

## Intercultural Visual Language and Visual Communication Difference

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### Abstract:

*The advances in the informatics and communication technologies of today ensured the development of visual environment and possibilities. Several researches indicate that we live in a visual age that re-shapes social processes, communication, perception and interpretation ways. The fact that perceiving and interpreting the world through visuals rather than words have direct effect on cultural structure and processes. In our age, “visuals” are the carriers of cultures throughout the world. Each culture has unique properties in the contexts of “values”. Cultural values contain invisible moral elements and therefore they are not clearly and obviously a visible and tangible structure. However, the reflections of the moral side of culture can be observed in artefacts that is the visible culture elements. The fact that visible culture elements include cultural values indicates that globalization can affect visual language only in a certain dimension. In our visual age, there are differences in intercultural visual language despite the rule of dominant cultures. In this context, this paper explains the concept and elements of culture and draws attention on the effect of globalization on the visual elements of culture. Later, the differences of intercultural visual language and visual communication over the concept of visual grammar.*

**Key words:** culture, visual language, visual communication, visual grammar, intercultural difference

## 1. Introduction

The advances in the informatics and communication technologies of today ensured the development of visual environment and possibilities. Today, people face more visual images that it has been ever before. The world is ruled by visuality through internet, computer, smart phones, virtual reality and augmented reality applications in addition to relatively older channels like newspaper, magazine, television, cinema and open air advertisements. So many previous researches (Barnard, 2002; Lester, 2012; Mirzoeff, 1998; Parsa, 2004; Sartori, 2004) indicate that we live in a visual age that re-shapes social processes, communication, perception and interpretation ways.

The fact that perceiving and interpreting the world through visuals rather than words have direct effect on cultural structure and processes. In this new century dominated by visual culture, ocularcentric societies have emerged in modern Western societies where images are central. The concept of vision has played such a dominant role that some scholars have labelled Western culture ocularcentric or dominated by vision (Jay, 1993). According to Martin Jay, visual images “are not only omnipresent in Western culture, but in fact have been central to its intellectual progress” (Hammerness, 2009, 1035). In our age, “visuals” are the carriers of cultures throughout the world. Cultures have direct effect on the production of visuals while visuals also affect and transform cultures.

Countries that are economically, technologically, socially and politically power groups are globally dominant cultures. In our visual age, we observe that visuals generated by dominant cultures spread to the entire world faster and substantially affect the “visible culture” elements of other societies. On the other hand, each culture has unique qualities in the context of “values”. Researches revealed the fact that transformation of cultures in the context of “values” takes too long and therefore

the “cultural values” are the most important element that shows the differences of cultures and societies (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1999; Hofstede, 2001; Schwartz, 2006). Cultural values contain invisible material elements and they are not clearly and obviously a visible and tangible structure. However, the reflections of the moral side of culture can be observed in artefacts that is the visible culture elements. The fact that visible culture elements include cultural values indicates that globalization can affect visual language only in a certain dimension. In our visual age, there are differences in intercultural visual language despite the rule of dominant cultures. In this context, this paper explains the concept and elements of culture and draws attention on the effect of globalization on the visual elements of culture. Later, the differences of intercultural visual language and visual communication over the concept of visual grammar.

## **2. The Concept of Culture**

“Culture” is a term that contains multiple meanings and different definitions. Almost in every resource, there are statements about variance of definition of the term “culture” and about the difficulty of a wholesome definition including various meanings of the concept. “Culture” is a large concept covering every field of human rights and therefore each discipline interpreted, explained and defined culture from its own perspective. This condition explains the reason of variance in culture definitions.

Etymologically, the word “culture” originates from the Latin word “cultura”. This Latin word has meanings like to reside, to grow and to protect while it is derived the root word “colere” which has meanings like to process, repair, build, plant, improve and train. According to Edward Tylor, who is among the first people defining the concept of culture, “Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that

complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (1871,1). Collecting 164 definitions of culture concept in the anthology they published in 1952 about culture, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952,181) defines culture as follows: “Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artefacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action”. According to Geert Hofstede (1997,5), a social psychologist and organizational anthropologist, known with his studies on culture, culture differences and organization cultures, culture “is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another”. Kağıtçıbaşı, having received several national and international science awards, defines the concept of culture from the framework of “social-cultural psychology”, his field of study, as follows: “Culture is the pattern of all material and behavioural arrangements achieved by members of a certain society in order to obtain more satisfaction from what they can find in nature; it covers all knowledge, belief, art, morality, customs, skill, habits and social institutions developed by humans as member of society” (2004,344). As there are many definition of culture made by researchers from different disciplines, it is possible to multiply these examples. Considering the time so far from the collection of 164 definitions of culture by Kroeber & Kluckhohn in 1952, it can be said that the number of definitions may have increased.

