Bill DeRouchey, the UX designer for BankSimple, thinks about both global patterns and local variations.

If you go to another country, almost the first thing you experience is the airport. And they all fundamentally work in the exact same way. You’re just trying to figure out if I’m going left or I’m going right. There’s a universal pattern to stuff like that. You’re just figuring out the local flavor for how it’s accomplished. It starts to change and reveal itself, the further away, of course, you get from immigration. As you go through those doors and then you hit the hall and you get out of the hall and you hit the taxis, and you start to see both elements that are the same and elements that are very different about a taxi experience.

Bill DeRouchey

The way people described some projects was like this, especially for relatively straightforward tasks: booking hotel rooms,

checking for viruses, e-commerce, ticket kiosks, or banking. They said something like, “It’s the task. That doesn’t really change from place to place. The basic steps are all the same.” At Google, Tomer Sharon found that the similarities of new technologies and businesses built around them were often stronger than regional cultural differences.

On one project, I thought there would be differences between North American and European customers, because our project managers thought that they were hearing different needs being expressed in Europe. In the end, I don’t think it was a deep cultural difference. I’m trying to be very practical. For every study, there is a set of research questions you need to answer. Even if you say, “There is no difference,” it’s still an answer, so it’s not a failure.

Tomer Sharon

As we kept talking, however, almost everyone came up with an example of the local flavor and preferences that make a lot of difference in designing a user experience. These examples included some infrastructure basics, like different types of payment methods, regulations that have to be acknowledged and designed for. This is true for products used in daily life, as well as for the high-tech products that Doug Wang designs.

Normally, when a designer takes a task, we are looking at one problem. But no problem is stand-alone: they connect to other things. Even a single work flow is influenced by what happens upstream and downstream. So to achieve our (design) task, we might have to talk to 20 other people. We are actually looking at the knot in a net.

Doug Wang

As people talked through the complexities of a design, each detail hinted at the contextual forces that shaped it. A good example is designing banking apps in the Middle East. There are some simple visual issues, such as designing for a language that is written right to left. But there are also the broader requirements of creating a banking application for the Islamic community that will be acceptable under Sharia laws and consistent with cultural customs of how a family makes important financial decisions. In this case, deep layers like language and religion interact with shallow layers like banking laws and commerce to affect the conversation. It’s hard to separate culture from user experience because the two are so intertwined.

Relevant Differences

Maybe we focus on differences because it's easy to assemble lists of things that are different. This is a philosophical debate as much as anything else between anthropologist and practical designer. We are a little bit of both of them. Even the questions we choose to ask—or not ask—are part of our stance. The question is what are the differences that are relevant for UXD in general, or for a particular project.

One of the things I learned early in my career is be sensitive to the differences that make a difference. I think that in the early days of user centered design, we were really focused on what are the differences between this and that, between this person and that person and this group and this culture and that country and this and that. But it's really important—I think the question we really need to ask ourselves as designers is when are we looking at a difference that makes a difference, and which of these differences at the end of the day don't actually make a difference. That can be sometimes hard to judge.

Robert Barlow-Busch

Some examples of differences that might—or might not—matter are:

- The utensils used to eat with or whether a fork is held in the right or left hand
- How taxi drivers calculate the fare for a ride
- How mobile phones are shared in a family
- Preferences for bright or muted color schemes
- Ways of addressing people by name
- What people eat for breakfast
- The most popular social media program
- Typical working hours for office workers

It can be easy to think that countries with a shared language and cultural heritage will have the same user experience, but there may be important differences between otherwise similar countries. In their work for The Open University in the UK, Caroline Jarrett, a UX consultant based in the UK, and Whitney, from the United States, found many differences in their assumptions about higher education, including the structure of a degree program costs, and attitudes about universities. Ronnie Battista, an experience design director, says that the small differences may be the most important.

