

A Comparative Study of Business Manners of Myanmar and German

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Abstract

This paper compares basic business manners of Myanmar and German in the workplace. All the information used in this paper is collected from the course books of fourth year and MA (Qualifying), and the internet websites. They are presented in four parts: greeting, introducing oneself, conversation and meeting behavior. The researcher pointed out similarities and differences in business manners of Myanmar and German. It was found out that they behave similarly in greeting, in which the higher rank is greeted first, showing up always on time in appointments, welcoming the guests, setting the cell phone on vibrate mode or silent mode in meeting, receiving the calls with an excuse, covering with hand or handkerchief in sneezing and dressing formally. The differences found out from this study are: introducing a new colleague in workplace, formal and informal pronouns, seating plan in meeting, small talk ritual, the concept of using the left-hand in sneezing, and the custom of shoes wearing in the workplace.

Keywords: Business manners, cultural difference, Myanmar and German

Introduction

Culture affects the people's ways of thinking. Every culture has its distinct characteristics that make it different from every other culture. It may have a great influence in communication. Cultural influences, attitudes and behaviour vary within and across nations and within and across ethnicities, and are strongly embedded within communities. To avoid cultural shock, cross-cultural communication plays a vital role especially in business world. This paper aims to study the basic interaction between Myanmar and German and covers the following topics: greeting, introducing oneself, conversation and meeting behaviors.

Literature Review

There are numerous studies and researches focusing on business etiquette and manners; and they play an important role in business joint-ventures. Nils Warkentin said: "Good behavior is crucial in working life. Behaviors that are completely in order in the private sphere can be inappropriate in a professional context."²

In the book "Über den Umgang mit Menschen" (Dealing with People) Adolph Freiherr Knigge (1788) mainly explains the business rules such as how to behave on the first day of work, how to greet each other in workplace, how to behave in meetings and business dinners, and how to dress for a job interview.

In the book "Business Etikette", (Business Etiquette), Nandine Meyden (2011) informs about modern Business manners of German. It also includes the important details from workplace to business dinner. Moreover, he explains how to write a business letter or email to a business partner.

In the text book "Erfolgreich in der Interkulturellen Kommunikation" (Successful in Intercultural Communication), Volker Eismann describes: "The

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² Nils Warkentin, (2017), www.karrierebibel.de

manners led to misunderstanding each other and the basic etiquette in workplace with colleagues from different cultural background.”¹

Another aspect explained by Anne Buscha and Giesela Linthout in the fourth year BA prescribed text book “Geschäftskommunikation” (Business Communication) (2007), highlights the word choice and vocal tone in business telephone conversation. The importance of business world is also emphasized in that book. However, this paper compares some basic manners and rules in workplace and the customs of German and Myanmar, in order to enhance successful communication in business collaboration between German and Myanmar.

Aim

This paper aims at understanding the basic manners of German in the workplace, in order to succeed and be easier in communicating with German people and to help learners of the German as a foreign language in their future business ventures with German people. It compares the business manners of Myanmar and German because it is necessary to provide information on business manners to the German language students at the German Departments in Universities of Foreign Languages in Mandalay and Yangon.

Data and Methods

For this paper, data are retrieved from websites of the Internet and text books such as *Geschäftskommunikation, zur Orientierung Basiswissen Deutschland* and *Erfolgreich in der interkulturellen Kommunikation* which are used in BA (Fourth Year) and MA (Qualifying) classes. The similarities and differences of business manners of Myanmar and German are observed in this comparative study.

Research Questions

1. What are the basic business manners of Myanmar and German?
2. How can the similarities and differences of business manners of Myanmar and German be identified?
3. Why is manner important at work?

Findings

Myanmar and German behave similarly in greeting, in which the higher rank is greeted first. In business meeting, they have to arrive at right time. Punctuality is observed extremely in German. However, Myanmar are a bit relaxed about punctuality. Myanmar and German warmly welcome the guests and always set their cell phones in vibrate or silent mode in all meetings. They receive only the emergency calls. Myanmar and German have same manners in that they cover the mouth with hand or a handkerchief when sneezing or coughing. They are very conservative and wear formal dress at the workplace and in business meeting.

Myanmar and German have different manners in which the supervisor or the person in the higher rank introduces the new colleague to others. Myanmar and Germans go together to the table of the new co-worker and introduce themselves. Myanmar have to use the formal personal pronoun in the work.

