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Exploring cultural influences on employee interpretations of
universal values messages in multinational organisations: a
business discourse approach

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ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on an increasingly popular, but little studied organisational communication practice, the deployment of corporate values messages as a means of ‘framing’ reality, and of achieving ‘shared meaning’ in multicultural workplaces, and asks if such practices, based on ethnocentric approaches to business communication, are likely to be effective in culturally diverse contexts. Using a business discourse perspective, and approaching culture as dynamic systems of meaning, the study presents a rich case of values communication in a European multinational, by exploring in detail the meanings employees derive from the organisational values messages, and the relationship between these meanings and the cultural context in which they are constructed.

Findings point to two main conclusions: Firstly, that universal values messages do generate multiple employee meanings, but these do not derive from distinct cultural memberships, such as ethnicity or nationality, but rather from the complex interaction between message texts, organisational cultural frames and discourses and cultural identities constructed during interpretation by message users. This finding offers support for a non-essentialist approach to culture in intercultural business communication research, which locates culture not in distinct external influences on communicative action, but in a complex and holistic ‘interculturality’ - the process and outcomes of interacting dynamic cultures, cultural texts, and the communicative action itself.

Secondly, findings show that, if the message texts trigger shared cultural frames, shared meanings will also emerge, despite apparent cultural diversity among message readers. This finding challenges the view of much current intercultural and cross-cultural communication scholarship, that the cultural diversity of business audiences is likely to render universal communication practices in multinational businesses ineffective. Instead, it suggests that explicit universal values texts in multinational organisations may indeed contribute to the generation of shared meaning, although this will be mediated by existing, implicit, cultural 'texts'.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Chapter purpose and structure

In this thesis I explore employee interpretations of values messages in multinational business settings and the complex relationship between such interpretations and the cultural context within which they are constructed. I combine a business discourse perspective and a non essentialist approach to culture to produce a rich case study of values reception in a multinational, multicultural business context, which, I believe, contributes new insights to our understanding of the relationship between culture and communication practice in international business.

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to explain the rationale and context for my research, articulate the research question, and outline the structure of the thesis. I begin with a discussion of the reasons which drive my interest in the communication and reception of values messages in multinational organisations and the way culture influences the meanings employees derive from these. I then discuss, in more detail, the practice and study of values communication in organisations and explore a number of arguments which help shape the research question. I finally move on to position my research in relation to a number of disciplines which study business communication in multicultural business contexts. I conclude with an overview of the rest of the thesis and the definition of some key terminology.

1.2 Research Rationale

1.2.1 Identifying the research gap

In this thesis I focus on an increasingly popular, but little studied business communication practice, namely the use by organisational leaders of formal management messages as a tool of 'framing' reality (Deetz et al, 2000) and of creating 'shared meaning' (DiSanza,1993) among employees of diverse cultural backgrounds in multinational companies (Van Nimwegen et al, 2004). Whereas this practice is extensively discussed and documented in practitioner oriented and practitioner produced literature (Lencioni, 2002; Love, 2006; Sparrow, 2009) academic inquiry has so far paid limited attention to it, particularly in relation to its impact on employees as consumers of such messages, the meanings they derive from these, and the role of culture¹ in shaping these meanings (Van Nimvegen et al, 2004).

This knowledge gap is, I believe, particularly problematic for two reasons. On the one hand, multiple studies of communication practice in cross-cultural and intercultural settings point to the significance of the cultural context, as an influencer of practice in general (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997; Neimeier et al, 1998; Varner, 2000; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009) and of user meaning, in particular (Haworth and Savage, 1989; Beamer, 1992; Brownell, 1999; Orth et al, 2007). This evidence strongly suggests that 'universal' messages, framed from particular ethno-centric perspectives are

¹ In this thesis I adopt a definition of culture as patterns or systems of meaning (Geertz, 1973). I provide a definition of the concept at the end of this chapter and discuss it in more detail in chapter two, where I also illustrate why this 'systems of meaning' approach to culture best fits my research purpose and question.

unlikely to produce 'universal' meanings in culturally diverse audiences and that their appropriateness and potential effectiveness should, therefore, be questioned (Lovitt and Goswami, 1999; Beamer and Varner, 2001; Pan et al, 2002).

Practitioners on the other hand, appear to ignore such arguments when it comes to communicating with employees in multinational organisations (Love, 2006; Jaccaud and Quirke, 2006; Sparrow, 2009). Despite the increasing popularity of certain cross-cultural management theories (e.g. Hofstede, 1991; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997) on other aspects of management practice, such as expatriate training, in the area of communication with employees organisations continue to rely almost exclusively on prescriptive, ethnocentric, and often untested, models of communication (Quirke, 1996; Clampitt, 2005; Smith and Mounter, 2005; D'Aprix, 2008). The impact of such models remains unknown, because of the paucity of research in this area. I believe that until such research can add to our empirical and theoretical armoury, we - the business communication academy- will remain unable to effectively contest such practices, and to help develop both alternative models and better management skills, which contribute to more effective communication in such contexts (Suchan and Charles, 2006).

