Sex, Lies and Stereotypes: Putting cultural tips for doing business in France to the test

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"Il y a toujours une manière de comprendre l'idiot, l'enfant, le primitif ou l'étranger, pourvu qu'on ait les renseignements suffisants."
Jean-Paul Sartre[1]

1. Introduction

In *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*, Jean-Paul Sartre asserts that each individual is a particular example of the universal concept, "l'homme" (Sartre 1996, 28). He argues that the universality of the human condition allows mutual comprehension between people, regardless of their particular social or racial backgrounds. He writes:

> Tout projet, même celui du Chinois, de l'Indien ou du nègre, peut être compris par un Européen. Il peut être compris, cela veut dire que l'Européen de 1945 peut se jeter, à partir d'une situation qu'il conçoit, vers ses limites de la même manière, et qu'il peut refaire en lui le projet du Chinois, de l'Indien ou de l'Africain. Il y a universalité de tout projet en ce sens que tout projet est compréhensible pour tout homme (Sartre 1996, 61).[2]

Sartre believes that with some effort, and the right information, cultural differences can be cut through to expose the common humanity that exists within us all.

In a similarly universalist vein, the structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss maintains that all cultures are based upon certain rules that appear as binary pairs or opposites (Lévi-Strauss 1958, 1973, 1964, 1962, 1963). Taking his cue from linguist

Ferdinand de Saussure (Saussure 1931), Lévi-Strauss sought to explain the similarities found in myths from all over the world by examining their structure. He found that, like language, the myths were composed of units that were assembled according to certain rules. These units formed relationships with each other which were based on binary oppositions such as hot/cold, male/female, raw/cooked and so on. For Lévi-Strauss these binary pairs, one term of which is favoured and the other disfavoured, form the basic structure for all ideas and concepts in a culture. Thus, all signifying systems and human ways of thought in all cultures share the same fundamental structures irrespective of their particular content.

The business world is firmly established in the modernist, universalist tradition. Globalisation seeks to extend and apply, through standardisation, its universalising principles throughout the world. It is not, therefore, surprising that international business theorists have embraced the universalist/structuralist model to 'objectively' describe the cultures of the 'Other'. This approach, however, is open to question. Poststructuralist and postmodern thought have highlighted issues relevant to cultural study of which the international business writer, with his modernist mind-set, seems totally unaware.

Poststructuralists have challenged the methods of structuralists as imprecise and dependent upon the observer. Concerned with reflexivity, Pierre Bourdieu emphasises the role of the observer's perceptions in the interpretation of the 'Other' culture. He has "questioned whether the ethnographer can really represent or 're-present' another culture" (Rubel and Rosman 1996, 1271). Postmodernists, interested in singularities and human individuality, see objectivity as an illusion. Melford Spiro writes:

> The postmodernist critique of science consists of two interrelated arguments, epistemological and ideological. Both are based on subjectivity. First, because of the subjectivity of the human object, anthropology, according to the epistemological argument cannot be a science; and in any event the subjectivity of the human subject precludes the possibility of science discovering objective truth (Weiss and Wesley).

In the rejection of essentialism and the search for the liberation of thoughts from binary oppositions, the postmodern view denies the possibility of building universal theory out of particularities and repudiates the notion that a person from one culture can write objectively on that of another.

With the structuralist/post-structuralist or modern/postmodern debate in mind, this paper reviews the main cultural theories and advice expounded in the international business literature. It then tests some of the advice and questions the relevance of universalist/structuralist models and stereotypical guidelines in international business.

2. The international business view of culture

In response to research pointing to failures in international business stemming from a lack of cultural understanding,[3] it has become fashionable in recent years to include sections or even chapters on 'culture' in international business texts.[4] Indeed, a number of books dedicated to the subject of the cultural aspects of doing business in foreign countries, including France, have appeared.[5] As in other areas of international business, however, North American authors dominate the literature. While this interest in things cultural is, on the face of it, commendable, many of these international business writers are forgetting that their own inherent cultural assumptions and preconceptions are exposed when they write on 'Other' cultures. At times, they reveal more about their own culture than that of the 'foreign' one. How valid can advice on a given culture, in this case French culture, written from the point of view of another culture with its own prejudices, be? Can it be 'correct' or are we entering the realm of stereotypes? And is the guidance relevant to cultures outside America?

2.1 Cultural theory in international business: different on the outside, the same on the inside?

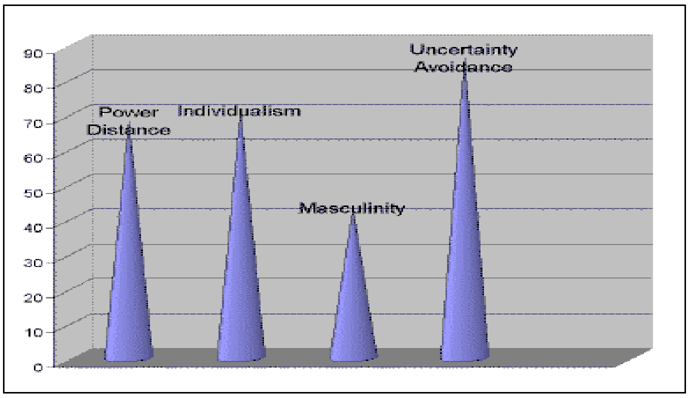
Most of the cultural theory favoured by international business writers is in the universalist ilk. It is either the universal human truths that lie deep within us that are emphasised, or attempts are made to classify cultures, to slot them into opposing binary categories so as to allow universal understanding. In either case, there is a Sartresque assumption that, armed with a sufficient number of cultural tips, people from one culture may successfully engage in business with people from another.

The first step on this road to inter-cultural understanding is that of defining culture. In 1945, Clyde Kluckhohn and W.H. Kelly represented culture as “all the historically created designs for living, explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, and nonrational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behaviour of men” (Kluckhohn and Kelly 1945, 97). International business writers tend to cite cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz for whom culture is the means by which people “communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about attitudes towards life. Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action” (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998, 24). Other popular definitions include that of Vern Terpstra and Kenneth David who aver that culture is “a learned, shared, compelling, interrelated set of symbols whose meanings provide a set of orientations for members of a society. *These orientations, taken together, provide solutions to problems that all societies must solve if they are to remain viable*” (Terpstra and David 1991, 6, my emphasis).

In terms of international business, these definitions of culture have given rise to a number of theories designed to help business people overcome communication problems when dealing with foreign cultures. The cultural models that are most often cited in international business have mostly been developed from empirical (thus ‘scientific’/‘objective’/‘universal’/‘modernist’) studies where the researcher has carried out his or her investigation on ‘Other’ cultures.

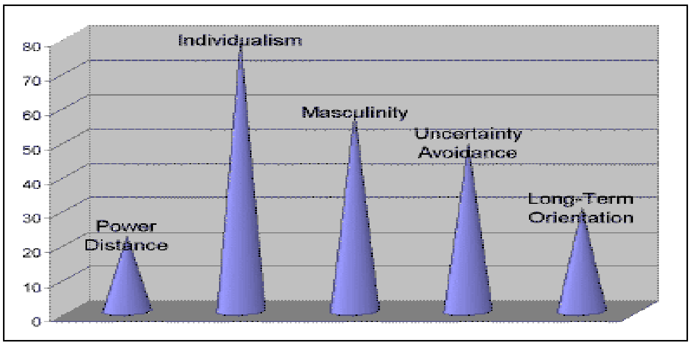
One example is Geert Hofstede, whose studies of the IBM company in the 1960s and 1970s allowed him to compare dimensions of culture across 40 countries (Hofstede 1976, 1977, 1977, 1978, 1984; Hofstede and Usunier 1996; Hofstede 1998).[6] For Hofstede, there are four dimensions to understanding different cultures – power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism and masculinity versus femininity. Based on the results of his interviews with IBM employees, Hofstede was able to give each country an index score that he used to rank cultures within each of the four categories. His analyses for New Zealand and France are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Hofstede's Analysis of France



Source: (Taylor 1998).