Global research often conjures images of multilingual facilitators and discussions of the cultural elements of design based on geography, but in testing an internal application with a large global

utilities company, we found differences between employees in the US and UK. As expected, we uncovered numerous shared issues, but there were smaller ones that we found in language discrepancies. For example, in the US, the word “monitor” was associated with the verb (e.g., to monitor a dashboard), whereas in the UK “monitor” was the actual terminal screen where they entered the information. A small distinction, but when dealing with the global provision of highly flammable gases, it’s basic communication issues that can be the most important in critical situations.

Ronnie Battista

Determining what differences, or what aspects of local culture and customs are relevant is especially important when you are looking at many countries, not just one or two. Jim Hudson made the point especially forcefully. He manages research for PayPal in Europe and the Middle East, covering more than 20 countries. He has to decide whether to think about Germany and France as similar (because they are both European countries) or different (because they have their own language and customs). Working for PayPal, he might focus on the most popular payment methods, and look for groups of countries that are similar in this behavior and then for those that are exceptions. In a comparative study of checkout processes between online bookstores in the United States and the United Kingdom, for example, he did not find any significant differences. But if you don’t understand how the unique Brazilian payment method, the boleto, works, you will never be successful in e-commerce there. That helps him make decisions about where to put research and design resources to have the most impact.

The Question of Hofstede

Trying to get your head around all the issues in understanding culture begs for a model that can organize all the elements and help you start thinking about how to use cultural information in design.

The model most people reach for is Geert Hofstede’s cultural dimensions. It’s certainly the most quoted, with some of the dimensions now part of general terminology. Concepts like “power distance” and “collectivism vs. individualism” came up in conversations without any special reference.

If you haven’t seen this work before, it’s a simple model, with five dimensions upon which any culture can be classified. It’s based on quantitative research over many years, starting with a study of IBM employees around the world.

HOFSTEDE'S DIMENSIONS

1. **Power distance**, or the degree of inequality among people that the population of a country considers as normal, looks at how much people accept and expect that power is distributed unequally (from relatively equal to extremely unequal).
2. **Individualism**, or the degree to which people in a country have learned to act as individuals rather than as members of cohesive groups such as extended loyal groups and families (from collectivist to individualist).
3. **Masculinity**, or the degree to which “masculine” values like assertiveness, performance, success, and competition prevail over “feminine” values like the quality of life, maintaining warm personal relationships, service, caring, and solidarity (from tender to tough).
4. **Uncertainty avoidance**, or the degree to which people in a country prefer structured over unstructured situations and their tolerance for uncertainty, ambiguity, and diversity of approach (from relatively flexible to extremely rigid).
5. **Time orientation**, or the degree to which thrift and perseverance, respect for tradition, and fulfilling social expectations are valued (from long term (LTO) to short term (STO)).

Geert Hofstede, Cultural Dimensions, <http://www.geert-hofstede.com/> (Hofstede, Hofstede, Minkov 2010; Hofstede 2001).

Just mentioning Hofstede brings out strong reactions. Despite how often Hofstede is mentioned—especially regarding power distance and individualism dimensions—his work is controversial for several reasons:

- Conflation of nationality and culture
- Focus within IBM, already a transnational organization
- Focus on management, not design

For some, Hofstede's dimensions have the value of being a starting point for their own investigations and as a framework on which they can hang their analysis of patterns of behavior. It's useful for researchers like Katharina Reineke, who are looking for ways to manage personalization in a culturally sensitive but automated way. Her work to allow culturally-based personalization started with discovering that her European approaches to e-learning didn't work well in Rwanda. In her research for her Ph.D., she developed an approach that enables user interfaces to automatically adapt their visual presentation and workflows to the preferences of users depending on their cultural background. She used some of the Hofstede dimensions to create a measurable scale that she can turn into a software algorithm. But she

also found that she needed personal characteristics like age to be able to predict preference well.