My research aims to contribute to this yet largely unexplored territory, by studying a particular type of organisational messages, so called 'values statements', which are increasingly deployed by leaders as a means of

employee influence and control in multicultural workplaces (Larson, 1997; Lewis, 2000; Van Nimwegen et al, 2004; Love, 2006; Yaun, 2006). Values messages are treated as ‘framing’ devices (Swales and Rogers, 1995; Tietze et al, 2003) which aim to generate certain common meanings and beliefs about the organisation and the way employees should behave as organisational members, thus creating a ‘homogenous culture’. This, in turn, is supposed to lead to homogenous and appropriate action (Collins and Porras, 1996; Van Nimwegen et al, 2004). Because of these assumptions of meaning homogenisation and their specific ‘cultural’ content, values statements present a particularly appropriate type of universal message to explore in relation to culture in the intercultural business context. I discuss this in more detail when I develop the research question later in this chapter. I now turn to a more personal explanation of my research topic.

1.2.2 Research rationale: a personal perspective

As a practitioner in the field of employee communication management I have over the years become increasingly concerned with the assumption many managers in international environments make that language is culture free² that is, that provided employees speak a language fluently – this language more often than not being English - they will understand the same business text in the same way as any other speaker of that language. Even more problematic, I felt, was business leaders’ assumption that they could easily get employees to adopt what were assumed to be the ‘right’ beliefs, simply by

² Despite a range of studies contesting this point - see for example Hall (1976) and Wierzbicka (2006).

means of transmitting certain carefully crafted statements, which describe how these employees should feel, think and act as organisational members (Swales and Rogers, 1995; Deetz et al, 2000; Lencioni, 2002). Whilst popular management wisdom suggested that this practice would reap benefits by helping to create an engaged global workforce who shared the same worldview (Collins and Porras, 1996; Van Nimwegen et al, 2004), this was far from happening in the organisations I was working with.

As a native of one European country, Greece, living for many years in another, the UK, and frequently working in yet a third (France, Germany, Switzerland), representing clients who were mostly North American, I have been constantly aware of differences both in communication styles and in culturally driven meanings among employees of the same business. At the same time, most of the senior managers I worked with seemed to assume that the effectiveness of their formal communication would primarily depend on whether that communication was executed according to 'professional best practice standards' which largely agreed with their own, mostly Anglo-Saxon, sensibility of what good communication looked like.

Frustrated by the inadequacy and limitations of what I was doing as an adviser and practitioner, I reached beyond the prescriptive models that still dominate my industry today, for better and richer insights. Although, I found much theoretical support for my initial feeling of unease with universalism –for example, cross-cultural management theories relating culture and

communication (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1980; Schwartz, 1999) as well as a host of intercultural and cross-cultural communication studies (Kim et al, 1996; Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997; Graves, 1997; Collier, 2000; Spencer-Oatey, 2000) - I discovered few empirical studies which provided actual insights into how such universalist approaches to communication impacted the multicultural workplace.

Furthermore, although I initially found theories which privileged national cultural differences (Hofstede, 1980; Hall and Hall 1990) rather attractive, I also understood from my own experience that there was much more complexity there to be explored. On reflection, my own communication behaviour and message interpretation was not always influenced by my Greek nationality, although undoubtedly it sometimes was, and I observed that to be the case with many of the managers I worked with in organisations around Europe. As I discuss in the literature review, in recent years increasingly more voices have come to share this unease with national culture as the privileged cultural context in intercultural communication research and practice (Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2003).

The dissatisfaction with what I perceived to be lack of answers at the time led me to embark on my own research: I wanted to explore values communication practice in the workplaces in which I worked; I wanted to document, describe and understand the ways a multinational, multicultural workforce interpreted these values messages; I wanted to see to what extent these interpretations

were anywhere near similar to each other, as senior managers expected them to be; most of all I wanted to find a way to better understand how culture (i.e. the meaning systems which shaped employee worldviews) influenced these interpretations.

This thesis is as much the story of my learning journey, as it is an attempt to address the problem I encountered as a practitioner all these years ago and still encounter today. As I began to write up my thesis, a North American company I was working with, announced the introduction of a communication programme aimed to 'engage' their European workforce of very competitive sales managers, spread across more than 20 countries, behind a new set of cultural values of 'caring' and 'teamwork', while at the same time pursuing an aggressive programme of cost cutting, redundancies and centralisation.

It has taken me several years and several changes in my thinking to get to this thesis. In that time the academic debate concerning the relationship between culture and communication in business contexts has developed in interesting ways, as I discuss in the literature review. Organisational practice, on the other hand, appears to have changed very little, continuing to rely too much on untested, populist approaches to communication management. I hope that the work I present in this thesis can provide the long needed in-depth understanding which can begin to influence a change in this area. In the next section I go on to explore the research gap more fully and to articulate the research question which drives this thesis.

1.3 Developing the research question

1.3.1 The purpose and content of values messages

The construction and dissemination of management messages from leaders to employees with the intent of 'framing' organisational reality (Fairhurst, 1993; Conger, 1998; Tietze et al, 2003) and influencing employee beliefs and attitudes in specific ways has been strongly advocated by influential management literature, such as leadership studies (Kotter, 1995; Deetz et al, 2000; Mai and Akerson, 2003) and the 'excellence' stream of research (Peters and Waterman, 1982; Deal and Kennedy, 1982; Porter and Parker, 1992; Kotter and Heskett, 1992; Collins and Porras, 1996).