Figure 2: Hofstede's Analysis of New Zealand



Source: (Taylor 1998)

Interestingly, his findings more or less confirm cultural stereotypes. France is revealed as a country with a high uncertainty avoidance indicating its concern for "rules, regulations, and issues with career security" (Taylor 1998). While it is considered a more feminine country, it scores highly in both individualism and power distance. New Zealand, on the other hand, shows similar traits to other English-speaking countries with a high individualism ranking and a low power distance index.

Hofstede's methodology, however, is problematic. His sample is taken from just one set of employees from one multinational company and is culture-bound to some degree.[7] It seems something of a stretch to suggest that his findings are representative of a whole country, yet this is exactly how they have been interpreted in international business literature. Additional concerns arising from Hofstede's studies, such as whether nation-states can be seen as homogeneous cultural entities and whether someone from one culture can write objectively on another culture, are relevant to the other cultural theories discussed in international business texts.

Take the work of Edward T. Hall, for instance, who elaborated his 'high context', 'low context' cultural model in a series of books from his 1959 work, *The Silent Language,* through to his 1990 volume co-written with Mildred Reed Hall *Understanding Cultural Differences* (Hall 1959), (Hall and Hall 1990). For Hall, a high context culture is one in which most of the information is in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. On the other hand, in low context cultures, most of the information is vested in the explicit code. Hall and Hall state, "[t]he French are much higher on the context scale than either the Germans or the Americans. This difference can affect virtually every situation and every relationship in which the members of these two opposite traditions find themselves" (Hall and Hall 1990, 7).

Hall is also renowned for his identification of polychronic (P time) and monochronic (M time). Typically, high-context cultures follow the polychronic time system and low-context cultures the monochronic. P time is characterised by "the simultaneous occurrence of many things and by 'a great involvement with people'" (Cateora 1996, 126). M time, on the other hand, is linear, can be divided into small units and is perceived as almost tangible. Thus, because of their highly polychronic nature, Hall explains to the M time American:

> The French don't always adhere to schedules or appointments, delivery dates, or deadlines [. . .]. In a polychronic system there are apt to be many interruptions and emergencies. If the telephone rings as a Frenchman is going out the door to an appointment, he must stop and speak to the caller. Like all polychronic people, the French have elaborate information networks which include clients, friends and family, and these networks must be maintained scrupulously if they are to function effectively. For this reason promptness is not always to be expected (Hall and Hall 1990, 89).

Hall's models are often cited in books on international business[8] and, as the above quote demonstrates, Hall too applies them to the business context. While they are persuasive in that they offer business people a logical way of making sense of why their foreign partner does things differently, their universalist bias is undeniable.[9]

Anthropologists Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961) value orientations are also commonly referenced in international business texts.[10] Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck view cultural similarities and differences in terms of basic problems that all societies face including relationship of humans to nature, humans' time orientation, beliefs about basic human nature, humans' activity orientation and relationship of humans to other humans. "The concept underlying this approach, sums up one business writer, "is that there are different ways to cope with these problems, and different societies have adopted different solutions. [. . .] The focus [. . .] is on expressed cultural values. It is important in international business to understand the role that other cultural factors play in intercultural interactions" (Punnett and Ricks 1992, 161, 163). Like Lévi-Straus, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck maintain that the number of universally shared problems that humans face is limited. They also believe that "all societies are aware of all possible kinds of solution but prefer them in different orders. Hence in any culture there is a set of 'dominant', or preferred, value orientations" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998, 26).

Like Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, Clifford Geertz sees culture as "the way in which a group of people solves problems and reconciles dilemmas" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998, 6). Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner build on this supposition, as well as the work of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck and the binary opposition model of Lévi-Strauss, in their dilemma theory. In their 1998 book, they examine cultures based on the solutions their respondents chose to a number of 'universal' problems. This allowed them to identify seven fundamental dimensions of culture: universalism versus particularism, individualism versus communitarianism, neutral versus emotional, specific versus diffuse, achievement versus ascription, attitudes to time and attitudes to the environment (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998, 8-10). They then use their findings to explain cultural differences that may occur in an international business environment, contrasting the viewpoints that might arise at both ends of the spectrum.[11]

Their dilemma theory is further elaborated in their more recent study[12] where they claim to have made a startling discovery. They write, "[w]e finally noticed that foreign cultures are not arbitrarily or randomly different from one another. They are instead *mirror images* of one another's values, reversals of the order and sequence of looking and learning" (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000, 1). They go on to argue that "[o]nce we grasp this 'reverse view' everything the foreign culture says and does falls into place" (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000, 1). With the 'mirror image' theory binary concepts change places, reversing their sequences, so that although "the culture must still deal with the same dilemmas, the view of what is primary has shifted over to the left" (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000, 3). The aim of this theory is to get business people to "perceive and think in both directions", rather than to "apply the 'American Way' to every conceivable [problem]" (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000, 3,10).

The cultural models of Hofstede, Hall, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck and others have provided international business writers with handy theoretical frameworks upon which to hang their cultural advice. Describing the 'French Negotiator', Gesteland writes:

> French negotiators belong to a class by themselves. A product of Teutonic influences from the north of Europe combined with Latin infusions from the south, France's business culture is unique.

> For example, while the French are relationship-focused they are at the same time a nation of individualists. Moreover though they dislike getting straight to the point and often employ indirect, high-context communication, they are quick to argue and bluntly disagree with you across the bargaining table. And despite the fact that the word 'egalitarian' is derived from *égalité*, France remains one of Europe's most hierarchical societies today.
>
> In other words, French business executives tend to be relationship-focused, high-context, highly status-conscious individualists – an unusual combination of cultural traits (Gesteland 1999, 203).

This type of analysis based on the work of the international business cultural theorists is not entirely false, a trace of truth lingers. However, such research remains grounded in time and space and, as they are cultural descriptions based on the perceptions of outsiders, the insights can only ever be superficial.

Whether it be plotting cultural variables on graph, organising cultures into groups, sorting cultural behaviours into binary opposites or ranking them on a scale, the universalist premise behind these theories is clear. With a little effort and enough information, a foreign culture may be understood as, intrinsically, the human condition is universal. Using 'scientific' methodology to quantify differences is somehow perceived to be the key to mutual understanding.

As Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner point out, it is "differences rather than sameness which we notice" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998, 26). This tendency to register difference in other cultures often leads to stereotyping or caricaturing national behaviours. Lévi-Strauss' binary opposition theory comes into play as "people often equate something different with something wrong. 'Their way is clearly different from ours, so it cannot be right.'" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998, 26). The focus on the comparison of cultures in international business texts turns, more often than not, toward ethnocentrism in taking Anglo-American cultural norms as the point of reference.

