Global Culture—Myth or Reality? Perceptions of “National Cultures” in a Global Corporation

Hans J. Ladegaard

The literature argues that in global business communication the concept of “national culture(s)” is becoming obsolete because globalization leads to cultural convergence. This article argues that “national cultures” are not obsolete in global organizations. Two focus group interviews were conducted in a global corporation using folk perceptions as a framework. Employees were asked to discuss their work practices and agreed that uniform standards could not be used across cultures. The article concludes that, despite globalization, we do not see evidence of cultural assimilation in global employees’ work practices, but rather that stereotypes of national cultures are used to provide orientation.

Keywords: Global Communication; Global Culture; Folk Perceptions; National Stereotypes; Discourse Analysis

Almost every sphere of life in our modern civilization is affected by globalization. There are clearly expressed expectations in modern businesses and organizations that we should have a global outlook, that we should be able to understand and fulfill the requirements of a global environment, and, not least, be able to communicate globally. But what does it mean to be a global citizen, and how do we communicate globally? There are large numbers of journal articles and book chapters available on globalization and its effects on life in a modern world, but the majority of these contributions are non-empirical, made predominantly by people from Economics, Sociology, Political Science and Cultural Anthropology. However interesting and worthwhile these contributions to the debate on globalization may be, most of them do not consider the practical implications of globalization on people’s everyday lives.

Hans J. Ladegaard (PhD, University of Southern Denmark, 1996) is in the English Department at the Hong Kong Baptist University. Correspondence to: Hans J. Ladegaard, English Department, Hong Kong Baptist University, Ho Sin Hang Campus, Waterloo Road, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong. Tel: (852) 3411 7167; Fax: (852) 3411 7895; Email: hansla@hkbu.edu.hk

ISSN 1747-5759 (print)/ISSN 1747-5767 (online) © 2007 World Communication Association
DOI: 10.1080/17475750701478729
We know little about, for example, how people’s work practices are affected by globalization (see, however, Chen & Starosta, 2000). Every day, thousands of people across the world engage in global communication in multinational corporations, but what exactly do these people do when they communicate globally? How does it affect their perception of the communication situation that it is in a global context? Are there particular global standards for communication that need to be followed, or particular problems that need to be taken into account? Some of these questions have been addressed more recently by Communication researchers (see, for example, Chen & Chung, 1994; Chen & Starosta, 1997, 2000; Jensen, 2006), but the issues are important and need further attention from researchers.

The aim of this article is to explore these issues further, focusing on some of the practical implications of globalization. It reports from a large-scale empirical project in which Danish business organizations and researchers collaborate on analyzing aspects of global communication. The idea behind the project is that businesses identify authentic problems in their everyday global communication, and researchers observe, record and analyze these examples of real-life data in order to help solve specific communication problems, suggest improvements for the development of the organization’s communication, and, ultimately, develop existing and new theoretical perspectives on global communication.

The article compares theoretical perspectives on globalization with employees’ attitudes and perceptions, using the notion of folk perception (see, for example, Preston, 1996) as its framework. First, the interrelationship between culture and globalization will be discussed, followed by a brief outline of some of the major schools of thought in the literature on globalization; the focus here is on the hyperglobal perspective, which argues that globalization has led to the end of the nation state. Second, data from the Global communication project will be presented. The data comes from the same company, an IT Service Department which provides IT support to subsidiaries world wide, and consist of responses from two focus group interviews in which employees were asked to discuss their experiences, as well as procedures and possible problems, in relation to their global communication. Finally, the data from the global company will be discussed in relation to, in particular, the hyperglobal approach to global communication, arguing that these theoretical perspectives do not adequately reflect how employees perceive the situation when they discuss the global perspective of their work practices. In the following section, we will attempt to define globalization, and explore the interface between culture and globalization.

Culture and Globalization

Giddens (2002) points out that in spite of its sudden popularity, it is by no means clear what different people mean by globalization; however, most people sense that it “has something to do with the thesis that we now live in one world” (p. 7), and consequently, related to the idea of cultural assimilation, integration and
homogenization. Blasco (2004) argues that there are two different conceptualizations of culture and globalization in the literature, both of which support the idea that “the concept of ‘national culture’ is fast becoming obsolete” (p. 20). One conceptualization sees globalization as leading to cultural convergence or integration (see, for example, Featherstone, 1990; Kramsch, 2002). Featherstone (1990) argues that in our global world, culture has escaped the bounded nation-state and turned “the globe into a single place within which diversity can take place” (p. 2). The central idea is that the process of cultural integration takes place not only on an inter-state level, but transcends the state-society unit and can therefore be argued to occur on a trans-national and trans-societal level (p. 1). What we see therefore, according to Featherstone, are “emerging sets of ‘third cultures’, which themselves are conduits for all sorts of diverse cultural flows which cannot be merely understood as the product of bilateral exchanges between nation-states” (p. 1). Kramsch (2002) argues along the same lines, pointing out that “‘Culture’ has become less and less a national consensus, but a consensus built on common ethnic, generational, regional, ideological, occupation- or gender-related interests, within and across national boundaries” (p. 276). Referring to Geertz (2000), she says that before the age of globalization, culture meant national culture, i.e. what different peoples had and held in common, whereas today, the world—across national cultures—has become “a scramble of differences in a field of connections” (p. 249).

The other conceptualization regarding culture and globalization argues that globalization is leading to a weakening of the nation as a source of identity, i.e. national identities are no longer prevalent and what we see instead is “cultural complexity and diversity, cosmopolitanism and transnational identities that coalesce around non-national foci, e.g. multinational corporations or indeed transnational social movements” (Blasco, 2004, p. 20; see also Hannerz, 1996; Sklair, 1999). Smith (1990) is among the advocates of this view. He argues that the era of the nation-state is over, and we have entered “a new world of economic giants and superpowers, of multinationals and military blocs, of vast communications networks and international division of labor” (p. 174). In this new service society, based on technical knowledge, nations and nationalism have become obsolete and are being replaced by this new concept of “global culture” which is “tied to no place or period. It is context-less, a true mélange of disparate components drawn from everywhere and nowhere, borne upon the modern chariots of global telecommunications systems” (p. 177).

Smith (1990) further argues that global culture, by definition and intention, is supranational and “answers to no living needs, no identity-in-the-making. It has to be painfully put together, artificially, out of the many existing folk and national identities into which humanity has been so long divided” (p. 180). This means that global culture is an artificial construction, a new melting pot, made up of bits and pieces of pre-existing national and folk cultures, and centered around global institutions and corporations. What happens in this artificially created global melting pot, according to Smith, is that because the same telecommunications are used, and the same supranational norms applied, cultural differences between participants
will be eroded, and in communication, a genuinely global culture will be created, “based on the properties of the media themselves, to which the ‘message’ will become increasingly incidental. For the rest, tourism and museology alone will preserve the memory of an earlier era of ‘national cultures’” (p. 176).