Aaron Marcus tried using the dimensions and thought about how they might affect design. This was in 1993, when the idea was novel (at least in the United States), but in the end, he found it hard to translate these theoretical concepts into design principles. Filip Sapienza also tried to apply Hofstede's broad quantitative model to his own research with bicultural groups of US Latinos and Chinese-Americans. Rather than scores that fell between their two countries, as the model might predict, participants' scores fell outside the ranges for either one. He concluded bicultural populations, especially immigrants, "experience wide shifts in their cultural sensibilities when transitioning from one society to another" (AM+A 2001; Sapienza 2010a, 2010b).

Ultimately, attitudes toward Hofstede (and other ways of looking at culture) may come down to the difference between social scientists and ethnographers—between a top-down quantitative view that offers a strong model and a bottom-up qualitative view that offers rich description. Hofstede's dimensions may be valuable for defining descriptive concepts, even if they are not as useful as specific research in the appropriate context for making design decisions.

Ann Light (2009) writes that Hofstede "is held up as evidence that tidy answers exist somewhere to untidy problems." Her report from an OzCHI 2008 workshop suggest that as important as Hofstede's guidance on cultural diversity is, for design research, if you want to understand a very different culture, you have to get first-hand experience, not design from a recipe book. Her article concludes: "So if you're designing for a culture you're not familiar with, here's the best advice: read Hofstede's work and put it back on the shelf with everyone else's. Then engage in 'good listening' with the people you're designing for. Use cultural guides and technical probes to help bridge the communications gap. And keep your attitude and methodology flexible—the unexpected is where the most important ideas await. Talk to others who do this work and are interested in cultural perspectives."

A FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Models may be more useful for helping UX designers understand cultural influences when they focus on specific types of attitudes or behaviors that are relevant for specific types of projects. When Experientia, an Italian UX company, worked on a social change project in Finland, they developed a framework to help designers understand the

different forces that influence whether people will make changes in their attitudes and behaviors.

One of the challenges of designing for social change is that the products cannot simply fit existing contexts, behaviors, or attitudes, because its goal is to change those very things. Instead, they focused on different aspects of motivation. This model allows designers to tailor their program for a specific context in specific ways.

Their model, for example, defines four different kinds of actions that need to take place for social change.

- **Engagement and Awareness:** Ways to present meaningful and contextual information. Engagement with a new behavior is more likely to be sustained long term if it is easier and more convenient than previous patterns; for example, making it easier to recycle technological waste products or creating systems that automatically reuse grey water in gardens without any extra effort.
- **Community Actions:** We are social animals and react to our neighbors' or peers' behavior. Change requires creating a pool of shared knowledge, accessible to all members of the community, and putting support mechanisms and networks in place to encourage compliance.
- **Self-Assessment:** To translate understanding into action, people need to be able to see the real impact of their individual or group actions. Includes immediate feedback and rewards, from emotional satisfaction. At a community level, the ability to evaluate joint consumption and carbon emissions is an important tool for highlighting the need for further action, and the opportunity to reward sustained change.
- **Leading by Example:** Encouraging individuals to change is vital, but the impact has to occur at the community, regional, and national level. This acknowledges the broader context.

You can read more about this work (Vanderbeeken, O'Loughlin, 2010) at <http://www.experientia.com/blog/experientiasframework-for-behavioural-change-towards-sustainable-lifestyles/>

Language and Culture

To talk about culture, we must also talk about language. What people say, the actual words they use, and what they mean by them is one of the three sources of information (along with the way people act and the artifacts they use) that ethnographers draw on in understanding a culture.

Communication and Context

In a keynote at the UPA 2004 conference, Ginny Redish, the usability, content strategy and plain language thought leader,

talked about communities. She pointed out that we all belong to many communities, which are often tied together by how they communicate. Drawing on her training as a linguist, she also noted that we may use different choices of words and styles of speech in each of our communities.