2.2 When a little knowledge is a dangerous thing…

The point of most theory is to provide a basis for the elaboration of practical guidelines or applications. The movement from the abstract to the concrete is swift in many international business texts. The theoretical frameworks outlined above are used to a greater or lesser extent by many writers to support their practical advice for doing business with ‘foreigners’. At times, though, the tendency to over-generalise the already universalist models leads to some questionable assertions about the ‘Other’.

Moreover, because of the structuralist nature of the theory, writers end up imposing their own perceptions onto the situation at hand. Lévi-Strauss comments that when “we consider some system of belief [. . .] or some form of social organisation [. . .] the question we ask is ‘What does it all mean?’ To answer it, we attempt to *translate* into our language rules originally conceived in another language” (Lett 1987, 100). Hall, for instance, offers guidance on dealing with the French from an (obviously) American viewpoint. He writes:

> [. . .] the French insist on politeness and respect in business. They do not like informality, first-naming, or anything that smacks of familiarity or lack of respect. They expect people to dress properly and to observe all the social amenities. In particular the French object to hearty backslapping, joking or teasing behaviour, or any kind of phony chumminess (Hall and Hall 1990, 117).

This assertion only makes sense when lined up next to the contrasting (stereotypical) behaviour of American business people who are presumably rude, informal, disrespectful, superficial jokers who dress badly. This same bias recurs throughout the literature.[13]

What is more, some writers prefer simply to give advice based on anecdotal evidence. Perhaps because cultural issues in business have not yet been accepted as ‘serious’ by some academics in the field, and certainly not by many business people,[14] there is also a tendency toward entertainment over scholarship. An observant reader of international business texts will soon realise that much of the ‘cultural’ advice is slavishly repeated from one book to the next. Frustratingly, few of the writers indicate their sources, indeed some books contain no bibliographic references at all.

A review of the advice proffered for doing business with the French reveals some curious recommendations. For instance, in book after book readers are advised that when doing business in France, they should be careful about making the ‘ring symbol’ gesture as it means ‘zero’, not ‘okay’.[15] One also learns that snapping one’s fingers in France is another ‘no-no’, unless of course one is calling the waiter, who should be addressed as *garçon*. Much of this kind of advice can be traced to Roger E. Axtell, author of a series of books on international business etiquette.

According to Axtell, there are a number of things that one should or should not do when conducting business in France. For example:

- Never eat sandwiches with your fingers (Axtell et al. 1997, 59).
- The French are “appalled by the way anyone else speaks French – including some other Frenchmen. Unless you are urged to trot out your Berlitz lessons, it is safer to stick to English except for greetings, toasts and an occasional isolated phrase” (Axtell 1993, 27).
- Avoid using toothpicks, nail clippers or combs in public, yawning or scratching in public or slapping an open palm over the closed fist – it has a vulgar meaning (Axtell 1991, 136).
- Using the index and middle fingers to push the nose upward signals “It’s so easy I could do it with my fingers up my nose” (Axtell 1991, 136).
- Don’t smile excessively; the French don’t smile unless there is a good reason (Axtell et al. 1997, 61).
- And talking about kissing, he states, “[t]he French… well, the French seem to be doing it everywhere all the time: on the cheeks, the hands, and even into the air” (Axtell 1991, 72).

Axtell is not the only international business writer peddling such dubious advice. Morrison, Conway and Borden assert that “the top executive [in a French company] is known as the PDG (pronounced pay-day-ahjay)” (Morrison, Conway, and Borden

1994, 124). In *Rules of the Game: global business protocol*, Nan Leaptrott describes the 'French Player' as "superior, formal, closed, secretive [and] adversarial" whose objective is to "maintain nonaccountability" and who does not like "dealing with foreigners" (Leaptrott 1996, 100). She warns the prospective businessperson, "Appear humble, but not like a country bumpkin. Show some sophistication. You are naturally humble because of the fact that you are not French. Do not attempt to find common ground. The French do not want to relate to you. Generally, the French don't care to know anything about you" (Leaptrott 1996, 101). Continuing in this suspicious vein, she rounds off with this assertion, "Tax evasion is the French national pastime" (Leaptrott 1996, 104). Here we seem to have surpassed the sphere of entertainment and entered that of prejudice and hostility.

Leaptrott aside, one could only hope that the objective of these books is to provide a little light comedy. However, the very same claims appear in more 'serious' international business texts.[16]

It would seem that much of the cultural advice given to international business people is reliant on outdated universalist/structuralist based frameworks that report 'differences' from the observer's point of view. Much of the more 'practical' tips betray the ethnocentrism of their authors who are unable to see the 'Other' through anything but their own culturally biased eyes. The tips are mostly for American consumption, that is French culture is constantly contrasted (both explicitly and implicitly) with American culture. Most of these texts are, however, available worldwide. One must question the utility of cultural advice written from an American perspective for readers from other countries such as New Zealand. Is it even possible to write up a list of guidelines that are not influenced in some way by one's own world view?

In addition, the information is superficial, representative only of what Terpstra and David call 'frontstage culture'.[17] To what extent can international business people take this advice at face value? Do people read these 'country-at-a-glance' guides and feel that they are sufficiently prepared to do business in France? And how damaging is erroneous advice for the businessperson abroad?

Another concern is that of over-generalisation of national cultures. How can cultural guidelines be inclusive of all the regions, classes and ethnic groups present in France? In other words, how ‘true’ are they?

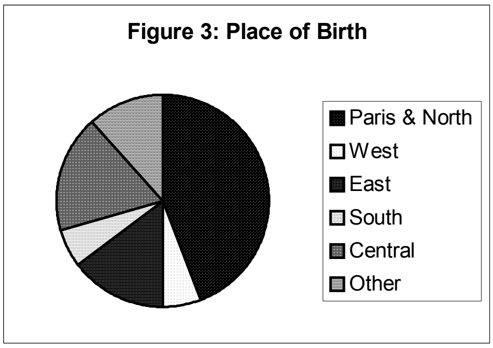
3. Putting cultural tips to the test

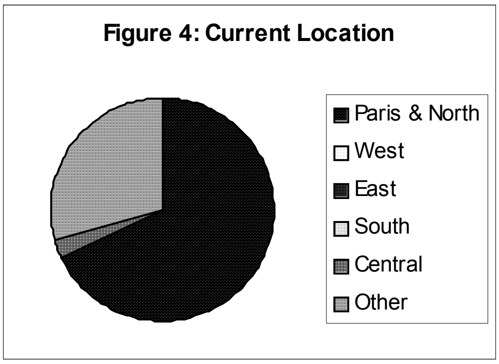
In order to determine the veracity of the cultural advice published in the international business literature, it was decided to test it on a randomly selected group of French people. The method selected was an anonymous questionnaire in French. Though using a fairly standard ‘universalist’ ‘scientific’ research tool – a questionnaire, the aim was not to use it to gather data from which I could write an ‘objective’ description of French business culture or from which I could develop a new theory. The goal was simply to ascertain whether particular cultural advice based on universalist theories or anecdotal evidence and subject to the cultural prejudices of the observer is relevant, correct or useful for the New Zealand businessperson in France.

The questionnaire includes some of the more commonly cited advice on business etiquette in international business texts. Aware of my role as the observer and the ‘Other’, I tried not to let my own perceptions of what was right and wrong play a role in the selection of advice. In an attempt to counteract any bias on my part, I included tips that I felt were probably accurate as well as those I believed erroneous.

