

Chronemics



A sundial at the Konark Sun Temple

Chronemics is the study of the role of time in communication. It is one of several subcategories of the study of **nonverbal communication**. Other prominent subcategories include **haptics** (touch), **kinesics** (body movement), **vocalics** (paralanguage), and **proxemics** (the use of space).^[1]

Chronemics can be defined as “the interrelated observations and theories of man’s use of time as a specialized elaboration of culture” - the way in which one perceives and values time, structures time, and reacts to time frames communication. Across cultures, time perception plays a large role in the nonverbal communication process. Time perceptions include **punctuality**, willingness to wait, and interactions. The use of time can affect lifestyle, daily agendas, speed of speech, movements, and how long people are willing to listen.

Time can be used as an indicator of status. For example, in most companies the boss can interrupt progress to hold an impromptu meeting in the middle of the work day, yet the average worker would have to make an appointment to see the boss. The way in which different cultures perceive time can influence communication as well.

Cultures are sometimes considered **monochronic** or **polychronic**.

1 Monochronic time

A monochronic time system means that things are done one at a time and time is segmented into precise, small units. Under this system time is scheduled, arranged and managed.

The United States is considered a monochronic society.

This perception of time is learned and rooted in the **Industrial Revolution**, where “factory life required the labor force to be on hand and in place at an appointed hour” (Guerrero, DeVito & Hecht, 1999, p. 238). For Americans, time is a precious resource not to be wasted or taken lightly. “We buy time, save time, spend time and make time. Our time can be broken down into years, months, days, hours, minutes, seconds and even milliseconds. We use time to structure both our daily lives and events that we are planning for the future. We have schedules that we must follow: appointments that we must go to at a certain time, classes that start and end at certain times, work schedules that start and end at certain times, and even our favorite TV shows, that start and end at a certain time.”^[2]

As communication scholar **Edward T. Hall** wrote regarding the American’s viewpoint of time in the business world, “the schedule is sacred.” Hall says that for monochronic cultures, such as the American culture, “time is tangible” and viewed as a commodity where “time is money” or “time is wasted.” The result of this perspective is that Americans and other monochronic cultures, such as the German and Swiss, place a paramount value on schedules, tasks and “getting the job done.” These cultures are committed to regimented schedules and may view those who do not subscribe to the same perception of time as disrespectful.

Monochronic cultures include **Germany**, the United Kingdom, Turkey, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Jamaica, Canada, Switzerland, most parts of the United States, and Scandinavia.

2 Polychronic time

A polychronic time system is a system where several things can be done at once, and a more fluid approach is taken to scheduling time. Examples of polychronic behaviors include: cooking food while watching television or browsing the **internet** while sitting in meetings. Polychronicity is in contrast to those who prefer monochronicity (doing one thing at a time).^[3] Unlike most Western and East Asian cultures, **Latin American**, **African**, **South Asian**, and **Arab** cultures use polychronic systems of time.

These cultures are much less focused on the preciseness of accounting for each and every moment. As Raymond Cohen notes, polychronic cultures are deeply steeped in tradition and relationships rather than in tasks—a clear

difference from their monochronic counterparts. Cohen notes that “Traditional societies have all the time in the world. The arbitrary divisions of the clock face have little saliency in cultures grounded in the cycle of the seasons, the invariant pattern of rural life, community life, and the calendar of religious festivities” (Cohen, 1997, p. 34).

Instead, their culture is more focused on relationships, rather than watching the clock. They have no problem being “late” for an event if they are with family or friends, because the relationship is what really matters. As a result, polychronic cultures have a much less formal perception of time. They are not ruled by precise calendars and schedules. Rather, “cultures that use the polychronic time system often schedule multiple appointments simultaneously so keeping on schedule is an impossibility.”^[4]

2.1 Measuring polychronicity

Researchers have developed the following questionnaires to measure polychronicity:

- **Inventory of Polychronic Values (IPV)**, developed by Bluedorn et al. (1999) which is a 10-item scale designed to assess “the extent to which people in a culture prefer to be engaged in two or more tasks or events simultaneously and believe their preference is the best way to do things.”
- **Polychronic Attitude Index (PAI)**, developed by Kaufman-Scarborough & Lindquist in 1991, which is a 4-item scale measuring individual preference for polychronicity, in the following statements:
 1. “I do not like to juggle several activities at the same time”.
 2. “People should not try to do many things at once”.
 3. “When I sit down at my desk, I work on one project at a time”.
 4. “I am comfortable doing several things at the same time”.