¹Volker Eismann, (2013), *Erfolgreich in der Interkulturellen Kommunikation*, p. 12

However, Germans have to speak normally informal personal pronoun to be easier and familiar in working environment when the senior will suggest switching to use it. In German meeting, the guests are always seated on the right side of the host. But the seating plan in Myanmar meeting is not generally fixed. In Myanmar, small talk plays not a role in business meeting, although it initiates the business conversation in German. Germans always cover with their left hand when sneezing or coughing to have confidence in extending the right hand shake. Saying “Gesundheit” can usually be heard in German meeting after someone sneezes, but it is not much obviously heard in Myanmar. Myanmar and German wear different types of shoes such as slippers and pump shoes.

According to customs and courtesies of Myanmar and German, the elder or a senior person is greeted first. Myanmar assumes that addressing the elder or senior person as informal personal pronoun “nin/ nga” (you/ I) is impolite. Thus, only the formal personal pronoun can be precisely used in dealing with each other in Myanmar workplace. However, German believes the conversation may be easier and familiar in working environment by addressing the informal personal pronoun to each other. It can be assumed that German is focusing on familiar and close relation between colleagues in the workplace.

Myanmar people's nature is not too strict and serious, but German is the master of planning. It is strictly prohibited to forget documents and paper and enter the room hurriedly in German meeting. Such behaviours have been considered that the person has without any preparation for meeting. The guests are warmly welcomed and seated in all business meeting of Myanmar and German. This habit shows that the guests are treated with the great and warm respect in both countries. Furthermore, the guests are always seated on the right side of the host in German which shows that German is always systematic.

As Myanmar and German are conservative, they dress up formally and try to cover their skin as much as possible in the workplace. Additionally, Myanmar wears slippers while German wears pump shoes. It would seem to depend on their custom and their origin.

According to the facts mentioned above, it can be defined that Myanmar has a culture of hospitality and openness. They are very friendly and outgoing people. It can be also described as a country of people with deep rooted custom and religion. Many of the accepted etiquette pertain to Myanmar's Buddhist religion; and some of them may be strange for westerners.

Similarly, Germans can be considered as the masters of planning. They think careful planning in business and personal life which will provide a sense of security. Germans believe that maintaining clear lines of demarcation between people, places, and things is the surest way to lead a structured and ordered life. This is reflected in the adherence to prescribed business rules in the German business culture.

To sum up, the manners and etiquette of Myanmar and German are widely distinguished in business world. Germans are not too much influenced by culture, and they do professionally. But in Myanmar workplace, there are a lot of cultural influences. Therefore, it is strongly suggested that the manners of Myanmar and German have to be studied thoroughly before the business relations. If you behave

wrongly; it may lead to misunderstanding to each other in intercultural communication.

Discussion

The cultures between the East and the West are distinguished by a large scale. It means that not only the culture but also the business manners are different in Easterners and Westerners. Thus, the business manner should be studied in advance before the business negotiations.

The similarities and differences of business manners can be obviously distinguished as follows.

1. Greeting

A slight bow of the head and addressing “Mingalaba” are the formal greeting to the person of the highest rank in Myanmar. When they are in the same position, they greet each other “Mingalaba” without bowing down. The person in the highest rank should be greeted first. If they are in the same rank, they greet the nearest person of any sexes.

However, the person in the highest position should be greeted first regardless of age and sex in German. Germans shake hands firmly and greet each other “Guten Morgen”/“Guten Tag”/“Guten Abend”/“Gute Nacht”, but it depends on time. Germans stand in a hand-reaching distance when they are shaking hand with someone who they do not know personally. The handshake should not go back and forth or side to side and pump the other person’s hand more than three. It should also avoid shaking hands slightly. A straight look into the eyes and smiles are the traditional greeting in handshake. Volker Eismann explained: “Regardless of age and gender, one looks at each other in the eye and smiles while greeting.”¹

The other hands should be taken out of the pocket as well. If they are in the same position, the older person should be greeted first by the younger and woman by man. The name of the greetee is also addressed in handshake.

Guten Morgen	- good morning
Guten Tag	- good day
Guten Abend	- good evening
Gute Nacht	- good night

In fact, there are similarities and differences in the greeting pattern of German and Myanmar. The person in the highest position is greeted at first in the business world. In the same rank, Myanmar greets first to the nearest person regardless of the sex. However, German greets women first in this situation. Myanmar and German have same manners in that the person seeing first someone and the person entering the room will greet first others.