The criteria for sample selection were not complicated. The subjects were to be French, in the sense that they live or had lived in France for most of their lives,[18] employed adults, preferably in the commercial sector, and willing to participate in the study.

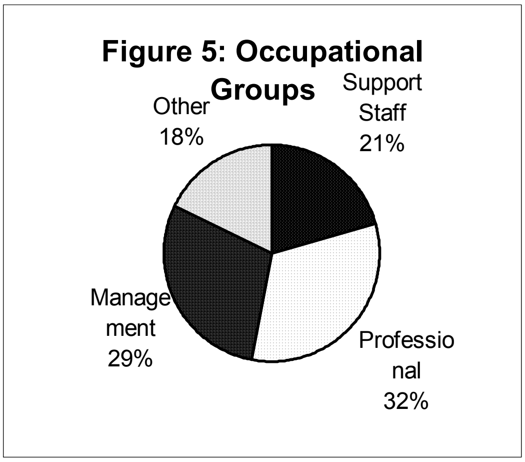
A total of 34 people completed the questionnaire and the sample includes people from all over France. Though most of the respondents were born in Paris or Northern France (44.1%), the other regions are also represented with 17.6% of the participants from Central France, 14.7% from Eastern France, 5.9% from Western France and 5.9% from Southern France. 11.8% of the respondents were born outside of France in Algeria, Canada, Ireland and Argentina. While the majority of the sample currently resides in the greater Paris region (67.6%), 3% live in Central France and 29.4% live in Auckland. Women, representing 59% of respondents, slightly dominate the sample.





The bulk of the participants fall into the 31-45 year old age group (52.9%), followed by the 46-60 year old age group (26.5%), then the 18-30 year old age group (20.6%). There is a fairly even distribution of men and women in the two former age groups however, in the case of the 18-30 year olds, women constitute 71%.

As for occupational groups, most of the participants work in professional jobs[19] or management (32.4% and 29.4% respectively). 17.6% are support staff and 20.6% work in other areas.[20] Interestingly, while there is an even gender split (50%) for respondents working in management roles, men outnumber women 63.6% to 36.4% in professional positions. On the other hand women form 100% of support staff and 66.7% of workers in other jobs.

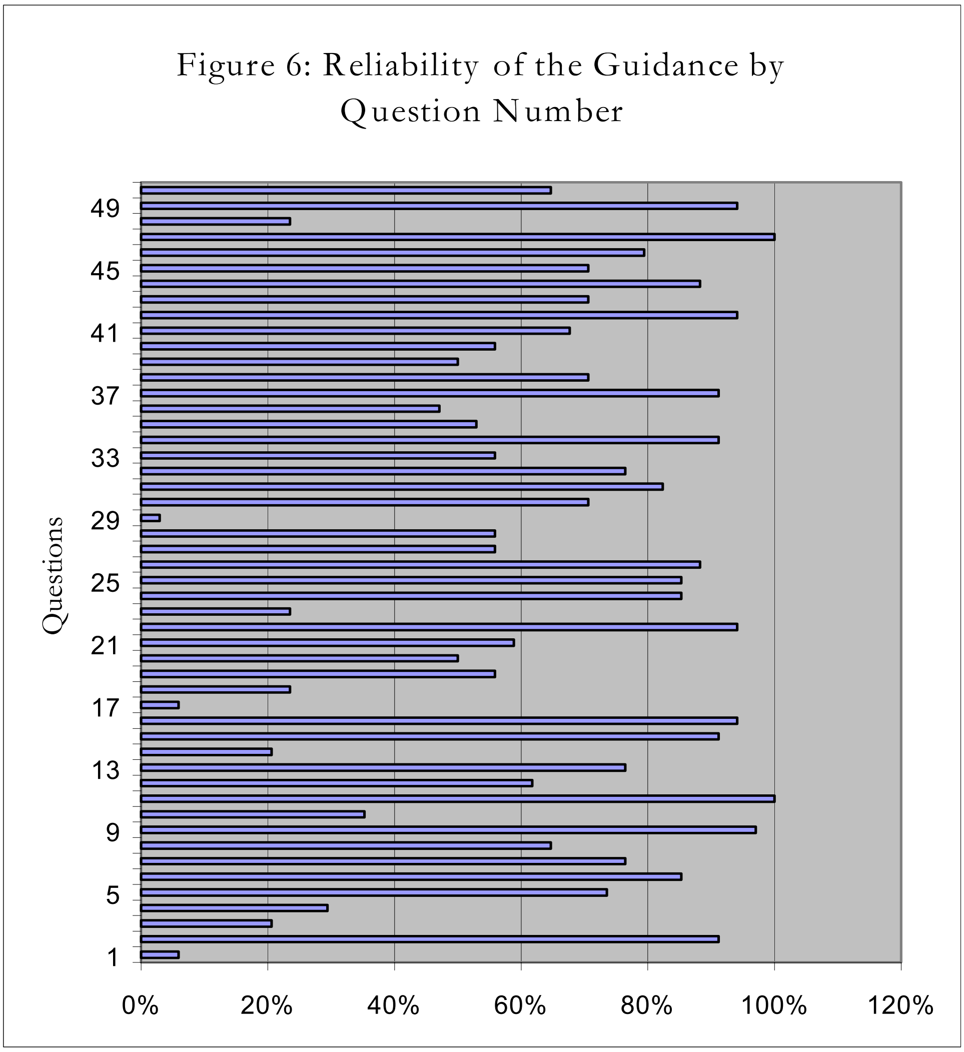


4. Etiquette and Stereotypes

When it comes to advice on what to do or what not to do when doing business in France, things are very rarely black and white. All 50 of the tips included in the survey appear in various international business publications as veritable facts. However, my findings show that much of the guidance is debateable and some is quite off beam.

There were only two pieces of advice that all the respondents agreed were true. The first one, ‘knock and wait before entering a closed office door’, is an example of guidance based on a contrast in cultural preconceptions. For the French, and in all probability for most New Zealanders too, this is rather an obvious point of common courtesy. For the Americans, however, it is a point of difference that needs underlining. Morrison *et al.* warn the American businessperson in France to “[r]espect privacy. The French close doors behind them; you should do the same. Knock and wait before entering” (Morrison, Conway, and Douress 1997, 141). Other commonly accepted tips that reflect American cultural prejudices include ‘do not talk too loudly in public’ with 94% concurring, ‘French business people critique more than they compliment’ (91%) ‘French business people are slow to make decisions’ (71%) and ‘do not rest your feet on tables and chairs’ (85%). All of these show the mirror image, as Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner might say (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000, 1), of North American business practices and are of questionable value to the New Zealand businessperson.

The second ‘true’ statement was ‘French business works through networks and personal contacts’. This attestation seems altogether more relevant, pointing to the way French business is carried out and the importance placed on relationships and communication. In a similar vein, 94% of participants agreed that ‘foreign firms should follow-up meetings with French partners with a letter recording their understanding of the decisions made and the points to be actioned’, 88% agreed that business cards were exchanged often in France and 71% upheld the statement that French wholesalers do not promote products, rather they ask retailers what they want and then deliver it. Again, highlighting the value of communication, 94% believed that 'the French appreciate people who are able to express their opinions well' and 91% concurred that 'foreigners who display a good knowledge of French history, art and geography are appreciated'.