3 Predictable patterns between cultures with differing time systems

3.1 Co-cultural perspectives on time

While the clash between the monochronic and polychronic perceptions of time can rife the best of intentions in international settings, similar challenges can occur between co-cultures within an otherwise unified culture. In the United States, the Hawaiian culture provides an example of how co-cultures can clash. Two time systems exist in Hawaii, where the Polynesians juggle two time systems:

Haole time and Hawaiian time. When you hear someone say “See you at two o’clock haole time,” that means that they will see you at precisely two o’clock. But if you hear someone say, “I will be there at two o’clock Hawaiian time” then the message has an entirely different meaning. This is because Hawaiian time is very lax and basically means “when I get there.”^[4] Within the Native American community, the same relaxed concern for punctuality is dominant. Comments like “We’re on Indian time, as usual” is commonly heard at many community events. Elders give calming reassurance that things “will happen when they happen” and “things happen when they are supposed to happen”, implying there is a reason behind it all, even if it might not be apparent at the moment. Moreover, it is common for individuals originating in India (a polychronic country) but inhabiting a monochronic environment like the U.S., to joke about their lax polychronic habits, saying “We follow DST: Desi Standard Time.”

4 Time orientations

The way an individual perceives time and the role time plays in their lives is a learned perspective. As discussed by Alexander Gonzalez and Phillip Zimbardo, “every child learns a time perspective that is appropriate to the values and needs of his society” (Guerrero, DeVito & Hecht, 1999, p. 227).

There are four basic psychological time orientations:

1. Past
2. Time-line
3. Present
4. Future

Each orientation affects the structure, content, and urgency of communication (Burgoon, 1989). The **past** orientation has a hard time developing the notion of elapsed time and these individuals often confuse present and past happenings as all in the same. People oriented with time-line cognitivity are often detail oriented and think of everything in linear terms. These individuals also often have difficulty with comprehending multiple events at the same time. Individuals with a present orientation are mostly characterized as pleasure seekers who live for the moment and have a very low risk aversion. Those individuals who operate with **future** orientation are often thought of as being highly goal oriented and focused on the broad picture.

The use of time as a communicative channel can be a powerful, yet subtle, force in face-to-face *interactions*. Some of the more recognizable types of interaction that use time are:

Regulating interaction This is shown to aid in the orderly transition of conversational **turn-taking**. When the speaker is opening the floor for a response, they will pause. However, when no response is desired, the speaker will talk a faster pace with minimal pause. (Capella, 1985)

Expressing intimacy As relationships become more intimate, certain changes are made to accommodate the new relationship status. Some of the changes that are made include lengthening the time spent on mutual gazes, increasing the amount of time doing tasks for or with the other person and planning for the future by making plans to spend more time together (Patterson, 1990).

Affect management The onset of powerful emotions can cause a stronger affect, ranging from joy to sorrow or even to embarrassment. Some of the behaviors associated with negative affects include decreased time of gaze and awkwardly long pauses during conversations. When this happens, it is common for the individuals to try and decrease any negative affects and subsequently strengthen positive affects (Edelman & Iwawaki, 1987).

Evoking emotion Time can be used to evoke emotions in an interpersonal relationship by communicating the value of the relationship. For example, when someone who you have a close relationship with is late, you may not take it personally, especially if that is characteristic of them. However, if it is a meeting with a total stranger, their disrespect for the value of your time may be taken personally and could even cause you to display negative emotions if and when they do arrive for the meeting.

Facilitating service and task goals Professional settings can sometimes give rise to interpersonal relations which are quite different from other “normal” interactions. For example, the societal norms that dictate minimal touch between strangers are clearly altered if one member of the dyad is a doctor, and the environment is that of a hospital examination room.

4.1 Time orientation and consumers

Time orientation has also revealed insights into how people react to advertising. Martin, Gnoth and Strong (2009) found that future-oriented consumers react most favorably to ads that feature a product to be released in the distant future and that highlight primary product attributes. In contrast, present-oriented consumers prefer near-future ads that highlight secondary product attributes. Consumer attitudes were mediated by the perceived usefulness of the attribute information.^[5]

5 Culture and diplomacy

5.1 Cultural roots

Just as monochronic and polychronic cultures have different time perspectives, understanding the time orientation of a culture is critical to becoming better able to successfully handle **diplomatic** situations. Americans, for instance have a future orientation. Hall indicates that for Americans “tomorrow is more important” and that they “are oriented almost entirely toward the future” (Cohen, 2004, p. 35). The future-focused orientation attributes to at least some of the concern that Americans have with “addressing immediate issues and moving on to new challenges” (Cohen, 2004, p. 35).