Whichever conceptualization of the culture-globalization interface is preferred, the outcome is the same. The literature we have reviewed argues that, in this modern age of globalization, nation states—have lost their role as meaningful units of participation; the world has literally become borderless (Ohmae, 1995, p. 11). One of the consequences, Ohmae (1995) argues, is that global exposure to the same information and the same cultural icons will lead to cultural convergence, or—as he calls it—“the California-ization of taste” (p. 15), but, more importantly in the context of this article, “the process of convergence goes faster and deeper. It reaches well beyond taste to much more fundamental dimensions of worldview, mind-set, and even thought process” (p. 15). In other words, what Ohmae, Smith and others argue is that the influence of global culture, and the media associated with the distribution of global culture and communication, are so strong that, ultimately, they will affect the way we perceive the world, how our mind works and how we think, i.e. assimilation relates, not only to cultural values, but also to perception and worldview.

If we relate these theoretical perspectives on globalization to the attitudes and perceptions of people working in a global workplace who engage in communication with people across the globe, we would expect to find some kind of correlation. We would expect the notion of global culture, or some form of cultural assimilation or convergence, to be visible in the statements these people make about their work practices. We would expect these employees to perceive the world as one place (Giddens, 2002) where borders and national “cultures” are irrelevant, and where the same norms, standards and procedures apply to communication, no matter who the interlocutor is, and where s/he is. We would expect them to have similar worldviews, mind-sets and thought processes (Ohmae, 1995), and we might even speculate that cross-national communication under those circumstances is expected to be relatively unproblematic. Therefore, based on the hypotheses outlined above, the following research questions were developed:

RQ1: Do the employees perceive the world as one place where national cultures are irrelevant?
RQ2: How do they perceive their colleagues in other countries, and are national categorizations important for their perceptions?
RQ3: How do the employees deal with the day-to-day management of global communication, and how are potential problems solved?

In the next part of this article, different approaches to the study of globalization will be briefly outlined, followed by a presentation of the employees’ attitudes and perceptions as discussed in the focus group interviews. The aim is to compare the employees’ experiences of global communication with the theoretical concepts outlined in this first part of the article.
Approaches to Globalization

Sklair (1999) argues that “globalization, by its very nature, is a big and complex subject” (p. 148), and therefore it is not surprising that there are several ways to talk about it, and several categorizations of theories and research. She identifies four different sources of globalization research:

1. The world-systems approach (works from the assumption that within the capitalist world-system, countries can be categorized into core, semiperipheral and peripheral based on their changing roles in the international division of labor).
2. The global culture approach (focuses on the problems that a homogenized (media-based) global culture poses for individual and national identity; the world has become a “global village” where everyone shares the same values).
3. The global society approach (great significance is attributed to the notion of “global awareness”; science, technology, and universal values are creating a world that is different from any past age; decreasing power and significance to the nation-state, and increasing significance to supra-national and global institutions).
4. The global capitalism approach (the dominant global forces are located in the structures of global capitalism; the system is based on the concept of transnational practices originating in non-state actors and crossing state borders) (p. 149).

Another approach to the categorization of research and theories on globalization is suggested by Held, McGrew, Goldblatt and Perraton (2000) who identify three broad schools of thought within the literature on globalization (see also Garrett, Evans & Williams, 2006, for an overview). The first is referred to as the hyperglobalizers. They see the developments in contemporary societies, strongly influenced by globalization, as a sign of a new era which marks the end of the nation state, and where the conditions of the global marketplace are being imposed on people no matter where they live. Ohmae is a strong advocate of this school of thought, not least after the publication of The End of the Nation State (1995), in which he argues that nation states already have lost their role as meaningful units (p. 11) because we live in a new “melting pot”, a borderless world where the processes of cultural convergence go much deeper and faster than ever before and have reached “well beyond taste to much more fundamental dimensions of worldview, mind-set, and even thought processes” (p. 15).

Another school of thought, according to Held et al. (2000), consists of the sceptics. They argue against the hyperglobalizers and maintain that nation states and national governments are still powerful and play a significant role in terms of supporting internationalization. They argue that the international economy is divided into three major geographical units, North America, Europe and Asia-Pacific and, within these entities, nation-states are still meaningful units of analysis (see, for example, Hirst & Thompson, 1996). The third school of thought is referred to as the
transformationalists; they also see globalization as leading to a new era where societies throughout the world are undergoing profound changes—not least because of technological developments and the rise of universal values—in their attempts to accommodate to a world that is far more interrelated and uncertain than ever before. Giddens (1990, 2002) could be mentioned as one of the significant contributors to this school of thought.

In spite of the seemingly arbitrary nature of these categorizations of theory and research on globalization, it might still be possible to identify some similarities. It would seem, for example, that the hyperglobal perspective has something in common with the global culture and the global society approach, and the sceptic’s perspective seems to share some common ground with the world-systems approach. So despite the fact that globalization, by its very nature, is a big and complex phenomenon, it might be possible to synthesize some of the predominant ideas in the literature and identify some essential features of globalization. Many contributors to the debate see the increased movement and mingling of people, ideas and information around the world as an important feature of globalization. Also, major technological developments, world-wide news media, increased interdependence between countries, suprateritoriality, and transnationalism are mentioned as factors that are, at the same time, both contributing to, and symptomatic of, globalization (Garrett et al., 2006, p. 393). All this is leading to a compression of time and space, to a homogenization of values and ideas which gives the impression of living in a global village where local events are “shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens, 1990, p. 64).

An alternative approach to globalization is to analyze folk perceptions, i.e. to elicit attitudes and perceptions from non-experts in relation to a particular issue such as globalization. Non-experts in the folk perceptions framework are defined as people with no formal training in the subject in question. The study of folk perceptions has been applied to a number of fields, including Anthropology, Cultural Geography, Dialectology and Sociolinguistics (see, for example, Preston, 1996; Williams, Garrett & Coupland, 1996). Folk perceptions are considered important for academic studies because, as Gould (1977) points out, “people react to perceived environment” (p. 111), and non-experts’ attitudes to languages and cultures, for example, have provided researchers with a deeper understanding of the vitality of linguistic and cultural groups. Furthermore, non-experts may sometimes exert considerable influence on the thinking and development of important social issues (in politics and education, for example) than experts, and therefore, the exploration of folk perceptions and experiences should be of interest to academics in disciplines such as Anthropology, Sociology and Communication.