Definitions on the concept of culture usually divide culture into two as visible-invisible. The distinction between visible and invisible culture has also been called overt/covert

culture or explicit/implicit culture. Visible culture elements include everything physical made by humans against nature. Invisible culture covers more abstract and mental elements like social values, beliefs, norms and traditions. According to the approaches that explain culture in this context, culture consists of mutual interaction of visible and invisible elements. On the other hand, the “value based culture” approaches take culture as a multilayered structure emphasizing the fact that culture is not a dual structure consisting of visible and invisible elements. As quoted by Erkenekli (2013, 155), this approach regarding culture in layers is believed to be more functional as highlighted contemporary researchers like, Hofstede (1984, 2001), Triandis (1973), Trompenaars and Turner-Hampden (1999), Schwartz (1994, 2006).

The layered culture model developed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1958) is a nested structure progressing from inside to outside or from invisible to visible. To explain the structure of the model, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner use the onion shell example reaching new layers as peeled. Down in the depths of onion, culture elements become increasingly more covered, secret, rarely noticed that is invisible. “On the outside of the onion lie explicit products of culture, defined by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner as ‘the observable reality of the language, food, buildings, houses, monuments, agriculture, shrines, markets, fashions and art’ (p. 21). The visible products of culture are symbols of deeper meaning” (Shaules, 2007, 57). Layers which can also be defined as components of culture can be listed from the most interior invisible to the most exterior visible: Basic assumptions, Norm and values, Artefacts and products (Figure 1).

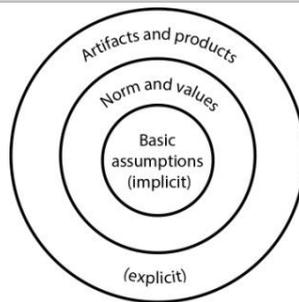


Figure 1. Trompenaars, F & Hampden-Turner, C., 1997, 22.

## 2.1 Basic Assumptions

Basic assumptions are the basis of culture as invisible elements in the most interior. Developed through a certain process of evolution, this layer in the inner depth of culture, includes basic assumptions and beliefs on life. The culture phenomenon has a decisive effect on the upper layers and shape the values, behaviours, relation with reality and life perception of individuals. According to Parker (1998), who simulates culture to an iceberg in an ocean, the parts on the surface of water represent the visible part of culture, while the parts under the surface of the water represent the invisible side of culture. What we know and are able to observe about culture consist of the visible part. However, the main big part of the iceberg under the surface of the water includes basic beliefs and assumptions that make the roots of culture. There is a giant invisible, secret part in the foundation of the visible culture elements. We can observe moral side of culture consisting of basic assumptions only through the reflections in the visible culture elements. “The deep assumptions that underlie norms and values are highly abstract, but they can be extrapolated from looking at meaningful patterns in behaviour and meaning systems” (Shaules, 2007, 58).

## 2.2 Norm and Values

The layer in the middle refers to the cultural norms and values of societies. Norms and values determine the social principles,

behaviour standards and value system in the society. Norms indicate the common perception of society on what is right and what is wrong. These may be formal like laws and regulations or informal like the unwritten rules on how to behave in society. Values are the definitions of the society about what is right and what is wrong. Norms define how an individual should behave while values define how the individual wish to behave. Shaules (2007, 58) gives an example about the difference between norm and value: “If you ask a Japanese why they bow, they might say that they do so because everyone does it (norm) or because it is important as a show of respect (value)”.

### **2.3. Artefacts and Products**

The most exterior part of the layered culture model is the visible aspect of culture including artefacts. Artefact refers to things that are created by human thought and labour. “Nature is the domain of objects and fact that forms, develops and changes by themselves. The term “fact” is used to determine the conditions that form by themselves. The word “arte” in the term “artefact” originates from the Latin word “ars” with a meaning of doing, processing, achieving, craft and art vs.” (Özlem, 2012, 167). Therefore, the products and works created by the human thought and labour are expressed by the term “artefact”. Despite the spontaneousness of nature, the culture products of human beings are called as artificial. Visible and tangible elements like language, art, design, buildings, food, equipment, clothing, fashion and technology. The reflections of invisible layers of culture manifest themselves in the artefact layer as culture related symbols. This layer can also be defined as the body of the things we first noticed and perceived on culture.