According to Tietze et al (2003) message frames are 'cultural literacies', which leaders use to motivate their workforce and to unite them behind a common purpose. These provide "the map for interpreting action, by telling followers what reality looks like and how things are or will be" (Tietze et al, 2003:136). Today the vast majority of organisations, including those operating across many national borders, deploy professional internal message 'framing' as a key people management tool (Helsby, 2001; Holtz, 2003; Smith and Mounter, 2005; Quirke 2008; D'Aprix, 2008).

A particular and very popular instance of such messages are so called values statements, specific corporate texts describing desired attitudes and behaviours, which leaders articulate and employees are expected to adopt in order to drive organisational success (Kamoche, 2000; Lencioni, 2002; Van

Nimwegen et al, 2004). These are often, but not always, presented as part of bigger mission or vision statement (Klemm et al, 1991; Swales and Rogers, 1995; Gatley and Clutterbuck, 1998) which as well as articulating a desired 'culture' – in the 'values' part of the statement- also outlines organisational performance objectives, couched in inspirational terms (Swales and Rogers, 1995; Baetz and Bart, 1996). This terminological distinction, namely the use of the terms *mission*, *vision* and *values*, is not always clear in practice. For example *mission statements* are sometimes called *values statements* and vice versa (Baetz and Bart, 1996; Gatley and Clutterbuck, 1998). In this study I focus on values statements only. These, dealing as they do with culturally laden concepts – behaviours, beliefs, attitudes – provide particularly interesting framing devices (Fairhurst, 1993; Tietze et al, 2003) to test in a multicultural business setting.

1.3.2 Extant research on values statements

Unlike the broader practice of 'culture management', which has been extensively researched and debated – in relation for example to the question of whether culture can be controlled by managers and to what extent (Hendry and Hope, 1994; Hawkins, 1997; Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 2003; Willmott, 2003) - the articulation, dissemination and reception of values messages as a culture framing communication practice, has been largely ignored by academic inquiry, with few exceptions (Fairhurst, 1993; Swales and Rogers, 1995; van Nimwegen et al, 2004). Furthermore, hardly any of these studies explore either the interpretation of values messages by employees, or their

deployment in international business contexts (Van Nimwegen et al, 2004; Wenstop and Myrmel, 2006).

As a result, when international organisations articulate and communicate values statements – and evidence suggests that this is becoming an increasingly popular practice in multinational businesses (Porter and Parker, 1992; Lewis, 2000; Barktus et al, 2004; Fairburn, 2005; Love, 2006; Yaun, 2006) – they largely rely either on untested consultant formulas or on prescriptive communication and management theories (e.g. Collins and Porras, 1996; Holtz, 2003; D'Aprix 2008) to guide them. These formulas and theories, in their promotion of universalist, 'best practice' approaches to communication, reflect a particular ethnocentric perspective, more specifically certain North American traditions of management and business communication scholarship (see, for example, Grunig, 1992; Dozier et al, 1995; Jablin et al, 2000, as well as critical reviews of such approaches, e.g. Lovitt, 1999; Taylor, 2002).

In their analysis of mission/values statements deployed by a number of US headquartered organisations many of which operated globally, Swales and Rogers (1995) show that such statements appear to follow specific 'genre' rules – they are short, 'upbeat', use active verbs, are couched almost always in the present or future tense or the imperative, and, importantly, utilise a small set of positive, value laden words such as *leading*, *creative*, *innovative*, etc. Interestingly, the same stylistic, structural and linguistic 'rules' seem to be

used for mission and values messages created by management in non Anglo-Saxon organisations (Van Nimwegen et al, 2004; Wenstop and Myrmel, 2006). This is shown, for example, by Wenstop and Myrmel (2006) in their study comparing values statements in American and Norwegian organisations and is also evidenced in many practitioner produced accounts (e.g. Larson, 1997; Yaun, 2006). The following quote from a senior communication practitioner in an international Swedish organisation – drawn from an online discussion on values dissemination - is also indicative both of the prevailing universalist, Anglo-Saxon approach to values messages, and also of the general management assumption that a homogenised culture built around the core concepts expressed in such messages is both desirable and achievable.

If you are a multicultural/multinational company, do not over-agonise over the cultural differences - focus on the good similarities between different cultural backgrounds of employees. We feel [our] values of customer satisfaction, achievement, continuous learning and respect for the individual are common to our workforce of 119 nationalities in 54 countries.

Melcrum Internal Communication Hub (2003)

A further illustration of this point is provided by Van Nimwegen et al (2004), who discuss the case of an international bank based in the Netherlands, where a largely Dutch senior manager task force produced a list of four 'values' articulated in English - *integrity, respect, teamwork and professionalism*. The Bank then proceeded to disseminate these to all their

employees worldwide in order to prevent, in the authors' words "a certain cultural and moral heterogeneity, if not disorder, from breaking out" (Van Nimwegen et al, 2004:102). The communication of universal values statements aimed to provide, instead, a homogenising 'glue' for the organisation. Interestingly, the premise that the communication of common values statements can indeed achieve such a purpose is not challenged by the authors of the research.

1.3.3 Contesting assumptions of universality in values message deployment

However, given the range of research which demonstrates that culture affects communication behaviour (Hofstede, 1991; Hall and Hall, 1990; Collier, 2000; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009) and, in particular, the way we articulate, disseminate and interpret messages (Graves, 1997; Brownell, 1999; Dutta-Bergman and Pal, 2005) a question must be raised regarding the potential effectiveness of universal values statements in organisations: To what extent is it possible for these universal messages which espouse a very specific worldview, to be interpreted in the same way in the first instance, let alone lead to common action (DiSanza, 1993; Deetz et al, 2000; Van Nimwegen et al, 2004) in the multinational organisational context?