Non-experts’ perceptions of globalization have been studied by Garrett et al. (2006). They asked 302 randomly selected university students from the UK, the USA, Australia and New Zealand to write down their spontaneous associations to the word “globalization” in the form of keywords. The researchers ended up with 1,673 keywords which were categorized into eight different groups including comments on (1) corporations and businesses (the dominance of multinational businesses,
corporate expansion, monopoly and the demise of small businesses); (2) economy, money and trade (capitalism, global markets, economic links and reduction of trade barriers, prosperity and availability of products); (3) culture, co-operation and diversity (acceptance of other cultures, cultural convergence and assimilation, multiculturalism, and change of cultures); (4) power (domination, westernization, Americanization); (5) communication and technology (the dominance of English, a single language, and communications technology); and finally three small categories: (6) ecology and health (the environment and climate, pollution and health); (7) anti-globalization (reference to anti-globalization protests); and (8) war and peace (war, conflict and peace) (Garrett et al., 2006, pp. 398–399).

Garrett et al. (2006) compared the different answers across national groups and they found salient differences. It was often the American respondents that were different from the other national groups. Culture was a significant grouping for all national groups, but more so for the Americans where comments on culture accounted for more than half of the total number of comments. In general, the comments on globalization from the American respondents tended to be predominantly positive, whereas they were more varied in the other cultural groups, including negative comments on, for example, sameness, uniformity and anti-globalization from predominantly the Australian and New Zealand respondents. The notion of cultural assimilation was frequent across all cultural groups.

Having reviewed the different approaches to globalization in the literature, the remaining part of this article will be dedicated to the study of folk perceptions of globalization. We will analyze the results of two focus group interviews in a global workplace, and relate the findings to the academic conceptualizations of globalization outlined in the first part of the article.

The Study
The study was conducted in one of two IT support units of a large global organization. The research groups behind The Global Communications Project (see Note 1) approached a number of global business corporations in Denmark and enquired about their possible interest in participating in the project. The present company volunteered and suggested that the IT support unit would be the most appropriate place for data collection because of the employees’ heavy engagement in global communication.

The organization has sales companies in nearly 40 countries and production companies in 10 countries, and it employs a total of some 8,500 people worldwide. Any request for IT support in subsidiaries across the world will go to one of the two IT support units. The Service Center where this study was conducted answers service calls from predominantly European subsidiaries, but occasionally, the employees participate in projects that involve communication with daughter companies worldwide. However, the communication the employees are writing about in the questionnaires, and discussing in the focus groups, almost always takes place within
the same company which has certain procedures which must be followed. For example, all initial service calls must be written and electronic, they must be in English, the requester must state whether the service call has high, medium or low urgency, and the call must be closed when the problem has been solved. This means we may characterize the employees’ communication as \textit{internal} (because it is within the same company) as well as \textit{external} (because it is international and cross-cultural).

The Global Communications Study in the IT Service Center consists of five types of data: an online questionnaire distributed to everybody in the department, ethnographic observations (two fieldworkers spent about four weeks in the workplace, observing, talking to people and taking extensive field notes), focus group interviews (to give the respondents a venue for informal discussions, and for sharing their work experiences), recordings of meetings, interviews with selected members of staff, and analyses of randomly selected emails. In this article, only the results from the online questionnaire and the focus group interviews will be presented.

Prior to the focus group interviews, an online questionnaire was distributed via email to all members of staff in the Service Center who were engaged in global communication in their daily work. The aims of the questionnaire were to get factual information about the employees’ work-related communicative activities, and to identify potential problems in their communication in order to help us focus on relevant questions in the focus group interviews. Two open questions were included to elaborate on the potential problems: (1) Are there any work activities where you find communication problematic? If so, please describe them briefly; and (2) Are there any particular aspects of communication in [name of company] you feel the project should investigate? The two questions are closely interrelated; if the employees feel there are problems, then they also think the project should investigate them.

Sixty-three questionnaires were distributed and 42 were returned, which gives a return rate of 66%. Only six respondents (14%) answered “no” to Question 1; the remaining 86% stated that there are work activities where they think communication is problematic. Some comments focused on information overload or technical problems as the main source of problematic communication (10 respondents, or 28%). However, the vast majority, i.e. 26 of the 36 comments (72%), identified culture or language, or more often a combination of the two, as a main source of problems in work-related global communication. The typical explanations included comments such as (my translation; see Note 4):

1. Our external consultants take another approach, culturally and linguistically; their [Indian English] accent and culture make it difficult to communicate efficiently. (male, 36)
2. The greatest challenge is “intercultural” communication; i.e. communication between different countries and languages. I have the impression this is very difficult and leads to a lot of misunderstandings. (male, 43)
3. Internal communication between SC [Service Center] and foreign colleagues is difficult. Are there special considerations to be taken in the individual
subsidiaries? How good is their English, and can you be sure they’ve understood the message when they say yes, or is their mentality to rather say yes and pretend they’ve understood? (female, 34)

4. What techniques can we use to make sure we have the same perception of a particular problem, knowing that we’re both using another language than our mother tongue. (female, 39)

5. In our daily work, we use a lot of humor to “open doors”. How is that perceived internationally? (female, 32)

6. I think it’s relatively easy to communicate with Northern European countries such as Germany, Belgium, Holland, Scandinavia, and Great Britain, but much more difficult to communicate with Southern European countries, such as Italy, Spain, and, to some extent, France. Why is that? (male, 33)

7. Written communication, especially emails, is problematic. How do we interpret different expressions, for example in relation to politeness, respect, cooperation etc., in our global communication? (male, 24)

8. Are problems caused by the many nationalities (most recently Indians) working together? Is it necessary for us to know more about the ways they work in other cultures, or is it enough to have just the assignment and the aim? (female, 32)

The responses from the online questionnaires were used to design the interview guide for the focus groups (see Appendix A), and—using the project’s three research questions as a headline—it was decided that the discussions should focus on the following questions:

(a) How is global communication perceived and described?
(b) What determines how one communicates globally in the most appropriate way?
(c) What is the importance of interlocutor, country and situation in determining the outcome of a global communicative interaction?
(d) What does one need to know, linguistically and culturally, to communicate globally?

The main principles of the focus group interview are presented below, followed by a presentation and discussion of some of the results from the focus group interviews.