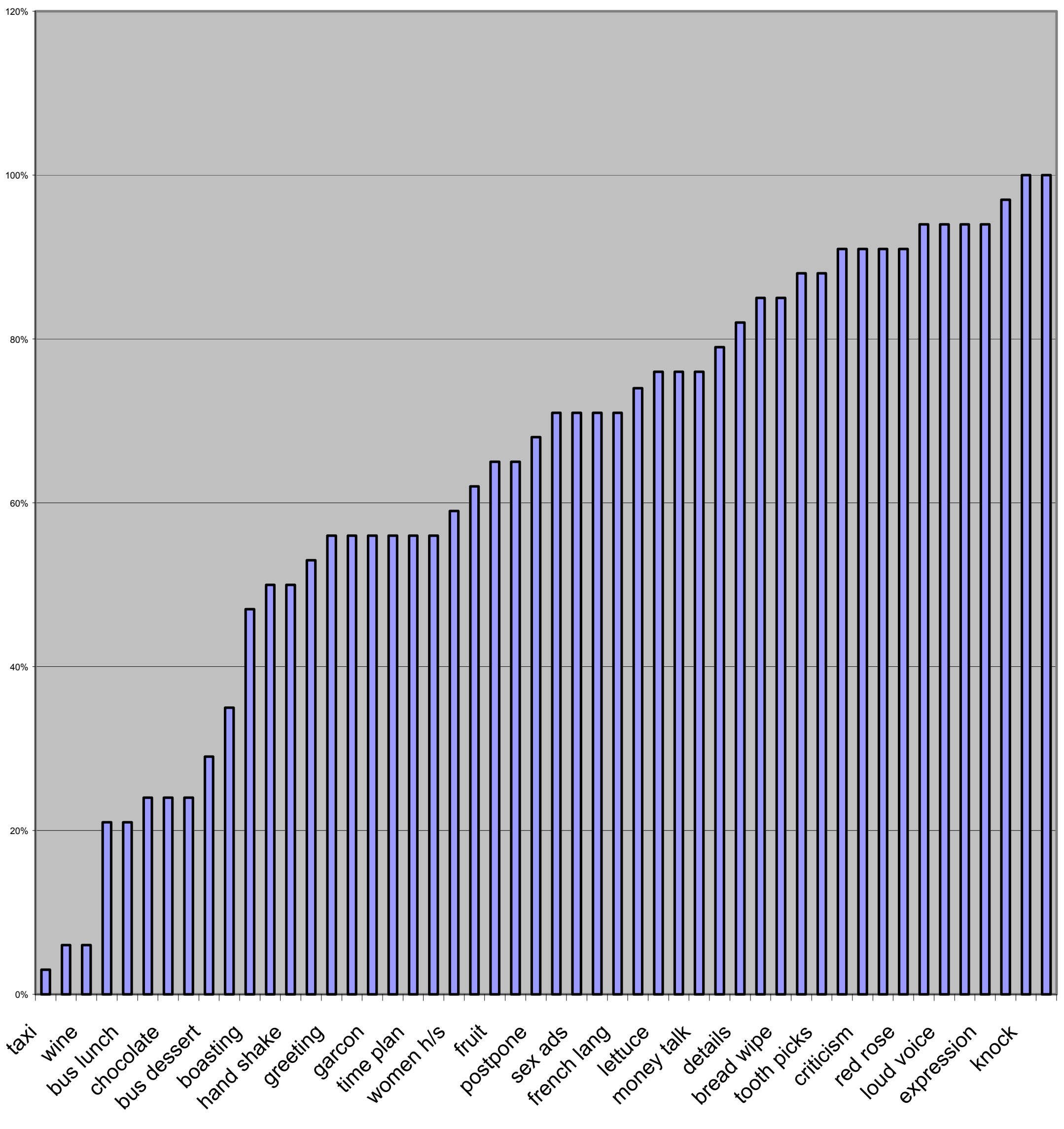
Indeed, the use of the French language in business is seen as significant for many of the respondents. 79% stated that 'foreign firms should use French in correspondence and in their product literature when doing business in France' and, contrary to what anglophone international business writers would have everyone think, 71% affirmed that 'French is the language of business in France'.

Other high scoring tips centre around gift-giving practices, with 94% not advising gifts of chrysanthemums and 91% agreeing that red roses would not be ideal gifts for hosts or hostesses. Interestingly, despite claims to the contrary in the business texts, chocolates were not considered preferable presents with only 24% of the sample agreeing that they would be appreciated. What is more striking is that 94% of the participants disagreed with the notion that wine was an inappropriate gift.

Advice on dining etiquette is similarly contentious. While certain points were upheld by the majority of respondents, such as ‘whoever initiates a meal invitation is expected to pay’ (97%) and ‘when dining, keep your hands above the table’ (91%), other suggestions were blatantly untrue. Somewhat unsurprisingly, only 6% of respondents agreed that ‘you should use a knife and fork to eat sandwiches’,[21] and only 35% felt that you shouldn’t drink spirits before a meal, diverging considerably from Roger Axtell’s opinion that “[m]any French people are offended by dinner guests who begin a meal with palate-numbing drinks like martinis and scotch” (Axtell 1993, 27). Axtell seems to have forgotten or is unaware of the French tradition of *l’apéritif*.

When it comes to business lunches, business writers are similarly mistaken when advising not to discuss business over a meal. 79% of participants disagreed with this statement and 71% disagreed that business should not be discussed until dessert. Interestingly, a slim majority (56%) agreed that to beckon a waiter, you should tip your head back and say *garçon*, though most did advise dropping the *garçon* if you did not want to come across as a foreigner or a total snob. Most were in accord, however, with the practice of not sipping wine until the host has sipped (74%) and 85% advised against using bread to wipe up sauces in a restaurant. This latter piece of advice, though, is one that many respondents were quick to point out as true ‘*en théorie*’, that is according to French *savoir-vivre* one should not use bread to wipe up sauces off one’s plate, but ‘*en réalité*’ it was fairly standard practice.[22] I witnessed this when dining in restaurants with some of my respondents who, quite unselfconsciously, began swirling pieces of baguette around their plate. Likewise, 65% of the sample indicated that peeling fruit with a knife and eating it with a fork was appropriate behaviour, though most said that they never did it themselves. The aversion to cutting lettuce with a knife, however, was true for 76% of respondents, most of whom adhered to this custom in their everyday lives.

Figure 7: Reliability of the Guidance in Ascending Order



What respondents did consider inappropriate, on the other hand, was the crossing of legs when seated. 76% disputed Axtell's claim that when seated "the French customarily cross the legs at the knees" (Axtell 1991, 136). They also tended to disagree with advice on topics of conversation. 79% felt that the statement 'French people do not like talking about politics' was fallacious and 53% did not adhere to the view that 'foreigners should not brag about their own country'. Some did, however, uphold the claims that 'French people do not like talking about money' (76%) and 'French people dislike personal questions' (62%). Only 24% of participants believed that formal introductions through a country's embassy were a good way for foreign firms to meet potential French customers, distributors or partners. The most ineffectual tip, however, has to be 'to call a taxi in Paris, just snap your fingers'. 97% of respondents rejected this Axtell gem (Axtell 1991, 136), guffawing at the very thought of it.

The findings also question the stereotypical libertine nature of the French. 29% said that sex and nudity in advertising shocked them and 24% denied that 'French people enjoy flirting with each other in the office'. Respondents were divided on the statement that 'French people do not smile unless there is a good reason' with slightly over half agreeing. Similarly, 56% felt that French people were uncomfortable being complimented or praised excessively.