On the other hand, many polychronic cultures have a past-orientation toward time.

These time perspectives are the seeds for communication clashes in diplomatic situations. Trade negotiators have observed that “American negotiators are generally more anxious for agreement because “they are always in a hurry” and basically “problem solving oriented.” In other words, they place a high value on resolving an issue quickly calling to mind the American catchphrase “some solution is better than no solution” (Cohen, 2004, p. 114). Similar observations have been made of **Japanese-American** relations. Noting the difference in time perceptions between the two countries, former ambassador to Tokyo, **Mike Mansfield** commented “We’re too fast, they’re too slow” (Cohen, 2004, p. 118).

5.2 Influence on global affairs

Different perceptions of time across cultures can influence global communication situations. When writing about time perspective, Gonzalez and Zimbardo comment that “There is no more powerful, pervasive influence on how individuals think and cultures interact than our different perspectives on time—the way we learn how we mentally partition time into past, present and future.” (Guerrero, DeVito & Hecht, 1999, p. 227)

Depending upon where an individual is from, their perception of time might be that “the clock rules the day” or that “we’ll get there when we get there.” Improving prospects for success in the global community requires understanding cultural differences, **traditions** and communication styles.

The monochronic-oriented approach to negotiations is direct, linear and rooted in the characteristics that illustrate low context tendencies. The low context and individualistic culture approaches diplomacy in a lawyerly fashion with draft arguments, a mission and an idea of how they will move the process along. A monochronic culture, more concerned with time, deadlines and schedules, tends to grow impatient and want to rush to “close the deal.”

More collectivistic, polychronic-oriented cultures come to diplomatic situations with no particular importance placed on time. Rather than worry about the ticking of the clock, they are more willing to let time tick away if it means they are having a meaningful discussion and are forming strong **relationships**. The collectivistic culture is also high context. Rather than rely on verbal, the high context negotiator operates with a greater emphasis on nonverbal communication. Chronemics is one of those **nonverbal** channels of communication, and their treatment of time illustrates their perspective of time. Instead of watching the clock, they are more deeply concerned with discussing broad themes and philosophies before details of a negotiation are addressed. Above all else, they place far less value on simply reaching agreement for the sake of meeting a deadline. Rather, they place far more value on ensuring that the outcome of any agreement “is good and looks good” so that they can preserve face, as is the norm in the collectivist culture.

Understanding these cultural differences and perspectives on time can greatly improve future negotiations in the international community.

6 Chronemics and power at work

Time has a definite relationship to **power**. Though power most often refers to the ability to influence people (Guerrero, DeVito & Hecht, 1999, p. 314), power is also related to dominance and status (Guerrero, DeVito & Hecht, 1999, p. 315).

In the workplace, those in a leadership or management position treat time – and by virtue of position – have their time treated differently from those who are of a lower stature position. Anderson and Bowman have identified three specific examples of how chronemics and power converge in the workplace – waiting time, talk time and work time.

Waiting time

Researchers Insel and Lindgren (Guerrero, DeVito & Hecht, 1999, p. 325) write that the act of making an individual of a lower stature wait is a sign of dominance. They note that one who “is in the position to cause another to wait has power over him. To be kept waiting is to imply that one’s time is less valuable than that of the one who imposes the wait.”

Employees of equal stature will not worry about whether they are running a few minutes behind schedule to meet with one another. On the other hand, for a mid-level manager who has a meeting with the company president, a late arrival might be a nonverbal cue that you do not respect the authority of your superior.

Talk time

There is a direct correlation between the power of an individual in an organization and conversation. This includes both length of conversation, turn-taking and who initiates and ends a conversation. Extensive research indicates that those with more power in an organization will speak more often and for a greater length of time. Meetings between superiors and subordinates provide an opportunity to illustrate this concept. A superior – regardless of whether or not they are running the actual meeting – lead discussions, ask questions and have the ability to speak for longer periods of time without interruption. Likewise, research shows that turn-taking is also influenced by power. Social psychologist Nancy Henley notes that “Subordinates are expected to yield to superiors and there is a cultural expectation that a subordinate will not interrupt a superior” (Guerrero, DeVito & Hecht, 1999, p. 326). The length of response follows the same pattern. While the superior can speak for as long as they want, the responses of the subordinate are shorter in length. **Albert Mehrabian** noted that deviation from this pattern led to negative perceptions of the subordinate by the superior. Beginning and ending a communication interaction in the workplace is also controlled by the higher-status individual in an organization. The time and duration of the conversation are dictated by the higher-status individual.