### **3. Artefacts in The Context of Globalization and Localization**

In present world, globalization, advances in informatics and communication technologies make societies and cultures closer. As a result of this, different societies look like each other with respect to the visible culture elements. This similarity is caused by the influence of dominant cultures rather than the equal interaction of all cultures. The influence of dominant cultures on the visible culture layer is faster and directly, almost creating a uniform world. For instance, television, clothing, music, architecture and design products are heavily influenced by the visual language of dominant cultures.

The world gets smaller and more uniformed in the globalization process but the concept of locality is getting stronger as well. Local culture refers to cultural accumulations of people sharing the same geography through their beliefs, traditions, habits and living practices. Local culture is a small scaled and geographically limited structure while global culture is a cultural power structure that is wider and spread throughout the world. Globalization and localization appear to be two contradicting concepts however they exist through each other. Roland Robertson describes this dual interaction by a new concept which he calls “glocalization”. Robertson states that it is wrong to evaluate what is local as resisting to what is global and to define globalization as excluding localization and that localizations is an aspect of globalization. “Differentiation and simulation experienced as a result of the on-going mutual dynamics between what is global and what is local make each other possible” (Robertson, 1995, 36).

Today all cultures are instantly informed about each other. It became possible to reach in seconds to the visual generated in any corner of the world thanks to the developments in communication technologies and especially to the Internet. At this point, the fact that our period is a visually

oriented age should be emphasized. Today, dominant cultures spread their values to all of the world through visuals. However, it would be missing information to state that developments in communication technologies only avail dominant cultures to spread their artefacts to the world. The Internet increased the interaction between societies and individuals and allowed each culture to be expanded to the world and different identities to have their voice heard. While it is impossible to deny the effect of the visual language of dominant culture to all of the world, researches proved that each culture has different visual languages where their unique values are reflected. Studies by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen on reading visuals are important in this context. Kress and van Leeuwen state that there is a visual grammar structure like the linguistic. According to their studies, this grammar structure bears intercultural differences and it is not possible to talk about a universal visual grammar. “Visual language is not -despite assumptions to the contrary-transparent and universally understood; it is culturally specific” (Gunther Kress & Theo van Leeuwen 2006, 4).

#### **4. Visual Grammar**

The “visual grammar” concept revealed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen in their book called “Reading Images: Grammar of Visual Design” is a new concept on “reading visuals”. According to this approach, Kress and van Leeuwen states that visual images can be read like texts while grammar may be a method to be used when working on visuals. “Grammar” is a string of sources combined to configure meaning rather than a string of rules on the correct use of visual language.

For Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), there cannot be a universal visual grammar valid throughout the world. Like verbal language, visual grammar varies among cultures. Just

like the grammar of each verbal language has unique differences, unique visual language of each culture has a unique visual grammar. Visual language and visual grammar are a culture related element. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006,4-5) emphasize on writing traditions as the most apparent examples of variance in intercultural visual grammar. Writing direction (from left to right, from right to left, from up to bottom etc.) and alphabet are among the important factors shaping visual language and therefore visual communication of cultures. For example, the tradition to write from left to right is an element that has deep effect on the Western visual communication.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006,4) states the following regarding the composition, writing direction and visual processing history of cultures: "... the elements, such as 'centre' or 'margin', 'top' or 'bottom', will play a role in the visual semiotics of any culture, but with meanings and values that are likely to differ depending on that culture's histories of use of visual space, writing included. The 'universal' aspect of meaning lies in semiotic principles and processes, the culture-specific aspect lies in their application over history, and in specific instances of use".

## **5. Intercultural Visual Language and Visual Communication Difference**

The visual age we are in, eye is the mostly used sensual organ. Visual process consists of a multi-staged complex process. During seeing, the light beam consisting of objects refracts when going through lens and inverted onto the retina. Then the visual stimulus are converted to electric signals through eye nerves and sent to the visual centre in the brain. In short, the process starts in eye while the vision takes place in a closed, dark and small centre in the back part of brain. In other words, seeing is an effect created in our brain by the electric signals

after the stimulation of eye. Irvin Rock (1995) states that, when seeing, brain doesn't make a facsimile simple record of the world but creates a unique picture of it. Signals sent to the vision centre goes through a interpretation process by brain about what the seen thing is. Therefore, human being is not passive observer when perceiving the world. Cognitive data, memory and experiences are combined to create a meaning on what is seen and the world is almost re-structured in the mind. During this interpretation process, our previous experience and knowledge have a dominant role. John Berger (2009,8) supports this idea by stating that "our way of seeing things depends on what we know and what we believe in". In this context, it can be said that culture has direct effect on the forms of perceiving and interpreting visuals as an element that affects and shapes human being for life.