The majority of studies which deal with vision and values messages (Fairhurst, 1993; Swales and Rogers, 1995; Wenstop and Myrmel, 2006) do not address this question, but focus primarily on the values statements

themselves – by analysing and comparing their content and/or rhetorical and linguistic characteristics, for example, across organisations (Swales and Rogers, 1995; Barktus et al, 2004; Wenstop and Myrmel, 2006) or by studying how these are framed in practice by senior managers (Fairhurst, 1993). Communication practice, however, particularly in a multicultural context, cannot be fully understood, let alone evaluated, without documenting and understanding the perspective of the message user (Larsen, 1991; Beamer, 1992; Jameson, 2000) as it is not message content, but user meaning that arguably mediates action (Mick and Buhl, 1992; Fairclough, 2003). It is, therefore, in understanding the meanings generated when a message is interpreted that we can begin to answer questions of impact and effectiveness of communication in the multicultural context, as context plays a major role in the meaning making process (Fiske, 1991; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004).

The few studies that address the interpretation of values messages and the effect they have on employee meaning tend to do this in mono-cultural and largely Anglo-Saxon business contexts and often while investigating a broader research question (DiSanza, 1993; Turnbull, 2001). Although, as I discuss in the literature review, these raise some interesting points about the relationship between the rejection and acceptance of such messages by employees and the overall cultural context, they do not deal with the complexity of the multinational, multicultural business environment. In such environments not only do employees come to work with different cultural references which may influence meaning, but also the English of professionally crafted management

messages may be very different from the English in the workplace, a 'lingua franca', with different rules and usage parameters than native speakers' English (Tietze, 2004; Charles 2007).

There are currently only a handful of studies which look at message interpretation in international businesses (e.g. Hoeken et al, 2003), but these tend to adopt a very narrow focus of culture – again this is discussed in the literature review. When it comes to values messages in particular, Van Nimwegen et al (2004) and, to a lesser extent, Brownell (1999), both utilising survey based methodologies and a national culture definition of cultural context, offer the only specific insights. Van Nimwegen et al, for example, compare reception in terms of agreement/disagreement with the Bank values statements, but do not explore the full meanings generated when employees read these statements. Interestingly, their study finds both unexpected differences and unexpected similarities in the way global audiences understand a particular set of values, thus raising further questions about the practice and its implications, but also about studying the relationship between communication and culture in terms of nationality only.

In her study of meanings assigned to messages of 'quality service', Brownell shows that employees in multinational hotel chains do interpret the term in different ways. Brownell, however, focuses her discussion on differences between native and non-native English speakers, and, assumes, rather than explores the relationship between the cultural context and the meanings she

identifies. Such studies only begin to scratch the surface of a very complex phenomenon in a complex setting and invite further in-depth investigation.

1.3.4 Articulating the research question

In summary, to understand better the communicative impact of universal values messages in multinational organisations two areas of inquiry need to be addressed, which are poorly explored by extant research. Firstly, there needs to be a shift of focus from the study of the message itself, its structure, content and linguistic characteristics, to include the interpretation of the message by the audience it is aimed at – the employees- and the exploration of the meanings employees construct when reading values messages. Secondly, we must try to understand in more detail, the relationship between employee meanings and the diverse cultural context in which these meanings are generated. My research question, therefore, combines the focus on interpretation with the exploration of the role of culture on meaning. It is articulated in three parts:

Q1. How are universal values messages interpreted by employees in multinational organisations, i.e. what meanings do they create?

Q2. To what extent are meanings shared between employees of different cultural backgrounds and to what extent are they different?

Q3. How does culture influence these meanings?

While the first and third questions directly address the two key areas of inquiry I discussed above, the second question provides a link between the two and a way for moving from one to the other. On the one hand, like question one, question two requires a descriptive answer in the identification and presentation of meaning patterns – pulling together prevalent and less prevalent meanings, majority and minority meanings, for example. Furthermore, like question one, question two also tests the assumption behind communicating values messages, that these messages will generate meanings which are both consistent with the meanings potentiated by the framing of the values texts *and* shared among employees.

On the other hand, in asking how meanings are shared among employees with different cultural backgrounds, question two offers a point of departure for exploring the relationship between culture and interpretation. If found, shared meanings could indicate areas where shared cultural influences (in other words, meanings derived from common group memberships) are at play (Dutta-Bergman and Pal, 2005). Similarly, patterns of diverse meanings could point to influences of cultural diversity (Beamer, 1995). Finally, while questions one and two drive the generation of rich descriptive data – actual meanings, types of meanings and meaning patterns – question three is more ambitious in that it opens up possibilities of theory development, through the exploration of the relationship between the two key concepts I deploy here, *meaning* and *culture*. Addressing this question is, consequently, the ultimate

destination of my research. This is reflected both in the structure and focus of the literature review and in the findings and discussion chapters.

1.4 Research context

I propose to investigate this research question in the context of a multinational organisation with a global reach which is headquartered in Europe and has a strong employee base in a number of European countries. My interest in the European multinational context derives both from my personal experience, as I explained earlier, but also from the fact that, until relatively recently, most comparative, cross and intercultural business communication research focused on non European contexts (Spencer-Oatey, 2000; Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 2003).