While some of the advice proffered by international business writers is either supported or categorically denied by my respondents, there are far more grey areas to contend with. Figure 7 shows that there are a large number of tips that split opinions more or less equally. One example is advice on greetings. Just over half of the respondents felt it appropriate to greet each person when entering a room and only 50% agreed that 'you should shake hands with each person when entering a room'. As for who should offer their hand first, 59% believed that in cases involving men and women it should be the woman who does so. Other tips that focus on French behaviour in business are also debateable. 50% of respondents agreed that 'punctuality is not important in business – people are often late', 56% shared the opinion that 'French business people hate commitment. They will wait until the last minute before scheduling anything', though more agreed that meetings are rescheduled frequently in France (68%), and 65% felt that the French are very formal and reserved in business. These tips are subjective in that they reflect the point of view of the observer who has indirectly contrasted 'French' behaviour to that of their own culture. One could certainly query the value judgement of Morrison *et al.* who claim that the "French hate commitment" (Morrison, Conway, and Douress 1997, 139), based on the assertion that "[t]hey will wait until the last minute before scheduling anything" (Morrison, Conway, and Douress 1997, 139).[23] The relativity of the observation on formality in business is also worth noting – the French are formal and reserved in comparison to whom? The answer would have to be the Americans.

Two other tips that place French culture in contrast to that of the Americans show similar levels of ambiguity. Just under half of the respondents disagreed with the idea that snapping the fingers of both hands is vulgar and 56% affirmed the tip ‘do not converse with your hands in your pockets.

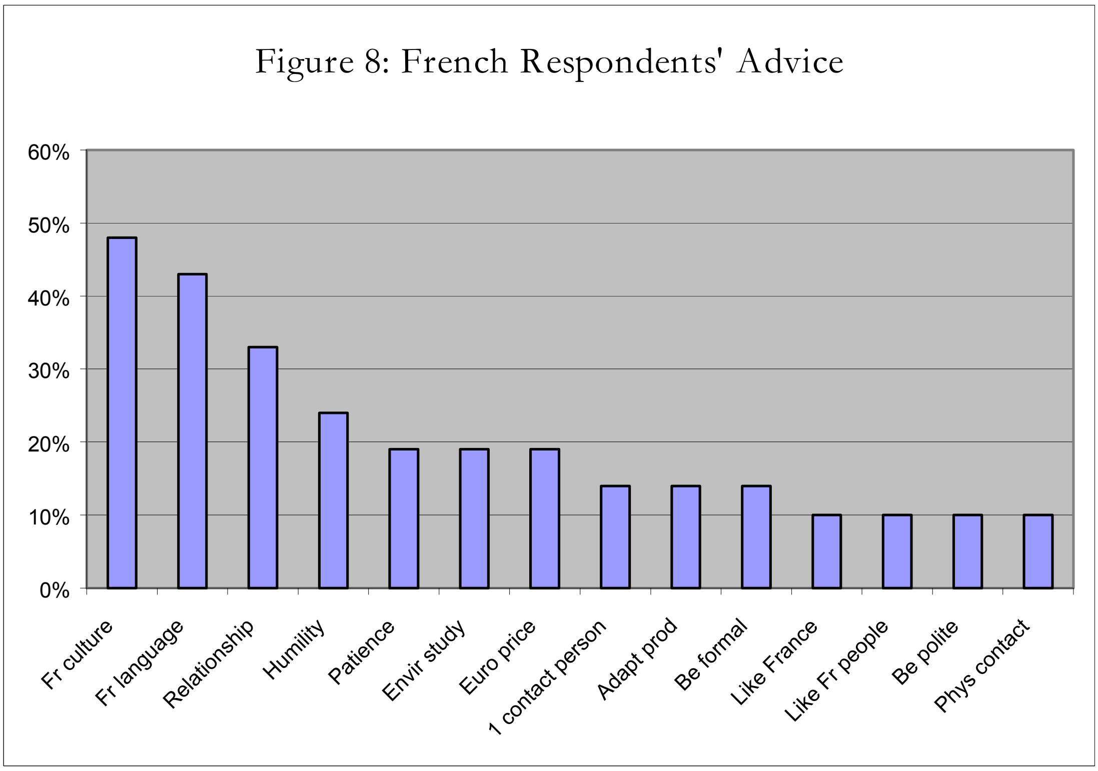
When considering the import of this guidance, one has to ask at what point something can be taken as true. What proportion of respondents has to be in agreement for a piece of advice to be deemed valid? This may prove very difficult to answer, but unless there is a reasonably high rate of concurrence, it would seem risky to treat any tip as gospel.

Despite the recent attention cultural matters have received in the international business literature, then, it would appear that the interest has for the most part been at a superficial level. Is it enough for the New Zealand businessperson to swot up on a few cultural tips before his or her trip to France? It would appear not. Many of the pointers are written from the perspective of their American observers and are therefore not always relevant or applicable to the New Zealand cultural environment. Furthermore, a good deal of the advice offered is misleading and some hints could make the businessperson in France look, at best, ridiculous, at worst, offensive. What, then, could New Zealand firms either wanting to do business with the French or wishing to improve their pre-existing business relations with France, do? For my French respondents, the answer was clear. If a New Zealand company wants to succeed in France, it must go beyond the surface layer of culture and be open to the use of the French language.

5. *Conseils* from the French Respondents

Having questioned and, in quite a few cases, rejected the anglophone business writers’ guidance on doing business in France, the French respondents of my survey were then given the chance to make their own suggestions.

Out of the 34 who participated in the survey, 21 or 62% took up this opportunity to advise New Zealand firms on what they, as French people, saw as important advice for working with their countrymen. The fourteen most popular pieces of advice are presented in Figure 8.



What is striking is the fact that the two most commonly cited pieces of advice were having a good knowledge of French culture and speaking the French language. 48% and 43% of respondents mentioned these factors respectively. Interestingly, when it came to the use of the French language, all but one of the respondents emphasised that the New Zealand representative should speak the French language fluently. Moreover, many informants were quick to point out that rather than learning about gestures, it was more important to have in-depth knowledge of French customs, history, *savoir-vivre* and business practices in order to adapt to the French market. There seemed quite a lot of resistance to the idea of the New Zealander imposing his language or culture on the French buyer. One informant wrote, “essayer de s’adapter à la vie française plutôt que de nous planter la culture néo-zélandaise”,[24] and another stated, “que le ‘Kamikaze’ Néo-Zélandais choisi pour venir faire des affaires en France pour sa société, connaisse la France et sa culture, parle français, aime la France et les Français [et] ait envie d’être en France”.[25] In other words, that the New Zealander going to France should respect the language and culture of his or her customers. It was also interesting to note that 10% of respondents indicated that the person sent to do business in France should actually like France and like French people.