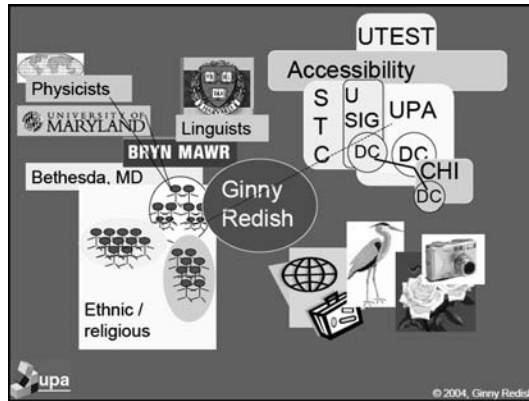


Figure 3.3 Yours, Mine, and Ours. Ginny Redish's community map shows how her different interests and the groups of people she is part of are both separate and overlapping <http://redish.net/images/stories/PDF/YoursMineandOurs.pdf>. (Redish 2004).

For some, this might mean using different languages. People in India typically speak two or three different languages: one language within their family, the Hindi national language, and English. Each is used in different social contexts. But even if you only speak one language, you probably talk differently to your family, your professional colleagues, and your acquaintances.

We may also want to communicate with different types of companies (and products) in different ways. Facebook might sound more like the way we talk to our friends, but we might prefer our bank to maintain a bit more formality. These preferences reflect both our personal style and cultural trends.

THE TRAP OF THE ANGLOSPHERE

From inside the Anglosphere, as the group of English-speaking countries is called, it's easy to think that everyone speaks English, especially because it's so often the language of international business or lingua franca of tourism. But most of the world speaks something other than English as their *first* language, and 75% speak *no* English at all.

Instead of joining the world together, language can create local clusters of sites—walled gardens—in languages like Chinese, Hindi, Portuguese, or Russian. Ethan Zuckerman, who created GlobalVoices to collect and translate blogs from around the world says that there is not one big global Web. “The Internet has become a bunch of interlinked but linguistically distinct and culturally specific spaces.”

(German 2010; Kettle 2010)

Cultures and Communication Styles

Even something as simple as a store clerk saying “Have a nice day” can be a cultural marker. The British might think it’s forward of them and injecting personal sentiment into a passing encounter, while Americans simply think it’s polite. This intersection of culture, business, and interface interests Noriko Osaka, a UX consultant working on global products from her base in Japan.

When I review international projects, I often recommend changing wording on the interface to avoid being unclear. For example, instead of using “Submit” on the Submit button, in Japan it would better to use “Complete this reservation.” Also, we always provide samples of the input for a form to help users, because we have different types of characters in the Japanese language.

I was once told by a British researcher that we enjoy the best service in Japan for free. Let’s say you get on the train in Tokyo, and you will hear a lot of announcements by the conductor; for example, on a hot day, you may hear, “We will turn on the air conditioning from now on, as it is getting hot, thank you for being patient in the crowded train.” And on a rainy day, they might say, “Be careful not to leave your umbrella. Today we find many of them left in the train.” You may think this is too much for an adult, however that’s the way it is here.

Noriko Osaka

Both the rules of the grammar and habits of speech add subtle differences of meaning. Languages may require you to name the gender of a person you are talking about, or when an event happened. If you don’t understand these differences, you may not really understand what someone is saying to you, or the implications of what you have said.

In the Chinese language, if I want to propose two options, I should put my preferences in the last position. If I say “hamburger or

pizza” I’m saying that I want pizza, so that’s why people say “yes, let’s have pizza.” From their perspective, I’m suggesting that they should take the last thing that I’m offering.

Itamar Medeiros

Bridging the gap between two cultures requires understanding how their languages are both the same and different. The debate over the relationship between culture, language, and how we think is summarized in a New York Times Magazine article:

If different languages influence our minds in different ways, this is not because of what our language allows us to think but rather because of what it habitually obliges us to think about...The habits of mind that our culture has instilled in us from infancy shape our orientation to the world and our emotional responses to the objects we encounter, and their consequences probably go far beyond what has been experimentally demonstrated so far; they may also have a marked impact on our beliefs, values, and ideologies.

Guy Deutscher (2010)

Even if you don’t speak the language, learning even a little bit about it can help avoid misunderstandings. When you are getting to know a culture, the slang and jokes can be the hardest to learn, and can easily contribute to communication gaps.