European multinational businesses, particularly those which bring together employees from different countries to work on integrated projects, in multicultural teams across borders, provide particularly interesting research contexts, because in such contexts sometimes geographic proximity is mistaken for cultural proximity (Hoeken et al, 2003). In answering the research question in this organisation, I expect to produce a detailed picture of actual employee meanings as relating to the specific values texts this organisation employs and insights about how these meanings are influenced by the cultural context in which they are generated.

1.5 Research contribution

By providing a rich case study which explores and documents a little researched business communication practice in the multinational, multicultural workplace, my research aims to contribute to a better understanding of the impact and implications of universalist management communication practices, and in particular the deployment of values messages in this business context. By exploring in detail the influence on specific meanings of the cultural context in which these meanings are generated, the research will also contribute to the debate about the relationship between communication and culture (Lovitt, 1999; Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 2003; Hunsinger, 2006; Jameson, 2007) in intercultural business communication research. It should also provide new insights which we can use to influence current management communication practice and to better educate future cadres of international managers (Pan et al 2002, Suchan and Charles 2006).

1.6 Research perspective: locating the ‘conversation’

My research fits within the interdisciplinary framework of business communication which covers the study of a broad range of communicative practices in business contexts from a wide number of philosophical methodological and disciplinary perspectives (Suchan and Charles, 2006; Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007). More specifically, I locate my study within the research space frequently labelled ‘Intercultural Business Communication’ - summarised as IBC- which has relatively recently emerged as a clearly

defined community of enquiry (Lovitt, 1999; Bargiela-Chippini et al, 2003). Intercultural Business Communication is concerned with the study of written and spoken communication in organisational environments which transcend single country boundaries and/or bring together people from diverse cultural (national, but not only) backgrounds, for the purposes of work and to achieve business objectives.

In short, Intercultural Business Communication research is concerned with the practice and impact of communication in international businesses and the communication needs of people who work in these businesses (Lovitt and Goswami, 1999; Beamer and Varner, 2001; Pan et al, 2002). As such it is related to, but is distinct from, three better established fields - organisational communication (e.g. Jablin et al, 2000) which is primarily concerned with communication in organisations, but not necessarily in international businesses, intercultural communication (e.g. Tannen, 1981; Gudykunst, 2000; Higgins, 2007), which focuses on interactions between members of different cultural backgrounds, but most often not in business contexts, and cross-cultural or international management scholarship (Tayeb, 1996; Thomas, 2002; Schneider and Barsoux, 2003) which is concerned with the organisation of work and the practice of management in international environments, and may be interested in communication practice as an aspect of management, but does not focus on it primarily. IBC has drawn from all these fields, as well as from a number of disciplines, but is now establishing a

clearer distinct voice of its own (Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 2003; Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007).

Broadly speaking, two different research traditions exist in this space. The first, largely characterising North American research until recently, considers cultural difference and its impact on communication to be the core challenge in intercultural business communication; a challenge which needs to be resolved for business to function effectively (Beamer and Varner, 2001; Jameson, 2007). Consequently, a large body of this research is primarily concerned with understanding, measuring and even predicting the influence of cultural differences on communication preferences, communicative action and communication effectiveness (e.g. Kim, 1994; Gudykunst et al, 1996). This type of research often relies on testing pre-existing theories - drawn for example from cross-cultural management studies - rather than exploring actual practice (this point also made in Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson 2003). Significantly for my particular subject, most audience studies in intercultural settings have been conducted from this perspective – although not specifically involving employee audiences (many of these are classroom based, for example). I will be discussing these in the literature review.

A second tradition, largely of European origin, which can broadly be described as ‘business discourse’ research (Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007) focuses more on the use of language and the creation of meaning in the multinational business context and seeks to describe and understand what are called

organisational discourses – spoken and written texts produced by organisational members as communicative action. Much of the research focus here is on how individuals or groups from different backgrounds in the international business context communicate with each other to achieve different organisational and personal objectives - for example in meetings, negotiations, sales encounters, or through various forms of correspondence such as letter, email, memo and fax (Louhiala-Salminen, 1997; Yli-Jokipii, 1998; Nickerson, 1999). This research approach is also interested in the influence of culture on communication, but perceives culture not as a deterministic set of rules, but rather as a meaning making framework (Guirdham, 1999; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004).

My research which takes a particular type of organisational message text, the values statement, and seeks to understand how this is used to create meaning in the multinational organisation fits primarily within this business discourse tradition. This approach is also coherent with my philosophical perspective as a researcher, which combines an idealist ontology with a constructionist epistemology (Blaikie, 2007). The latter, in particular, places meaning construction and the use of language for meaning construction in the heart of understanding organisational life (Jensen, 1995; Collier, 2000). See the methodology chapter for a full discussion of this point.

Finally, as well as being located within the broader space of intercultural business discourse research, my study has an affinity with two other research

streams: qualitative reception or audience studies (Jensen and Jankowski, 1991; Philo, 2008), which use discourse analytic approaches to focus on media texts as messages and the meanings generated when these messages are 'decoded' by media publics (Mick et al, 2004) and leader/employee framing studies, which explore how leader frames of organisational reality are interpreted by employees, in the context of organisational change (Turnbull, 2001; Bean and Hamilton, 2006). Again, I discuss this research in more detail in the literature review.