The carriers of culture in our age are visual images. In this new age, where visuality and visual expression methods are in the centre, the Internet, smart phones, television, cinema, virtual reality, augmented reality applications and multimedia devices are constantly generating and spreading images. These tools are programmed to emit uninterrupted messages in order to see, be seen and present new ideas (Tavin, 2009). Looking at the generated visuals, a uniformity can be claimed. The effect of western visual language is remarkable in many fields like design, fashion, decoration, commercials and movies. In our age, it is a reality that the West is a dominant power in the industries of technology, culture and media. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) state that generated visuals are always affected by local culture no matter how the Western culture is dominant and its visual language is spread to the world through various resources. culture of the place where the visual is generated and the unique local approaches interact with the visual language of the West that wraps all the world. In other words, one side of generated images is influenced by the dominant visual culture of the West, while the other side

reflects the visual language of the culture it belongs to. Cultural differences in the generation of visual language is supported by the statement of Hodgetts and Luthans that aesthetics is a matter related to the artistic taste of a society and that the aesthetic values of people with respect to art, music and literature may vary among countries (cited by: Yeşil, 2009, 111).

The way of communication through visual images is called “visual communication”. The history of visual communication which is classified as a branch of communication dates back to the cave pictures in the primitive ages. Visual communication has an older history than written communication and it is known it makes the basis of written communication. According to a study by Jerome Bruner, an education psychologist, people remember 10 percent of what they hear, 30 percent of what they read and 80 percent of what they see (Lester, 2012). Visual images enter rapidly and easily to long memory. Visual communication is the oldest and most natural form of human communication. In this context, “visual communication” has a very important position in this new age where visuality and visual expression methods are central.

Studies on cultural differences in visual communication (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Jun & Lee, 2007; An, 2007; An & Kim, 2007; Callahan, 2007; Wu, 2008) deal with the west-east difference in design solutions. In general, western visual communication is based on a semantic understanding based on building a structure including polarization, asymmetry and contrast between the units in composition. It is essential that compositions must have a clear and net logical order. On the other hand, eastern visual communication usually have solutions referring to the wholesome thought structure. Compositions consist of central and layered structures and there are semantic relations in the relation between units. In western visual communication, central composition solutions are rare (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Meng, 2013). Kress and

van Leeuwen (2006,95) gives the example of Singapore and state that the central composition solutions that are popular among Asian designers can be linked to the important effect of the Confucian thinking on hierarchy, harmony and continuity with the centrally collecting basic principle in the visual semiotics of their culture. Codes used in visual language are read and analyzed in the same manner by the people of the same culture. The way to see an image varies even among sub cultures. Berger (1999,10) explains this by saying that “our perception or evaluation of an image depends on our way of seeing it”.

Each culture has a body of values formed throughout the centuries. This body of values cannot be observed clearly due to the spread of standardized and uniformed culture products due to globalization today. But, the values, norms and beliefs defined as the “invisible” side of culture are noticed in the artefacts that are defined as the “visible” part of culture. The sub layers of cultures coming from the past and being restored through generations would inevitably create reflections in the artefacts which are the visible layer. In this context, it is clear that there are different grammars among cultures with respect to visual language and visual communication.

## **Conclusion**

Culture is a social heritage generated by the society throughout the historical process and transmitted from generation to generation. Every generation makes material and moral contributions to the inherited culture before leaving it to the next generation. Doğan Özlem (2012) mentions with the words of Leibniz about “bearing the burden of the past and being pregnant to future” as the basic qualities of culture. Culture that is formed by restoration through generations for hundreds of years is a strong fact that forms the society, guides the manner of thinking and living and brings identity to it.

Each culture has a body of values formed throughout centuries. According to the value-based culture model, this body of values is considered within the moral aspect of culture. The studies show that intercultural differences with respect to “values” still continue. Cultural values contain invisible moral elements and therefore they are not clearly and obviously a visible and tangible structure. However, the reflections of the moral side of culture can be observed in artefacts, that is the visible culture elements. The fact that visible culture elements include cultural values indicates that globalization can affect visual language only in a certain dimension. Studies show that generated visuals are always affected by local culture no matter how the visual language of dominant cultures is spread to the world through various resources. In our visual age, there are differences in intercultural visual language despite the rule of dominant cultures. In a more realistic approach, the culture of the place where the visual is generated and the unique local approaches interact with the visual language of dominant cultures. In this context, it is inevitable that one aspect of the generated images would reflect the visual language of the culture it belongs to while one aspect is affected by the dominant visual culture.

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