The third most important point made by respondents was that French business works very much on a relational level, that is to say, it is important to establish a good relationship with one's French counterpart. One person said that a New Zealand businessperson should "développer de la sympathie, de la communication avec les Français qui fonctionnent sur le mode relationnel".[26] Others highlighted the importance of networks in French business and some mentioned that it was a good idea to personalise contacts, that is, get to know one person in the French company with whom you are working and build up a relationship with this person. Indeed, 14% of respondents felt that it was important to only have one contact person in a firm. According to one informant, "il faut constamment être en contact avec son homologue français et 'sympathiser' par téléphone. Quand on a la sympathie d'une personne dans l'autre entreprise, on peut compter sur elle".[27] To form this sort of relationship, it would appear, one would need to have a good command of the French language. What is more, 10% of the sample suggested that in order to facilitate the building of relationships, it was imperative that the New Zealand businessperson actually visit the French firm with whom they were doing, or wishing to do, business. As several informants put it, "il faut accepter le contact physique".[28]

While emphasising the value of being on friendly terms with one's French business partner, informants were quick to call attention to the fact that formality and politeness were still expected of their New Zealand counterpart. Friendliness should not be confused with familiarity. One person warned, "éviter les rapports décontractés"[29] and another said, "respecter le côté formel des Français".[30]

Two of the key qualities required of a New Zealand businessperson working with the French are humility (24%) and patience (19%). "Humilité et patience", claimed one respondent, "seront récompensées par la confiance".[31] For another participant the situation was more complex. On the one hand, one needed to be patient, on the other, one needed to "pousser les Français à prendre la décision ou à avoir l'idée en premier (une entreprise française n'aime pas la concurrence et préfère travailler avec des entreprises légèrement inférieures). Il faut donc les rassurer et leur montrer (ou laisser paraître !) que leur avis est très important."[32] Some offered explanations as to why foreigners needed to exert patience when dealing with the French. For instance, one should take into account the fact that many top managers in French companies are graduates from the *Grandes Écoles*[33] who most likely had experience working as high-ranking public servants. In such positions, they had to be very *prudent*. "Ils ont donc gardé cette prudence et c'est pour cela qu'ils prennent leur temps avant de prendre une décision. En tant qu'intéllos, ils réflechissent beaucoup".[34]

More practical advice included quoting prices in Euros (19%), doing a thorough environmental study before entering the market (19%), and adapting the product to suit French tastes (14%). All of these tips point to a resistance to standardisation or to an imposition of foreign practices or systems in France. "Qu'il parle prix en euros et surtout pas en dollars"[35] was a sentiment echoed by several participants.

In addition to the advice tabled in Figure 8, individual respondents offered the following hints: be punctual even if your French counterpart is running late, pay attention to your personal presentation, do not accept an initial refusal as a positive answer may be forthcoming, use a French agent, women should play on their *charme* in business but they should also know when to stop,[36] French business people like detailed information as it gives them a sense of security, promote New Zealand and try to share some New Zealand traditions and customs when in France, never criticise French food, wine or lamb as they are the best in the world, and finally it is a good idea to get agreements in writing.

For my respondents, then, a superficial knowledge of French etiquette via the intermediary of an American observer, would not stand a New Zealand company in good stead in the French business world.

6. Conclusion

There is a degree of danger attached to taking at face value much of the cultural advice plied in the international business literature. This is because what may be perceived as ‘reality’ to an outsider is not necessarily reality for someone living in the ‘Other’ culture. What is more, people living in the ‘Other’ culture may have their own perceptions of reality based on differences in their socio-economic, regional, educational or ethnic backgrounds. When dealing with something as subjective as culture, any attempt to objectively describe it, without letting one’s own value judgements encroach upon the account, seems an impossible task.

After considering the results of this survey, one must seriously question the utility of categorising ‘Other’ cultures. By using ‘scientific’ and ‘universalist’ methodology, international business researchers bind themselves to structuralist outlooks, and by constantly comparing and contrasting the culture of the ‘Other’ to their own in-built cultural frameworks and belief systems, they cannot help but paint a biased picture. In the quest to find the universality of humanity of which Sartre wrote, any practical advice to emerge from the international business cultural theory seems doomed to stay in the realm of the superficial and ethnocentric.

The question is, can we ever get away from this world of binary opposites, from this framework that forces us to compare and contrast everything? Can we escape the influence of the observer or the interpreter and move out of the sphere of superficiality and ethnocentrism?

The answer, it seems, must be ‘no’ as long as we continue to view the ‘Other’ as the ‘Other’. For, according to binary opposition theory, what is different or opposed to our way of looking at things is necessarily wrong, or at least not favoured. This position breeds suspicion and hostility from which spring stereotypes and misunderstandings.

Yet if we were to take the postmodern argument to the extreme, we would say that it is impossible to ever understand the ‘Other’, to ‘translate’ the culture of the ‘Other’. No particularities could be generalised and things would remain fragmented and localised. However, this is not a very constructive solution nor is it one that would facilitate the kind of communication problems faced by those working in the commercial world.

The only way to break free from this inhibiting mind-set is to embrace a more holistic approach encompassing the learning of the language of the 'Other', through which one can then understand the culture. As we have seen, most of the advice that was considered useful centred on communication. In other words, one needs to speak the language to understand and integrate oneself into the culture of the 'Other'. Divorced from their linguistic context, many of the cultural tips were demonstrated to be of little value, as real communication, at least at the sophisticated level required in a business negotiation, depends on language.

That language and culture are inextricably linked is a concept that is not lost on some of the international business writers. Svend Hollensen posits:

> A country's language is the key to its culture and can be described as the mirror of the culture. Thus, if one is to work extensively with any one culture, it is imperative to learn the language. Learning a language well means learning the culture because the words of the language are merely concepts reflecting the culture from which it derives (Hollensen 2001, 164).

Czinkota and Ronkainen add:

> Very often mastery of the language is required before a person is accultured to a culture other than his or her own. Language mastery must go beyond technical competencey because every language has words and phrases that can be readily understood only in context. Such phrases are carriers of culture; they represent special ways a culture has developed to view some aspect of human existence (Czinkota and Ronkainen 1990, 136).

And with special reference to the French, Hall and Hall claim:

> In France you will need one [. . .] very important skill: fluency in the French language. Americans working with the French must speak their language or their business will suffer (Hall and Hall 1990, 130-131).

Unfortunately, the anglophone international business world in general has been reluctant to espouse the use of ‘foreign’ languages in commerce, preferring to push English as the language of business. While this posture may initially seem attractive, without knowledge of one’s business partner’s language, one is only ever destined to scratch the surface of his or her culture, and this may prove detrimental to the business relationship.

What is needed is a national foreign language strategy that would actively encourage firms to accept the use of French and other foreign languages when dealing with overseas customers.

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Notes

[1] (Sartre 1996, 61) Translation: There is always a way of understanding the idiot, the child, the primitive or the foreigner, provided that one has enough information.

[2] Translation: “Every purpose, even that of a Chinese, an Indian or a Negro, can be understood by a European. To say it can be understood, means that the European of 1945 may be striving out of a certain situation towards the same limitations in the same way, and that he may re-conceive in himself the purpose of the Chinese, of the Indian or the African. In every purpose there is universality, in this sense that every purpose is comprehensible to every man” (Sartre 1970, 46).

[3] See (Tung 1988) (Black, Gregersen, and Mendenhall 1992).

[4] Most international business text books include sections on ‘culture’, ranging from a page or two to whole chapters. See (Cateora 1996; Czinkota and Ronkainen 1990; Daniels and Radebaugh 2001; Deresky 1994; Hill 2000; Kotler and Armstrong 1990; Mendenhall, Punnett, and Ricks 1995) for example.

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[5] For general information on cross-cultural business see (Gesteland 1999; Bartlett and Ghoshal 1991; Leaptrott 1996; Morrison, Conway, and Borden 1994; Terpstra and David 1991; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998; Usunier 1996; Terpstra and Russow 2000; Seelye and Seelye-James 1995; Brake, Walker, and Walker 1995; Lewis 1997; Ghauri and Usunier 1996). See (Hill 1994) for details on EuroManagers.