1.7 Definitions and use of terms

Transnational, international and multinational business

Although management researchers draw specific distinctions between these three labels, frequently seeing them as representing different degrees of globalisation (Adler, 1991), I will use the term *transnational* as the organisation I am studying uses it, to mean 'a fully integrated multinational business'. In the rest of the study I use *international* and *multinational* rather interchangeably to refer to businesses which operate across many borders and employ people of many nationalities. I use the term *multicultural* – as in *multicultural workplaces* – to refer to the diverse cultural backgrounds employees in international businesses bring to work.

Culture and cultural context

At the outset of my study I adopt Geertz's definition of culture which assumes a close reciprocal relationship between culture and communication. According to Geertz (1973:89) culture is

an historically transmitted pattern of meanings, embodied in symbols; a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life

In the course of my literature review I explore different views of culture in relation to studying communicative action in intercultural contexts and arrive at a more specific conceptualisation of culture as a complex web of dynamic meanings, seen from a non-essentialist perspective (Dutta, 2007). I use the terms *culture* and *cultural context* as interchangeable and present arguments for that in the literature review (following primarily Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004), where culture and how it has been conceptualised in intercultural business is discussed in detail.

Intercultural communication

I use the term *intercultural communication* to refer to communication between people from different cultural backgrounds and to communication in international, multicultural business settings (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004).

Message, audience and meaning

I will use *message* in the technical communication sense to refer to a text articulated by a 'sender' using a code (in this case a linguistic code) transmitted to a 'receiver' with the purpose of affecting some kind of change on that 'receiver' by means of the 'receiver's' reception and understanding of that message (Fiske, 1991; Hall, 1993). I will use the terms *audience* and *public* interchangeably to refer to message receivers, in my case employees in multinational organisations (Grunig, 1992; Argenti, 1996; Nightingale and Ross, 2003). Finally, when I talk of meanings assigned to messages by users, I refer to the process and outcomes of message interpretation (Fiske, 1991).

Although, on the face of it this terminology appears to be incompatible with a general interpretive approach to language and meaning, I do not believe that it is problematic. By using terms such as *message* and *audience* for my study I simply adopt well versed ways (both in academic and practitioner literature) of describing what I study. I do not ascribe to a view of communication as a linear process, as earlier sender-receiver models may suggest (Bowman and Targowski 1987), neither do I take the view that audiences are passive recipients of message content. Rather, I follow those scholars within mass media and audience research (Jensen 1991b, Mick and Buhl 1992) who, while using this terminology to describe the texts and text users they study, also clearly adopt an interpretative approach to the study of meanings these users generate.

Discourse and business discourse

As the term *discourse* spans a number of diverse literatures, its use has been very inconsistent (Pullen et al 2007; Heracleous, 2008). Within management and communication literatures its use has been as Tietze et al (2003) suggest, if anything 'eclectic' (also see Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Fairclough, 2003). I adopt a general approach to *discourse* as 'language-use-as-social-practice' (Holliday et el, 2004) and to *business discourse* as 'language-use-as-social-practice' in business contexts (Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007). Within this context I use *discourse* both to describe how employees and managers use talk to construct their reality, and, in a more specific way, to describe specific discursive patterns present in the interviews and texts I am analysing which may be seen to act as framing devices (Tietze et al, 2003). The latter use of the term is close to Watson's definition of discourse as

A connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitute a way of talking about a particular issue, thus framing the way people understand and respond to that issue

Watson (1995: 814)

Discourse and its relationship to meaning, culture and identity is discussed in more detail in the literature review. Other terms are defined as part of the literature review.

1.8 Chapter summary and looking ahead

In this introductory chapter I have highlighted a present incongruity between practice and research based theory which I believe compels an investigation into a particular management communication practice, the use of universal values messages for the purpose of creating 'homogenisation' and 'shared meaning' among employees in multinational organisations. I briefly discussed what we know about how values statements are currently deployed in the single and multinational business context, how this practice could be contested by the use of extant research, and where the knowledge gaps are. I then articulated a research question which focuses on exploring in a real business context how values messages create meaning, what meanings they create and how these meanings are influenced by culture. I then briefly discussed the type of organisation in which I propose to conduct my study, and highlighted how I expect the study to contribute to academic knowledge and to practice. Having positioned my 'conversation' among the intercultural business discourse research community and in the company of qualitative, audience researchers, I concluded with a definition of terms.

In the next chapter I review the key literature around culture, meaning and message interpretation with focus on the business context, in order to create clear parameters for my research and to explain certain choices I made in the way I approached my subject. I follow this by discussing my selection of research strategy and methodology and the philosophical positioning that underpins these, and show how these informed and shaped the research

design. Chapter four introduces the research context and research subjects and sets the scene for the presentation and discussion of findings. Chapter five presents the research findings in some detail. Chapter six discusses these findings in relation to the research question and in the context of other research and theory, and draws conclusions about the meanings values messages generate in multinational contexts and the influence of culture on these meanings. I conclude with a summary of my contribution to the field and a discussion of limitations and suggestions for potential further research.

CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Chapter purpose and structure

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature relating to the two concepts which are pivotal to my research question, namely *meaning* (in other words the process and outcomes of message interpretation) and *culture*, with particular reference to the multicultural business context, and to investigate how their relationship can be conceptualised and studied in order to address the research question. I begin by discussing theories of meaning and the meaning of texts, and explore theoretical concepts relating to message reception and interpretation. I then review the literature around communication and culture and show how under the influence of popular cross-cultural management research, much extant intercultural business communication research has adopted a rather narrow perspective in the study of culture and communication. I argue that while this approach to culture initially challenged successfully prevailing concepts of universality, it is now proving a limitation for researchers who seek to unravel and understand the complexity of communication practice in multinational organisations. I contrast this approach with an alternative perspective, which gives more prominence to the organisational context as the locus of the intercultural communication inquiry.