2. Introducing Oneself

It can be found that the type of introducing oneself may be different in each and every culture. In Myanmar, the supervisor introduces the new colleague to others. The name is addressed first and then the title or rank is addressed. For example:

She is Daw Yin Yin Htay (Lecturer).

She is Daw Swe Nwe Hmwe (Assistant Lecturer).

¹ Volker Eismann, (2013), *Erfolgreich in der Interkulturellen Kommunikation*, p.62

She is Daw May Hnin Lwin (Tutor).

Conversely, Germans go together to the table of the new co-worker to greet him, then introduce themselves and shake hands in the workplace. In introducing yourself, one should say who you are by addressing the greetee's name after greeting. Besides, titles are very important to Germans. One should do his best to address people by their full, correct title, no matter how extraordinarily long that title may seem to someone. The importance of titles in introduction is explained by Volker: "Doctor, Professor is part of the name".¹

Example: Guten Morgen, Herr Prof. Schön, ich bin Paul Ehrlich.

Guten Morgen	- good morning
Herr	- Mister
Prof. (Professor)	- professor
Schön	- Schön (family name)
Ich	- I
bin	- am
Paul Ehrlich	- Paul Ehrlich (name)

Consequently, the new colleague is introduced by others in Myanmar; but he introduces himself in German work place. Then, titles are very important to Germans but the role of title is not much obviously found in Myanmar.

3. Conversation

In conversation, the person in the lower positions use the formal personal pronouns "Kyanaw" ("I" for male) and "Kyama" ("I" for female) to the addressee in higher positions at work in Myanmar. If the addressee is older than the speaker he also uses "Kyanaw/ Kyama" even though they are in the same rank. When they are in the same position and age not only "Kyanaw/ Kyama" but also "nin/ nga" (informal personal pronouns for "you" and "I") are used in conversation.

In German business interaction, although one has to address others formally "Sie" (you), the informal usage "Du" (you) is also used to be easier and familiar at work. The higher ranking person— regardless of age and sex - would always be the one to suggest switching to "Du". However, a specialist for manner advised that: "One should not dare to rush "you" in familiar form "Du". That form is always offered by the rank higher."²

If they are at the same rank, one should wait; the senior will suggest switching to "Du". For example, the two Chefs are meeting and only the senior Chef can suggest to "Du".

There are formal and informal personal pronouns in both languages. In Myanmar business world, the formal usages are spoken to higher rank or elder; but the informal usages can be used in the same age or in the same position in German workplace. In the same way, Germans have to speak formal in the work. To reveal a good working atmosphere, they use normally informal personal pronoun "Du" when the senior will suggest switching to use it.

4. Meeting Behaviour

4.1. Punctuality

It is not allowed to show up late in the business meeting, preferably arriving a few minutes in advance. If you expect to be delayed, you should make a

¹ Volker Eismann, (2013), Erfolgreich in der Interkulturellen Kommunikation, p.63

² Nils Warkentin, (2017), www.karrierebibel.de

call immediately and offer an explanation. Asking to excuse again for being late to meeting is needed in Myanmar.

Being organised, methodical and rigorous, the Germans plan their work day. He or she has to arrive at right time to the meeting preferably 5 minutes earlier. Germans are extremely punctual, and even a few minutes delay can be offensive. Meetings should be planned at least two to three weeks ahead of time. If you are going to be even slightly late, you should explain your situation. He or she has to avoid walking into the meeting room hurriedly, stumbling and forgetting the documents. The Germans assumed that these would be the signs of the lack of prior planning.

Additionally, punctuality is observed extremely in German. Myanmarers are a bit relaxed about punctuality. In German business meeting, a person needs to arrive at meetings wellprepared and refrain from incomplete documents, because the Germans are not comfortable in handling the random agenda.

4.2. Seating Plan

The guests are always ushered and then seated in Myanmar meeting. The highest rank or the host is seated at the centre of the table and the guests would be placed on the right or left. After the meeting, the host sees off the guest to the door or to the car parking.

The guests are welcomed and seated in the room in German meeting too. The seats of the guest are arranged to the right side of the host. And the host will see off the guest at the door when the meeting is over.

Equally, the guests have been welcomed and seen off in both countries. Although the guests are always seated on the right side of the host in German meeting, the seating plan in Myanmar meeting is not generally fixed.

4.3. Small Talk

Before the meeting, there is usually small talk of culture, custom and cuisine, not requiring a long elaborate ritual, but also not diving straight into business talk. It can be found that small talk is not much necessary in Myanmar business world.