The Focus Group Interviews

The focus group interview was originally developed to elicit audience responses to radio programs in the 1940s; later the method was adopted by people in marketing and consumer research, and today it is being widely used by researchers from a range of different research traditions, predominantly within the Social Sciences (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). One of the strengths of the focus group, compared to individual interviews, is that group dynamism may create interviews with a more diversified array of responses; the participants are encouraged to discuss and share their experiences and attitudes in relation to a particular topic. Krueger (1988) argues that focus groups usually work well because they tap into human
tendencies: They measure attitudes and perceptions, which are developed, in part, through interaction with other people, because “we are a product of our environment and are influenced by people around us” (p. 23).

Krueger (1988) defines a focus group interview as “a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment” (p. 18). A focus group usually consists of 6–10 people who have been selected because they have something in common, such as, in the present case, a daily engagement in global communication. The group also needs a moderator whose job it is to probe, to keep the discussion going, and to keep it on track. The moderator does not participate in the discussions but will put probing questions to the group and rely on them to discuss and share their experiences. The moderator is usually also involved in the design of the interview guide; the purpose of the interview guide is to ensure that all relevant questions in relation to the issue are being asked—moving from the more general to the more specific.

In the present study the participants were randomly selected in the Service Center. The intranet was used to issue invitations to everyone engaged in global IT support on a daily basis; the employees were invited to take part in a Discussion Group on Global communication. They were informed that participation was voluntary, and that the outcome of the discussions would be used by researchers. Fourteen people volunteered to participate; some of them were native speakers of Danish, some of them were from outside Denmark, and based on their language abilities, two focus groups were designed—one in Danish, one in English—with seven people in each group: four men and three women. Each interview lasted two hours, and there were three fieldworkers involved: two moderators asking questions in turns, and one observer taking notes. The participants all knew each other, and they were encouraged to discuss and talk freely, and to share their experiences from the global arena with each other. The questions in the Interview Guide (see Appendix A) were used as guidelines, rather than being followed methodically (cf. Krueger, 1988); the most important criterion was that the respondents talked about issues that they considered salient. In an attempt to create a more relaxed atmosphere, the participants were offered coffee, tea, soft drinks, biscuits, sweets, and fruit, and they were told there were no right and wrong answers and promised complete anonymity. The focus group interviews were transcribed, and the employees’ attitudes and perceptions in relation to the themes outlined above will be reported below in verbatim.

Data from the Focus Group Interviews

The first general question the participants were asked to discuss was what it means to them to work for a global organization. The idea was that a discussion of global work experiences would lead them to talk about their global communication. The following exchange illustrates the informants’ response to this question
EXCERPT 1

JQ: I work with Service Desk and for me, well ah the problems that are brought in are often from ah foreign sales companies

Mod: yes

JQ: and a given problem or any change in the system must always be operationable in other countries so that we have a complete picture of our world

Mod: yes

CX: previously I worked in a private company, in the daughter company of a private company, and I didn’t think about it [globalization] at all, but here we are more aware that we are in the headquarters of a global company

Mod: mhm

CX: I think this is what separates this job from my previous job, that we are responsible that people all over the world are happy

Mod: mhm

CX: or at least reasonably happy

[...]

KS: I think it’s become more [global],’cause now I’ve been here for almost ten years, I think I can tell that somehow, even though the company hasn’t become more global, then at least the department has become more focused on what’s happening in other places than Denmark [...] and I think this is because in terms of software we’ve developed, so that previously we worked with isolated systems technically, but today we have one big system where all countries are part of the same system so when we work we’re actually forced to thinking more globally

We could argue that this piece of dialogue shows that the participants acknowledge, through reference to their day-to-day work experiences, the existence of something we might call global culture. They refer to the standardization of norms and procedures (software) across countries, to the inter-dependability of global work practices (“we are responsible that people all over the world are happy”), and the constant awareness of things happening, not just in the mother company but in other countries as well.

However, in the English focus group, even the standardization of norms and procedures of communication in the global company is questioned. The employees may be using the same software globally, but they argue that they do not actually do the same thing when they write an email, or respond to a service call, to colleagues in different countries. This is primarily because of language. Most of the company’s employees, both in Denmark and overseas, have to communicate in a foreign language which sometimes makes it difficult for them to explain what they want to say. The following excerpt is from the beginning of the interview where the respondents are discussing what it means to work in a global company; the issue
is whether global standards and procedures can be used in service calls (English focus group; quoted in verbatim).

**EXCERPT 2**

KO: there’s a big difference, what has been written in a service call, and what’s actually the original idea or the theme or the concept behind the call

Mod: yeah (1.2)

KO: don’t know if you have the same experience?

CL: yeah I agree, I agree definitely

OD: do you think that’s because they know what they want but they can’t express it?

KO: yeah (1.0)

OD: or, it’s because once they actually start trying to put those feelings into English, that’s when it becomes hard

KO: in most cases they would be able to express it in their own language

OD: mhm

KO: but it’s the translation into English that fails

[19 turns left out]

KO: the problem is that most of these translations will be word by word

NH: yeah

KO: and if you’re German you’ll put all the verbs in the end of the sentence [mhm], and then you do the same when you’re doing it in English [mhm] yeah, all this [Name of company] English or Service Call English and if you’re French, you’re doing it the way you’re trying to build a sentence in France or in German [sic], the Dutch do the same they have their own way [mhm] so they more or less translate

NH: yeah

KO: word by word

NH: directly

KO: and then we have to rethink about their language and//culture, we build our sentence in a different way

NH: //mhm (general laughter)

KO: //all different from our//

BT: //we do it normal/

KO: //Danish [name of company] English (everybody laughs)

OD: so the world’s wrong, yeah that’s it (laughter)

This excerpt shows some of the problems inherent in using English as a global lingua franca, and it demonstrates that some knowledge of local languages and cultures is essential in (re)constructing meaning, and interpreting the intentions behind service requests coming from the company’s subsidiaries in different countries. This is emphasized later in the discussion when the respondents acknowledge that the communicative difficulties they sometimes experience with colleagues from Southern Europe may be attributable to the fact that they themselves do not know Spanish, Italian and Portuguese. Furthermore, in relation to the problem this article addresses, the excerpt questions the validity (at least from a folk perspective) of some of the theoretical issues mentioned in the first part of the article,
including the application of the same supranational norms across national cultures, the erosion of traditional cultural differences, and the creation of a genuinely global communication culture (cf. Smith, 1990).

The next topic to be discussed in the focus groups is the practical handling of global communication, for example the day-to-day sorting of specific problems in service calls. During this discussion, it becomes even more apparent that the concept of global culture is of little relevance to these global employees (Danish focus group; my translation).