Finally, related to the latter, I discuss a more recent emergence of a discourse-centred approach to culture which locates cultural context in the discourse itself and highlights the role of a non essentialist concept of cultural identity in understanding the relationship between culture and communication. I then review the few studies which deal with message interpretation in

relation to culture in an intercultural business setting and explore the implications for my research. I close the chapter by revisiting the research question in the light of the conclusions drawn from the literature review.

2.2 Meaning and message interpretation

2.2.1 Meaning and meaning making: a social semiotic perspective

The terms *meaning* and *meaning making* are central to interpretative organisational research, in particular works driven by constructionist epistemologies and ethnographic methodologies (e.g. Watson, 1995; Mills, 2002; Parry 2003). Here meaning and meaning making is used to describe how organisational members construct their organisational reality and/or researchers, who engage with organisational members, interpret these constructions. As I will show in my methodology chapter, philosophically and methodologically my research fits within the same broad interpretative tradition. Consequently, I too will be using terms like *meaning*, *meaning making* and *sense-making* (Weick, 1995) as part of my core vocabulary to describe, for example, what my respondents were doing in their interview narratives and the conclusions I am drawing as I delve into these narratives, myself.

However, I want to distinguish between this broader use of *meaning* as 'making sense of experience', and a more focused concept of *meaning*

relating to the process of communication and, in particular, the decoding³ or interpreting of messages by message users (Fiske, 1991; Hall, 1993; Mick et al, 2004). In this section I will attempt to pinpoint *meaning* in this sense, first by drawing from key theory (particularly semiotics and discourse theories) and then by discussing how these theoretical concepts have been used by empirical research to explore message interpretation, namely the meanings audiences assign to message texts in various contexts. I will then draw conclusions about how I can use the concept going forward.

2.2.2 Theoretical foundations of the concept of meaning

As a linguistic concept, *meaning* has its roots in the theory of signs and signification called Semiology or Semiotics, which was separately established by Ferdinand de Saussure in Europe and Edward Peirce in North America in the 20th century (Fiske, 1991). Although these two semiotic traditions have their differences, they both address the question of how we use signs to create meaning and have both been influential in communication research (Jensen, 1991a; Mick et al, 2004). Because of its focus on language, my discussion of the principles of linguistic meaning draws primarily on the Saussurian tradition and the theories of meaning-in-context that have built upon it, which are generally described as a social semiotic approach to meaning (Tietze et al, 2003; Higgins, 2007). In a paper concerning the importance of the 'linguistic turn' in organisational research and the centrality

³ As I explained in the previous chapter the use of the term 'decoding', like the terms 'message' and 'audience' is in line with interpretive audience research traditions and does not imply a linear, mechanistic view of communication

of language and meaning in understanding organisational action, Cohen, Musson and Tietze (2005) argue that a semiotic approach to meaning in organizations is able to provide the researcher and practitioner of business communication with unique insights, which are not afforded by any other current approaches:

Semiology [as an approach to meaning] provides a focus for enquiry and a theorization of meaning-making processes that more conventional approaches to business communication treat as peripheral at best, and often ignore altogether

Cohen et al. (2005: 283)

2.2.2.1 The meaning of a sign

Saussure (1974), discussed in Fiske (1991), postulated that a linguistic sign is composed of a *signifier* (the physical existence of a sign, for example the written form of a word in English) and a *signified* (a mental concept related to that form). The relationship between signified and signifier is stable but arbitrary, i.e. it relies on a community or group deciding to use the sign in a particular way to signify a particular aspect of their reality. This implies that meaning is only possible because, we in our human communities come to an agreement about what symbols or signs actually mean when we use them (Fiske, 1991). In other words meaning, and linguistic meaning in particular, is both arbitrary and cultural. This point and its implication for my research question is explored further in this section.

2.2.2.2 Denotations, connotations, myths and frames

Building on Saussure's theories, Barthes (1968 and 1973) developed what is perhaps the most frequently applied theory in the analysis of message meaning in a social context (Mick et al 2004). Developing Saussure's concept of *signification*, namely the process by which a sign relates to external reality, Barthes utilises the idea of two orders of signification: *denotation* and *connotation*. According to Barthes *denotation*, describes the relationship between a sign's signifier and signified and the relationship between the sign and its referent in external reality. Barthes assumes that the denotative meaning of a sign is relatively stable. On the contrary, at the second level of signification, meaning is what happens when the sign interacts with the sign user and their context. This is *connotative meaning* and it is unstable, varied and socially determined (Barthes, 1973; Fiske, 1991).

Connotative meaning can relate to the individual's experience and/or to what Barthes calls cultural *myths*. For Barthes a *myth* is a chain of related concepts, a sort of template or frame through which a culture can conceptualise and understand an aspect of the world. According to Tietze et al (2003), Barthes saw myths as collective stories or "social products, reflecting dominant and subordinate social interests" and was concerned with the ways signs "both reflect and reproduce these cultural myths" (Tietze et al, 2003:26). Although Barthes' ideas and theories strongly influenced cultural and discourse studies, and some areas of marketing and advertising research which adopt semiotic perspectives (see for example Mick et al 2004), the

concept of *myth* does not seem to have been adopted widely to describe these common cultural perspectives on the world.