Publications on doing business in France include: (Hall and Hall 1990; Gordon 1993, 1996; Péron 2000; Szarka 1992; Millar 1998; Asselin and Mastron 2001).

[6] Hofstede's work is often cited in international business literature. See, for example, (Punnett and Ricks 1992), (Seelye and Seelye-James 1995), (Usunier 1996), (Harris and Moran 1996), (Gesteland 1999), (Hill 2000), (Hollensen 2001).

[7] Hofstede's research team was made up of British and Americans.

[8] For example, see: (Cateora 1996), (Usunier 1996), (Usunier 1996), (Axtell 1989), (Czinkota, Rivoli, and Ronkainen 1989), (Ferraro 1998), (Herbig 1998), (Gesteland 1999), (Asselin and Mastron 2001), (Hollensen 2001).

[9] Hall and Hall point out that when they refer to the French, "we mean the people of northern France, especially those who live and work in Paris and Lyon, [. . .]. This is where we conducted out interviews with French women and men in business and the professions" (Hall and Hall 1990, 85) The business writers who cite them, however, often overlook this fact. Hall and Hall's findings are taken to encompass all French people, regardless of regional and ethnic differences.

[10] See (Czinkota and Ronkainen 1990), (Punnett and Ricks 1992), (Usunier 1996), (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998), (Daniels and Radebaugh 2001), for example.

[11] Contracts, for instance, are viewed differently by universalist and particularist cultures. "Weighty contracts, they say, "[. . .] are a way of life in universalist cultures. A contract serves to record an agreement on principle and codifies what the respective parties have promised to do. It also implies consent to the agreement and provides recourse if the parties do not keep to their side of the deal. [. . .] [Business people in particularist cultures] have a personal relationship with their colleague, whom they hold in particular regard. If you introduce contracts with strict requirements and penalty clauses, the implied message is that one party would cheat the other if not legally restrained from doing so" (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1998, 39-40).

[12] Their 'mirror image' theory is based on six dimensions of cultural diversity or dilemmas: universalism and particularism, individualism and communitarianism, specificity and diffusion, achieved status and ascribed status, inner direction and outer direction and sequential time and synchronous time (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars 2000, 11).

[13] See: (Leaptrott 1996), (Walden 1998), (Lewis 1997), (Axtell 1989), (Axtell 1991), (Axtell 1993), (Axtell et al. 1997).

[14] Reynolds and Rice's survey on American companies' preferences for educating their international managers found that "American managers are not overly concerned with cultural problems in international business. In all 'open' questions, the type of education mentioned by the managers was almost without exception 'technical', mostly engineering and business related. There was very little requirement seen for foreign language, history, art, religion, sociology, or anthropology" (Reynolds and Rice 1988, 56) They put this down to the emphasis American managers place on building better products that can be standardised for export around the world rather than customising "products or services to the peculiar needs or desires of specific overseas customers" (Reynolds and Rice 1988, 56). Similarly, reviewing the literature on factors associated with successful international corporate assignments, Paul W. Russell Jr. found that cultural empathy only ranked eighth on a list of ten factors (cited in Harris and Moran 1996, 147-149).

[15] See, for example (Morrison, Conway, and Borden 1994, 125), (Axtell 1989, 95), (Axtell 1991, 47), (Gesteland 1999, 205), (Daniels and Radebaugh 2001, 72).

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[16] See, for instance, (Lewis 1997), (Hall and Hall 1990), (Ferraro 1998) (Daniels and Radebaugh 2001).

[17] Terpstra and David define 'frontstage culture' as the "standard, normal, proper ways of doing things that insiders are willing to share with outsiders" (Terpstra and David 1991, 9) 'Backstage culture', on the other hand refers to "knowledge that insiders define as standard ways of doing things that they are not willing to share with outsiders [. . .] [as insiders] may regard the activity as illegal, illicit, or just shameful [. . .] [or they] may define the activity as private knowledge that in some way gives competitive advantage to those who know it" (Terpstra and David 1991, 10).

[18] It was decided not to exclude respondents who, though born outside the *Héxagone* are very much part of today's multicultural French society. The French business world is not made up entirely of 'Marcel Duponts' and I felt that it was important to reflect this in the sample.

[19] Some of the professional jobs include doctors, engineers and teachers.

[20] Some of the 'other' jobs are painter, sales representative and cameraman.

[21] One of my respondents recoiled in horror at thought of eating sandwiches with cutlery. She explained that according the Christian tradition, bread should never be brought into contact with steel.

[22] Jette Schramm-Nielsen notes the tendency of French respondents to reply to questionnaires from a "normative, 'en principe' attitude and not according to what they actually do [. . .] the French – maybe more so than other cultures – often live with and react on these two levels of reality" (Schramm-Nielsen 2000, 7).

[23] The notion that the French dislike commitment is also mentioned by (Hall and Hall 1990, 89) who equate it with their polychronic nature.

[24] Translation: Try to adapt to the French way of life rather than forcing New Zealand culture upon us.

[25] Translation: The New Zealand 'kamikaze' chosen to come and do business in France for his company should know France and its culture, speak French, like France and the French and want to be in France.

[26] Translation: Develop congeniality and communication with the French who function on the basis of relationships.

[27] Translation: you should be in constant contact with your French counterpart and make friends with him over the phone. When one has the friendship of someone in the other company, one can count on him.

[28] Translation: You need to accept 'physical contact', in other words you need to meet people face-to-face.

[29] Translation: Avoid relationships that are too relaxed.

[30] Translation: Respect the formal side of the French.

[31] Translation: Humility and patience will be rewarded by trust.

[32] Translation: Push the French into taking a decision or let them think that they were the first to have an idea (a French company does not like competition and prefers to work with slightly inferior partners). Therefore, you need to reassure them and show them (or make it seem as though) their opinion is very important.

[33] The *Grandes Écoles* are élite tertiary institutes, entry into which is highly competitive and only the very best students are accepted into them.

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[34] Translation: They have thus kept this prudence or carefulness and this is why they take their time to make decisions. As intellectuals they reflect on things a lot. This same point is raised by French international negotiation expert, Guy Deloffre, who explains that because many of France's top managers are graduates from the *Grandes Écoles*, solving a problem in a French firm often calls for "…une demarche opératoire longue, complexe, hermétique à l'esprit rationnel de nombreux étrangers, qui débouche sur *la solution à la française*" (Deloffre 1999, 120-121). (Translation: an operative approach that is long, complex, completely alien to the rational ways of thought of many foreigners and which results in a very 'French solution').

[35] Translation: That he [the representative of a New Zealand company] talk about prices in Euros, certainly not in dollars.

[36] One respondent, a female Communications Manager, gave quite a detailed account of her views on women in French business. She claimed that on the one hand, women had some advantages in business as they could play on their charm or seductiveness - provided that they knew when to stop. They were also in a position to be able to obtain more information and, at times, get male colleagues to agree to more of their suggestions as males tended to feel less threatened by women in business. On the other hand, she also said that there were disadvantages to being a woman in business, the least of which not being that there were still some men who felt that women should be at home raising children. As these men waited for women to make the slightest error, women always had to perform at a much higher level in order to impress them. She also said that women had to work much harder to achieve their goals and gain recognition.