EXCERPT 3

Mod: are there any norms in terms of what you do, for example if you’re going to send an email, is it irrelevant where the recipient is in [name of company], would you use the same standards or would you think, “now I’m going to communicate with someone who is in ah”/

MP: //well I think a lot about that, whether it’s an Italian I’m going to talk to, or if it’s a Frenchman, and then again who is it, is it somebody I’ve met before?

Mod: mhm

MP: it’s very different how I write and talk to them

BK: yes that’s right

IG: well even though I don’t communicate that much outside our department I think about it sometimes too ’cause it’s not always people see things exactly the same way we do in Denmark

Mod: right

IG: what’s in between the lines, this is where you have to be a bit careful sometimes

BK: and then you need to be aware that their English is perhaps not quite of the same standard, so you need to be careful when you write

Mod: okay

BK: so that at least it can’t be misinterpreted, no irony and (laughter)

CX: what is important is what you do in relation to the people you haven’t met before

BK: mhm

KS: yeah there’s a lot of difference

JQ: yeah

KS: what I’d do is be very careful what I write, and ask people who know them how this will be perceived

BK: yeah, or how you begin the mails, just write hi NN, or just mister or misses like that

As this dialogue shows, when specific choices have to be made in daily work routines, such as what to do when you answer a service call, the employees need to know who they are communicating with because they do things differently, depending on the recipient’s national culture, and degree of familiarity. They are aware that even within the same organization, things are said and understood differently, and therefore they need to be careful what they write, and how they write it. This is also evident in the next excerpt where the participants in the English focus group discuss how to write a new email to someone they do not know.
EXCERPT 4

BT: I think a lot about how to start the communication because, ah now I’ve lived in the UK myself so I was used to always using dear and stuff and to be polite [mhm], sometimes I feel that people maybe feel that you’re a bit too personal if you’re starting the communication with dear NN, and it depends a lot who I’m communicating with if I write hello or dear or hi [mhm], just that first word I think sometimes is difficult

[...]

OD: yeah it’s interesting because you use the word as you said in English dear

CL: yeah

OD: dear Martin dear Frank or whatever it’s nothing (,)

CL: dear

OD: it’s for, it’s just ah, it’s just the way you talk

CL: yeah

OD: but if you suddenly think about how that could be perceived by someone in France or in Spain as being as you said rather too intimate

CL: yeah

OD: then this (,)

BK: also because you’d never, yeah you would but not in the same way, you wouldn’t use it in Danish

What this excerpt shows is that the employees are aware of the importance of using the appropriate politeness phenomena, such as address forms, and how they vary across cultures. This makes them uncertain when it comes to the appropriate way of addressing a new interlocutor, i.e. finding the right culture-dependent balance between intimacy and formality. The importance of politeness across national cultures is also discussed in the next excerpt (Danish focus group; my translation)

EXCERPT 5

JQ: if we could return to politeness, ah I think ah, you’re in a bit of a dilemma sometimes if you go to countries where they address each other very politely, for example in Austria where it’s Mr. or Mrs. something in a sales office where they use this address form amongst themselves, and then we come down being informal calling the super users by their first name and ah, the super users give the impression they think it’s okay, but how do they really feel about us coming down addressing them with a different form, I have no idea how they really feel about it, I haven’t heard anything

MP: well maybe [name of company] should draw up some guidelines, actually I know they do it for people they send to Japan they are actually enrolled in a sort of Japan-course

Mod.: mhm

MP: how you do things, and do you bring gifts, and you have to accept that you just deliver your gift and they just put it in the drawers because they can’t open it while you’re watching and so on and so on

CX: just like [name of external consultants]

BC: yeah they do it

MP: and maybe it would be a good idea to have a mini-course you know, there’s not that much difference between the European countries but if you go to the
USA, there’s actually a lot of difference, ah you know just the way they eat, you only use your fork and then you sit like this with your hand down here [puts his left hand under the table] I think it was so weird when we did this

[...] CX well, to get back to what [name of colleague] was saying, in Germany the contacts I have down there, they call each other by first name when they’re up here and they’re so used to it that they also use du [informal address form in Danish and German], but as soon as they’re back in the office down there, they use De [formal address form in Danish] and last name

As this excerpt shows, specific speech events are interpreted locally. This is an example of what Blommaert (2003) refers to as “placed resources” (p. 619), i.e. resources that are functional in one particular place and context but may even be dysfunctional when moved to other places. MP, who talks about eating habits in the USA, tells another story from his trip to the American daughter company: New colleagues, whom he had never met, would greet him in the corridor and say “Hi, how are you?”, and each time he would stop and expect to be introduced, and it took him “2–3 days before I realized that I was supposed to just say ‘I’m okay’ and then just move on, but in the beginning I stopped because I thought they wanted to talk to me.” The employees agree that phenomena such as address forms, greeting and eating habits are culture and context specific, and therefore they suggest that the company might consider offering “How-to-do-it courses” for employees who have short- or long-term commitments in other countries.

What we see over and over again in the focus groups is that uniform guidelines and procedures cannot be applied to these employees’ work practices, whereas national and regional stereotypes are used repeatedly as a frame of reference. This becomes clear several times during the interviews, and the excerpt below is another example. The moderator asks the group what happens when they receive an electronic request from a complete stranger, or encounter a person (via telecommunications) of whom they know absolutely nothing; do they have any guidelines, knowledge or ideas which will help them determine what to do and how to do it? (Danish focus group; my translation).

EXCERPT 6

BK: I have some general ideas yes
MP: well, let me put it like this, I may have you know, if I get something, ah some kind of request, and I can see it’s from Copenhagen, then I might think it’s from those people from the Devil’s Island, and then I already have some kind of prejudice about the people from headquarters (laughter)
Mod: is it because it’s Zealand or because it’s headquarters?
MP: probably because it’s Zealand [5 turns left out]
MP: in Western Jutland you may perhaps find this sort of idea that they are so damn sophisticated and fast over there [in Copenhagen], and in Western Jutland people say “let’s take it easy and think twice”
Mod: mhm
MP: so what are you thinking [name of colleague] (laughter)
BK: I’m still thinking
Mod: (to BK) you said you had some ah/
BK: /yeah but it’s just some terribly
general ideas/
Mod: /yeah okay
BK: but that doesn’t mean I’m not open towards other/
Mod: /no but that’s how we/
BK: but I have you know a bit like the French you know I pigeon-hole them sort
of I think they are difficult and argumentative (laughing) and actually a bit
like opposed you know, but of course that doesn’t mean you can’t meet
French people who are not like that
Mod: sure
BK: the Germans are very sort of [she makes a stern face and makes consecutive
vertical movements with her hand in the air]
JQ: yeah right
BK: exactly right?
JQ: no-nonsense, direct, to-the-point [referring to their German colleagues]
Other:yeah mhm
BK: ‘here I come and this is how it should be” [referring to their German
colleagues]
MP: don’t you think it’s just something we were brought up to believe?
BK: well (laughing)
MP: no but without you know, it’s just something we’re carrying around
BK: yeah that’s probably true but sometimes it’s actually true you know