I think I was on my second day of work and was still getting settled. At the next desk a fellow named Jan, a native Belgian, was on a long conference call with a large team of people, most of whom were in the US. When he finished the call, there were a few moments of silence and then he leaned his head over from behind his monitor with a quizzical expression and said, “Bob, excuse me. Do you have a moment... Please, tell me what is *crock of shit*?” I guess people on the call had been saying that something they were doing was a crock of shit and he wanted to know exactly what that meant. I spent a lot of time translating English slang and swear words for people. It was great fun.

Robert Barlow-Busch

Nuances of Meaning

Although we can learn to speak a language fluently enough to use it functionally, it is harder to develop the kind of ear for the way language is used that only comes from an insider view. There were many stories about how the meaning of a phrase can differ from one country to another, even if the literal meaning of the words is the same. Sometimes it can be hard to tease out the

“Never would’ve predicted the inconsistencies in language b/w American and British English, & how it would impact my effectiveness as a speaker.”
@Whitneyhess, Twitter,
May 21, 2010

differences in meaning without the detailed examples that UX research can uncover. Anjali Kelkar's experience as a UX researcher on a project in India shows the danger of making assumptions about the underlying meaning of a word.

For an air freshener product category in China we conducted studies where we asked people to take pictures of their daily life around maintaining their homes. These were followed by in-home interviews with research participants. The marketing team was aware through previous market research that their target audience loved the concept of anything natural. As a result they had recently introduced various 'natural' scented air fresheners such as green tea, tangerine, ginger lily, and so on, but with little or no success in the market.

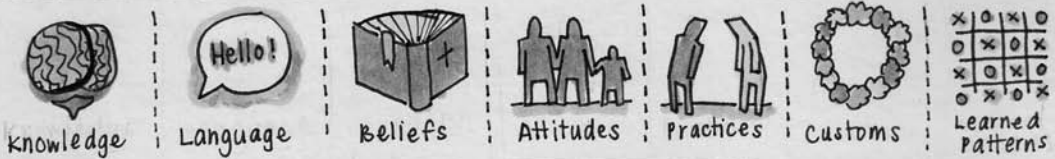
During the interviews we wanted to probe deeper around whether they could *show* us what natural meant. As we looked at the pictures with one of our participants, I said, "You have a really fantastic house and you are proud of it. Show me how natural is part of it." Finally, she picks up a grainy picture of clothes hanging on the balcony and says, "This one. When there is a little breeze outside, the fragrance of freshly washed clothes blows into my living room, it makes me think there are scented trees outside my home. And that is natural." This was the a-ha moment for my client's team who was present, that *natural* didn't literally mean natural scents, *natural* meant the experience the user had with fragrance in a natural setting. Understanding the nuances of what people meant when they said *natural* was the key to this project

Anjali Kelkar

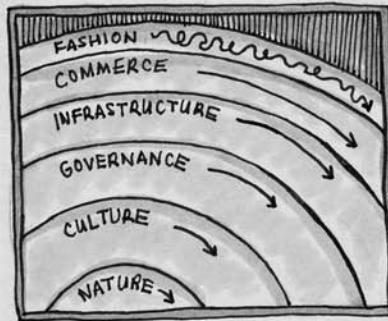
CULTURE AND UX

chapter 3

Culture is defined by what we share - It is never finished



CULTURE is more than NATIONALITY



PACE LAYERING - Stewart Brand

"The things we value: children, education, the ability to laugh at yourself, some of these things are very human. That doesn't change because of where you live"

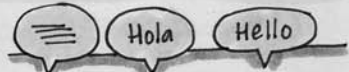
JHUMKEE LYENGAR

DETERMINE YOUR DIFFERENCES



- Ann Light -

If you want to understand a culture, go get first hand experience not design from a RECIPE BOOK



You can't talk about culture without also talking about LANGUAGE

Nuances of meaning can be difficult to uncover...