Likewise, getting to know each other before the German meeting, there is usually small talk of what you did at the weekend, how the family members are, how your holidays were, and which team you support in World Cup. Age, health and salaries are not the matters to discuss each other in German small talk culture.

Bickmore (1999) examined “small talk is a bonding ritual and an effective strategy to manage the interpersonal distance in business relations.” For Myanmar, small talk is not taking a step to initiate a business conversation, although it initiates the business conversation in Germany. So, the German is willing to have small talk before the business meeting. Some common topics for small talk with German are weather, books, soccer and headlines in the news.

4.4. Cell Phone

Myanmar always set their cell phones in vibrate or silent mode in all meetings. If someone receives the emergency call, he should offer an excuse, and then step outside. The call duration should take only a few minutes.

Similarly, cell phones should be kept out of sight in German meeting. It would be better to turn off or set to silent or vibrate mode during meetings and

conferences. When accepting an emergency call, a person may excuse himself as quietly and calmly as possible from the gathering with an apology and then step outside. It should not take long, and he will return to the meeting in a moment with excuse.

German and Myanmar have the same etiquette of cell phone in meeting. The cell phone should do set in vibrate or silent mode always and only the emergency should be received.

4.5. Business Card

Myanmar usually exchanges the business card at the beginning of meeting; the gesture of politeness and respect such as right-hand holded with left hand should be used when the card is changing. If the guest is using both hands, you should receive it with your both hands.

The business cards are exchanged as well at the beginning of German meeting. He or she should give and receive cards with the right hand—the hand of discretion. The receiver can read the card directly without having to turn it around. German always takes a glance at the card when he receives a card. It is also important to bring the card readily to exchange at the meeting.

In the first meeting of a business contact, business cards are exchanged at the beginning of conversation. The business card should always be ready in the pocket. Furthermore, one should pause and read the card in exchanging. Without taking a look at the business card is regarded as impolite in German culture. One should make a comment about a card when you receive it to show your impression on the card. For example, note the logo, the business name or some other piece of information. However, the main point in card exchange for Myanmar is just the gesture showing respect and politeness.

4.6. Sneeze or Cough

Sneezing or coughing in meeting is generally avoided when possible. Sometimes it is impossible to hold a sneeze or cough in meeting. When someone wants to sneeze or cough, he covers his mouth with his hand or with towel, sometimes steps outside in Myanmar.

Correspondingly, when German wants to sneeze or cough in the meeting, he bows slightly and covers his mouth with his left hand, not with his right hand, to avoid spreading germs in hand shake. After someone sneezes, it is probably accustomed to hearing or saying “Gesundheit” (health) which means “bless you” in English.

When sneezing or coughing, everyone covers the mouth with a handkerchief or with the hand. However, German always covers with their left hand to have confidence in extending the right hand for hand shake. Saying “Gesundheit” can be heard usually in German meeting, after someone sneezes.

4.7. Dress Code

As Myanmar is a very conservative country, the skin is covered as much as possible. For formal occasions, the local attire that men mostly wear is a shirt and longyi and businessmen sometimes wear full western-style suits. Businesswomen usually wear longyis, usually with jackets or blouses. Shoes are sometimes taken off at the door of a meeting room.

Business dress in Germany is understated, formal and conservative. Businessmen should wear dark coloured, business suits; solid, conservative ties, and white shirts. Women also dress conservatively, in dark suits and white blouses or conservative dresses. Skirts should reach the knees, shoulders should be covered and pump shoes should be worn for any business dealings.

Hence, Myanmar and German dresses are formal and conservative. Shoes are sometimes taken off at the door of the office in Myanmar but Germans always wear pump shoes.

4.8. Gift

Gift giving among business associates is common in Myanmar. The traditional food and local products are given for showing respect to each other. The gifts do not need to be expensive. Sometimes, the expensive presents make the receivers feel like he should be giving back something of similar value. Formally, Myanmar does not open the gifts in front of the givers. On the contrary, gift giving among business associates is not common in German.

Conclusion

The stereotype of German is strongly individualistic, and demands the utmost respect at all times. The highest of standards are also expected in German business world. Consequently, any unethical behaviour will seriously diminish all future business negotiations. To build a strong relation between German and Myanmar, their basic business manners should be necessarily observed. In this paper, the similarities and differences of the essential business manners are investigated. This study is expected to enrich people's knowledge on business manner differences between Myanmar and German. To conclude, there may be other factors such as the table manners which may lead to have a better relationship in business avoiding any cultural misunderstanding. It will be still left to study.

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