This piece of discourse is an interesting example of the nature of stereotypes; it
shows that categorizations are readily available but, as far as the private uncensored
attitudes are concerned (cf. Lambert, 1967), they are difficult to elicit, and potentially
有害 to talk about. It is reasonably easy for MP to air his regional stereotypes
about people from Zealand/HQ, possibly because his stereotypes are ingroup
(Denmark), as well as outgroup (Zealand vs. Jutland), and therefore perhaps less face
threatening. However, when it comes to the national stereotypes about the French
and the Germans, BK takes precautions (“it’s just some terribly general ideas”), and
she uses hedges (“but that doesn’t mean I’m not open . . .” ; “you know I pigeon-hole
them sort of”) and mitigation (“a bit like opposed”), suggesting that this activity is
potentially face threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987). It is also noticeable how
much they agree on their categorizations, i.e. outgroup stereotypes are completely
shared. For example, in the case of the Germans, BK makes a stern face and quick
vertical movements with her hand in the air, and JQ knows exactly what that
means: that they perceive the Germans as representing a “no-nonsense, direct and
to-the-point” approach.

The participants also touch upon the famous “kernel of truth” debate (cf. Mackie,
1973). In response to MP’s comment that stereotypes are “just something we
are carrying around”, BK says yes “but sometimes it’s true you know”. This
conversation continues, and IG tells the story of a “problematic person” who they
come across repeatedly in his department when they follow up on people with IT
problems, “and it is in fact a Frenchman and sometimes we laugh about it
you know, but it is a typical Frenchman you know, and I don’t really know
if there’s any harm in that.” Again, we see the hedging (“you know”), but also the
idea that this is more than just a stereotype because it is based on observation and experience.

Not only stereotypes of national cultures are used as a frame of reference; the participants also seek more detailed information about the people they are communicating with. This means that the notion of anonymity in cyberspace, that people do not need to know the national and personal identity of the people they are communicating with, cannot be supported, at least not for this professional context. Excerpt 7 shows that the employees need to know as much as possible about the people they communicate with, and the motivation is again that they communicate differently with different cultural groups. The participants are discussing how they handle service calls from requesters with whom they have never communicated before (Danish focus group; my translation).

EXCERPT 7

MP: if I get a service call from someone I don’t really know, well then I know that [name of colleague] he knows this person damn well so I’ll ask him what is he or she like (...) in fact I’ve actually communicated with an Italian thinking that it was a really nice girl (someone starts laughing), and then when I came down to Italy it turned out it was a man with curly hair (everybody laughing loudly) it wasn’t actually very funny

CX: is that really true? (laughing)

MP: in fact I tried the same thing in the old job I had, for about half a year I communicated with a German, and because of the name I’d imagined that this person was a very beautiful black girl or something like that, and then when I came down there (people start laughing) it was a giant negro [sic], and he just said “G’day [respondent’s first name]” (everybody laughing loudly) I hadn’t understood a damn thing (people still laughing)

CX: it’s important to meet people

MP: but what I do is that I go [to the company’s intranet] and check their photographs sometimes

Mod: so this means you’d like to know if it’s a man or a woman if the name doesn’t really ring a bell?

All: yes

MP: it’s//very different how you

KS: //yes but also how old they are

MP: address a woman in Italy (everybody laughing)

JQ: you asked yourself actually, about [name of Italian colleague]

CX: yes but there’s a lot of difference if the person you’re communicating with is 20 or 60

JQ: yes definitely

CX: whether you write hi [name of Italian colleague] or hi miss whatever her name is

What this excerpt shows is that communicating with a nameless, global citizen with no fixed identity is, if not impossible, then certainly very difficult. The employees agree that in order to communicate effectively in a global world, they need markers of identity, not only to establish the national identity of their requesters, but, literally, to be able to paint a picture of the person they communicate
with. National culture, age and sex are all important cues, functioning as a direction finder and enabling the employees to communicate appropriately.

In the last part of the article we will discuss the folk perceptions outlined above in relation to theories on globalization.

Discussion

Giddens (2002) argues that nation-states, institutions and organizations (including work and the family) in the age of globalization have experienced “a massive shift in their very nature” (p. 18). They carry the same names and appear to be the same from the outside but they have acquired a completely new meaning. They have become “shell institutions” which can no longer be used as a meaningful frame of reference in a global cosmopolitan society. Ohmae (1995) takes this idea even further and argues, not only that the nation-state is dead as a meaningful frame of reference, but also that cultural convergence has lead to a harmonization of worldview, mind-set and thought processes.

If we reconsider the statements from our global workplace about the employees’ work practices and personal experiences in relation to global communication, it is difficult to find any correspondence with the accounts of Giddens, Ohmae, Smith, and others. What we have seen in the employees’ perceptions is that (stereotypes of) nation-states are used as a frame of reference, whereas the notion of “global culture”, at least as far as the employees’ conceptualization of the global workplace is concerned, seems to be a hypothetical construction more than anything. Only once, and very briefly, during the two 2-hour focus group interviews do the respondents refer to something we might call global uniformity. This happens in the beginning of the Danish focus group (see Excerpt 1) when they discuss what it means to work for a global organization, and the uniformity refers specifically to technology, i.e. that within the company the same software is applied, and must be operationable, across the world, and this requires a uniform approach as far as procedures are concerned.

What the employees tell us through their discussions of global communication, and through sharing their experiences of global work practices is that they use stereotypes, the pictures in their minds which govern the process of perception (cf. Lippmann, 1922/1965), to construct a pseudo-environment because “the real environment is altogether too big, too complex for direct acquaintance” (p. 16), and therefore, they reconstruct it on a simpler model in order to describe it, relate to it, and deal with it. The interesting point in relation to the argument in this article is that nation-states, and stereotypes of national cultures, are used as the (only) meaningful frame of reference in the conceptualization of a manageable world that the employees can describe and act in. We might speculate that the fuzziness of the very concept that is being discussed, and tentatively described, is part of the problem. The word “global” is, as yet, certainly as far as folk perceptions are concerned, not defined and hence not cognitively “real” and operationable for these global employees. Similarly, “a global citizen” is a hypothetical construction which,
consequently, cannot be used for guidance and orientation in everyday work encounters. Therefore, what is left—operationable and cognitively real—is the nation-state and the national stereotypes associated with different states.