Work time

It is not likely that you will ever see a president or a high level executive punching a time clock. Their time is perceived as more valuable and they control their own time. On the other hand, a subordinate with less power has their time controlled by a higher status individual and are in less control of their time – making them likely to report their time to a higher authority. Such practices are more associated with those in non-supervisory roles or in blue collar rather than **white collar** professions. Instead, as power and status in an organization increases, the flexibility of the work schedule also increases. For instance, while administrative professionals might keep a 9 to 5 work schedule, their superiors may keep less structured hours. This does not mean that the superior works less. They may work longer, but the structure of their work environment is not strictly dictated by the traditional work day. Instead, as Koehler and their associates note “individuals who spend more time, especially spare time, to meetings, to committees, and to developing contacts, are more likely to be influential decision makers” (Guerrero, DeVito & Hecht, 1999, p. 327).

A specific example of the way power is expressed through work time is scheduling. As Yakura and others have noted in research shared by Ballard and Seibold, “scheduling reflects the extent to which the sequencing and duration of plans activities and events are formalized” (Ballard and Seibold, p. 6). Higher-status individuals have very precise and formal schedules – indicating that their stature requires that they have specific blocks of time for specific meetings, projects and appointments.

Lower status individuals however, may have less formalized schedules. Finally, the schedule and appointment calendar of the higher status individual will take precedence in determining where, when and the importance of a specific event or appointment.

7 Associated theories

7.1 Expectancy violations theory

Developed by Judee Burgoon, expectancy violations theory (EVT) sees communication as the exchange of information which is high in relational content and can be used to violate the expectations of another which will be perceived as either positively or negatively depending on the liking between the two people.

When our expectations are violated, we will respond in specific ways. If an act is unexpected and is assigned favorable interpretation, and it is evaluated positively, it will produce more favorable outcomes than an expected act with the same interpretation and evaluation.

7.1.1 Relationship to chronemics

In some cultures, people place a high value on time and use time as a basis for decisions. In other cultures, time is less significant. For example, in Mexico or Central America tour guides may fail to indicate the correct arrival and departure times. In other countries, such as Switzerland, a traveler can set his or her watch by the promptness of the trains. When these cultures cross, expectancy with respect to time is violated and can cause discord between the people involved.

7.1.2 Popular movie examples

The following movies were cited in Em Griffin's *A First Look at Communication* as having good examples of Expectancy Violations:

- The African Queen - starring Humphrey Bogart and Katharine Hepburn
- Almost Famous - starring Kate Hudson
- North by Northwest - starring Cary Grant
- How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days - starring Kate Hudson and Matthew McConaughey

7.2 Interpersonal adaptation theory

For more details on this topic, see Interpersonal adaptation theory.

The Interpersonal Adaptation Theory (IAT), founded by Judee Burgoon, states that adaptation in interaction is responsive to the needs, expectations, and desires of communicators and affects how communicators position themselves in relation to one another and adapt to one another's communication. For example, they may match each other's behavior, synchronize the timing of behavior, or behave in dissimilar ways. It is also important to note that individuals bring to interactions certain requirements that reflect basic human needs, expectations about behavior based on social norms, and desires for interaction based on goals and personal preferences (Burgoon, Stern & Dillman, 1995).

7.2.1 Relationship to chronemics

The old statement "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" holds true with IAT and chronemics. There will be situations when even though you are a very timely person, you may have to deal with someone who is not as timely as you are and adapt your communication to their needs. These adaptations can vary depending on the position of the person you are dealing with, as well as the cultural background of that person.

It is also important to remember that although you will sometimes have to adapt to others, there will be times that things would be more positively balanced if the other parties adapted to your concept of time.

8 Reception

9 See also

- African time
- Edward T. Hall
- Albert Mehrabian
- Nonverbal communication
- Paul Virilio

10 References

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- [2]
- [3] Joshua Keating (2012-03-16). "Why Time is a Social Construct | Science | Smithsonian". Smithsonian-mag.com. Retrieved 2014-03-10.
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11 Suggested reading

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12 External links

- Colorado State University (2003, November 17). *Chronemics*

- ICTAC intercultural skills test
- Peace Corps comments on cross cultural communication
- Time Sense: Polychronicity and Monochronicity

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