Some of the excerpts (e.g. No. 7) also highlight that the medium of communication is important for the perception of “the other”. Although our respondents may eventually meet up with their requesters, in most cases they have to rely heavily, at least during the initial phases of communication, on the cues they can deduce from the emails (e.g. the requester’s nationality), and from the company’s intranet. Spitzberg (2006) argues that formations and developments of personal relationships in computer-mediated communication (CMC) are fundamentally different from relationships based on face-to-face encounters. CMC has no non-verbal cues, and this might lead to perceptions of the communication as being more (or less) global, and it could invite more (a fewer) stereotypes. Thus, comparing global face-to-face encounters and global CMC would be an appropriate topic for future research.

In our two focus group interviews, where the center of attention is globalization and the day-to-day management of global communication, there is, with the exception mentioned above (Excerpt 1), not one single reference to the world as one place, worldwide uniformity, cultural assimilation, or national cultures as being obsolete. When it comes to folk perceptions, the notion of a transnational, uniform global culture does not make any sense. Unlike the folk perceptions studied by Garrett et al. (2006), who found that comments on cultural assimilation and uniformity were frequent, our employees appear to perceive the world as a multitude of different nation-states, and what they have to relate to in their day-to-day work practices is how linguistic expressions and cultural phenomena are used and interpreted differently in different national contexts, and to orient themselves and make sense of the world, they use (national) stereotypes to provide guidance. The difference between the two studies of folk perception may be attributable to methodological factors: Garrett et al.’s respondents were university students who were asked to theorize about globalization, whereas our respondents were employees sharing their experiences and discussing the impact of globalization on their work practices.

Blommaert (2003) argues that “it is a regrettable feature of much discourse on globalization that it seems to present globalization as the creation of worldwide uniformity. Processes are often represented as generically, as a universal shift in the nature of societies, semiosis or identities” (p. 611). He further argues that the world is not a uniform place and consequently, when sociolinguistic items (such as address forms) “travel across the globe, they travel across structurally different spaces, and will consequently be picked up differently in different places” (p. 612). Therefore, “what occurs in a particular sovereign state can and must be explained by reference to state-level dynamics, but needs to be set simultaneously against the backdrop of substate and superstate dynamics” (p. 612). In other words, local events, including cultural conventions and linguistic expressions, must be interpreted locally, even
(or perhaps particularly) in a global work environment where information overload and lack of orientation are among the problems the employees are facing.

Another conceptualization in the literature on culture and globalization, which was also presented in the first part of this article, argues that globalization is leading to emerging sets of third cultures (Featherstone, 1990; Geertz, 2000; Kramsch, 2002), or, in the words of Adler (2002), globalization leads to processes of cultural synergy where participants in global encounters create new conglomerations, i.e. cultural compromises, as it were, or new forms of communication, organization and management “that transcend the distinct cultures of their members” (p. 116). This, according to Geertz (2000), means that the word “culture” has acquired new meaning. Before the age of globalization, culture meant national culture, whereas today it means that, across national boundaries, people create new, third cultures that are different from anybody’s national culture. They are negotiated cultures, described by Geertz (2000) as “a scramble of differences in a field of connections” (p. 249).

However, if we relate these theoretical conceptualizations to the folk perceptions this article has analyzed, it is difficult to see any signs of emerging third cultures, or cultural synergy, in the employees’ accounts of their experiences and work practices. There is little evidence of new cultural conglomerations, or negotiated compromises, but ample support to Geertz’ pre-globalization use of “culture” as referring to national entities. In a study of Danish students’ stereotypes of British, American and Australian language and culture, Ladegaard (1998) found that the stereotypes his respondents mentioned reflected, not so much what British, American and Australian cultures are, but rather what Danish culture is not. When people study and evaluate foreign cultures, they focus on differences, not similarities, and what they notice are the subjective generalizations that differentiate the foreign cultures from their own (see also Ladegaard & Sachdev, 2006). Thus, “difference” can be used to provide guidance and orientation, because—even though it is acknowledged that national stereotypes are “just some terribly general ideas” (BK, Danish focus group)—they tell the respondents what they should, or rather should not do, when they act in a global world, and this is exactly what they need. Consequently, if there is any support in the literature to our respondents’ conceptualization of culture and globalization, then we need to turn to the skeptics (e.g. Hirst & Thompson, 1996) who argue that nation-states are still powerful and meaningful, and play a significant role in the age of globalization.

What we have seen in our study of global communication in the workplace is that employees look for orientation and guidelines (see Ladegaard, 2005; Ladegaard, forthcoming, for further details). Most of them have to communicate about complicated issues in a foreign language where “nuances get lost” (CX, Danish focus group), and they often have to communicate with customers who feel even more uncomfortable about their lingua franca English. In the Danish focus group, the respondents discuss how the company used to have universal guidelines which they could apply to their daily work. However, they also agree that such guidelines might not even be helpful anymore “because it’s become much more global today... and our department is not even Danish as such anymore” (KS, Danish focus group).
The overriding principle for global encounters seems to be “a sort of do-as-you-please approach” (BK, Danish focus group), and to provide guidelines, focus and orientation, the employees use national stereotypes to tell them how they should approach someone they have never communicated with before.

Conclusion

Why is it important to study folk perceptions of globalization? Garrett et al. (2006) argue that because people react to their perceived environment (cf. Gould, 1977), “such subjectivities should provide insights into how people respond to what they feel globalization means to them, how it affects their priorities, concerns, aspirations and futures” (p. 396). The authors further argue that such insights are important, partly because “definitions fundamentally shape descriptions, explanations, evaluations and actions” (Scholte, 2002, in Garrett et al., 2006, p. 396), and partly because politicians and professionals, who make important decisions about our future, cannot ignore public understanding but should focus more on “the concerns and aspirations of the people” (p. 396) in their policy making. Thus, what the present study has contributed to this debate is insight into how employees in global corporations feel about issues of globalization, particularly in relation to their job, and this could be used by this as well as other global companies when they develop their businesses, for example in relation to global communicative strategies and language policies. This study has pointed out, for example, that the use of English as a global business lingua franca is not as unproblematic as some companies would like to think. Therefore, it might be worthwhile studying the issue further, and considering alternative approaches, before more prescriptive, English-only language policies are implemented.

In conclusion, this article claims that if we look at folk perceptions of globalization (in the form of global employees talking about their work practices, and sharing their experiences of global communication), there is little support to most of the theoretical conceptualizations of globalization we find in the literature. Two competing theories of globalization and culture have been presented; one which argues that globalization leads to cultural homogenization (Ohmae, Smith, Giddens etc.). Global commodities such as Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and Barbie are presented as evidence “that we live in a world of sameness, that growing global interconnectedness will lead to the death of cultural diversity. If not always a description of the present, this notion of globalization often involves at least a scenario for the future” (Hannerz, 2001, p. 57). The other predominant theory of culture and globalization argues that globalization leads to the emergence of third cultures (Featherstone, Geertz, Kramsch, etc.), or cultural synergy (Adler), where new cultural conglomerations are being negotiated between interactants in global encounters. Neither of these theoretical conceptualizations is being supported by the folk perceptions in our study. This study concludes that our employees use (stereotypes of) national cultures to provide direction and orientation when they
engage in global communication. There is little evidence of cultural uniformity and sameness, but a distinct awareness of the significance of national cultures being used as guidelines for communication.

Hannerz (2001) argues that the most appropriate way to think about culture in a global ecumene is to look at cultural analysis as an everyday practice. This is exactly what this article has attempted to do. The aim has been to point out discrepancies between predominant theories of globalization and culture, and the everyday work practices and experiences of employees whose job it is to communicate globally. It remains to be seen how the theorists’ notion of “global culture” manifests and expresses itself. This study argues “global culture” is a hypothetical construction more than anything, and consequently not something which can be adequately conceptualized, described and, not least, used for orientation. National stereotypes, on the other hand, are readily available and conceptualizable, and are therefore used to provide guidelines and orientation in the buzzing blooming confusion of the global world (cf. Lippmann, 1922/1965). Consequently, what this article recommends is that we include folk perceptions in academic scholarship with the aim of reconceptualizing and redefining the culture–globalization interface. This is in line with Hannerz (2001), who argues that

In so far as academic scholarship on culture carries any intellectual authority outside our own institutions, we would do better to keep a critical eye on the varieties of culturespeak both among ourselves and in society at large—and try to blow our whistles when a usage seems questionable or even pernicious. It could seem, moreover, that the personal experiences which many people now have of globalization might well allow them to participate in our rethinking culture (p. 69).

Notes

[1] The Global Communication in Danish Business Organizations project is supported by a grant from the Danish Research Council for the Humanities, the University of Southern Denmark, and two multinational business corporations. I am grateful to members of the Global Communication Research Group (Teresa Cadierno, Dennis Day, Mikkel Flyverbom, Astrid Jensen and Sharon Millar) for comments on an earlier version of this article; any shortcomings that remain are of course my responsibility.

[2] For the purpose of the Global communication project, a global workplace was defined as a work setting where the employees’ job involves communication, on a regular basis and using different media, with people from other countries.

[3] Referring to particular groups of people as “cultures” is inherently problematic. The problem is that this practice gives the impression that culture is something refined and static, commonly referred to a fixed inheritance of shared meanings. The opposing view is that culture should be seen as signifying process, i.e. the active construction and negotiation of meaning by groups of people (see, for example, Street, 1991). The term “culture(s)” is used in this article, in the absence of a better term, with these problems in mind.

[4] To insure the accuracy of the translations, multiple translators have been involved, including native speakers of Danish with complete mastery of English, and native speakers of English with complete mastery of Danish.
What is implied probably is that the employees try to reconstruct meaning based on what they know about the sender’s mother tongue and culture.

Denmark consists of Jutland, a peninsula attached to Germany, the island of Funen, the island of Zealand with the capital Copenhagen, and a number of smaller islands. People from Jutland sometimes refer to Zealand as the Devil’s Island (“Djævleøen” in Danish), presumably implying that the island is ruled by the devil, or inhabited by little devils.

The IT supporters in our study are likely to meet the superusers they are communicating with sooner or later. Either because they have joint projects, or because the IT supporters travel regularly to subsidiaries across Europe to solve particularly complicated IT problems. However, the employees do not receive any formal training in intercultural competence, so their abilities to communicate are based exclusively on personal experience—and stereotypes.

All the respondents communicate frequently with colleagues and customers in Eastern and Southern Europe, and they agree this is often when communication gets problematic, frequently because their interlocutors are not used to communicating in English as much as their Danish colleagues.

References


Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. What does it mean to you that [name of company] is a global company?—Is it something you’re consciously aware of in your daily work?

2. What is global communication to you?—Does it have anything to do with the way you communicate?—The medium you use?—What you talk about?

3. Is there something you would, or wouldn’t, do when you communicate globally?

4. Do you use any standards when you communicate globally?
5. Is it important to know where your requester/recipient comes from? Why (not)?—When you respond to emails, for example, do you always check where the recipient comes from?
6. Which language(s) do you use for global communication?—Is it a problem for you if/when you have to communicate in a foreign language?
7. Do you think it is difficult to communicate globally? Why (not)?
8. Have you experienced cases of miscommunication when you communicate with people from other cultures?—If yes, please exemplify.—If yes, what kind of miscommunication?
9. Why do you think these examples of miscommunication happen?
10. How do you solve them?
11. Is there any pattern in the examples of miscommunication you’ve experienced?—In relation to specific cultures?—In relation to specific situations?—In relation to specific people?
12. Can you prepare yourself for global communication so that miscommunication is avoided. If yes, how?
13. Are there any cultures that you have preconceived positive attitudes towards? If yes, which? And why?
14. Are there any cultures that you have preconceived negative attitudes towards? If yes, which? And why?
15. Do you think positive/negative attitudes mean anything for your communication?
16. What do you think these positive/negative attitudes are based on?
17. If we asked you to compare the different [name of company] nationalities you work with, or communicate with, around the world with an animal, which animal would you pick?—Which animal would most adequately describe [name of company] France, Italy, Spain, Germany, UK etc.

Appendix B: Transcription Conventions

MP, KS, CX, BC, IG, JQ, BK = synonyms of abbreviations of participants in the Danish focus group
KO, L1, OD, CL, BT, NH, IJ = synonyms of abbreviations of participants in the English focus group
Mod. = moderator
A comma (,) indicates a short pause (less than 1 second)
(2.0) indicates a longer pause in seconds
// indicates an interruption
italics indicates that the word is pronounced with stress or emphasis
[...] indicates a turn left out
[mhm] indicates somebody in the group saying “mhm”, but we do not know who