Alternative concepts have been proposed, instead, which capture more or less the same territory, for example, theories of cultural *frames* (Jensen, 1991b; Tietze et al, 2003), *scripts* (Schank and Abelson, 1977; Wierzbicka 2006), or *schemas* (Deetz and Mumby, 1985; Beamer, 1995). In broad terms these describe culturally embedded concepts or discourses which individuals draw upon when they assign meaning to given messages (Brown and Yule, 1983; Wierzbicka, 2003). According to Brown and Yule

These different terms are best considered as alternative metaphors for the description of how knowledge of the world is organised in human memory, and also how it is activated in the process of discourse understanding

Brown and Yule, (1983: 238)

Tietze et al (2003), for instance, discuss the idea of ‘cultural frames’ as a metaphor which illuminates the relationship between message meaning and cultural context.

We find this a salient metaphor for understanding the diverse packages of knowledge that we bring to our reading of a particular communicative event or text. When we encounter a new situation we use our existing frames to make sense of it. In this way the new situation is not experienced as a barrage of totally unfamiliar stimuli, but is understood

in terms of things we already know. Thus frames provide us with structures for making sense

Tietze et al, (2003:73)

As I show when I discuss my data, this concept of *cultural frames*⁴ provides a very useful device for understanding meaning generated by message reading and the relationship between meaning and cultural context.

2.2.3 The meaning of texts

So far in discussing meaning I have referred to the meaning of signs, where signs are the units that make up messages – although a single sign can of course comprise a message in itself, as is often the case with logos or images (Barthes, 1973; Mick et al, 2004). I now turn my focus to more complex messages such as the ones I am concerned with in this study- namely message texts.

At the most basic level, texts can be described as syntagms of signs, some combining linguistic elements only, some combining signs from more than one code – for example linguistic and visual elements as in print advertisements, or language, pictures and music as in television advertisements (Nightingale and Ross, 2003; Aitken et al, 2008). Some theorists argue that there is a first level meaning to such texts which is close to Barthes' denotational meaning

⁴ Related to this is the notion of 'framing' reality through communication (Bean and Hamilton, 2006) and texts or discourses as 'framing devices' (Fairhurst, 1993) which I briefly discussed in the previous chapter and use later in this chapter and in my data presentation and discussion. This notion of 'framing' relates to the articulation or coding of texts as opposed to their interpretation, although the two concepts are of course related – the process of 'framing' ultimately aims to create shared cultural frames (Tuchman, 1991).

and relies primarily on the denotational meaning of the signs that make up the text (Levinson, 1983). According to Grice (1957), discussed in Levinson (1983), this is *natural* meaning. It is closer to the propositional content of a text (Lyons, 1977) and can stand alone without a relationship to any user. However, given my question is about language in use and the meanings generated by users in the complex context in which they work, I am not proposing to explore this concept of 'abstract', user-free meaning further.

Rather, I will concentrate on meaning of texts-in-use, what Grice calls *meaning-nn* or *user meaning*. This Grice defines as follows:

S meant-nn z by uttering U if and only if:

(i) S intended U to cause some effect z in recipient H

(ii) S intended (i) to be achieved simply by H recognising that intention

Grice (1957) quoted in Levinson (1983:16)

Significantly, the focus here is on the communicative intent behind the text-as-message; at the reception point the understanding of that intent is an important aspect of the meaning of that message. This concept is developed further within speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969), which is concerned with the performative aspects of spoken language, i.e. how linguistic utterances can be used to perform an act such as congratulating, admonishing or making a request (Wierzbicka, 2003). Elements of speech act theory are frequently used as part of analytical frameworks employed to study meaning making in the course of intercultural interactions (e.g. Spencer-

Oatey, 2000), and, occasionally, in the cross-cultural analysis and understanding of written texts (e.g. Beamer, 2003). However, where participant interaction is not present to contribute to meaning construction, as is the case with written texts, semiotic and discourse concepts arguably provide a more appropriate framework for studying text meaning (Fairclough, 2003; Mick et al, 2004).

Fairclough (2003), for example, advances a discourse theory of 'texts as elements of social events' (p. 8) whose social effects are 'mediated by meaning making' (p. 11), and argues that with the meaning of written texts we enter a much more complex territory:

It is very difficult to be precise about the processes involved in meaning-making for the obvious reasons that they are going on in people's heads, and there are no direct ways of assessing them. When we move from spoken dialogue to, for instance published texts the problems are compounded because we no longer have the ongoing negotiation of meaning within dialogue, which at least gives us some evidence of how things are being intended or interpreted. And a published text can figure in many different processes of meaning-making and contribute to diverse meanings, because it is open to diverse interpretations

Fairclough (2003:11)

Fairclough argues that for the purposes of textual analysis there are three types of meaning potentiated by a given text: *actional* meaning, which relates to how the text is used as social action, *representational* meaning, which relates to how the text represents/frames the world, and *identificatory* meaning which relates to how the text is used to construct identities. All these meanings are potentiated by any text/message, so the decoding of a text by a reader will produce a combination of *actional, representational and identificatory* meanings. Arguably, with written texts (as discussed above) the actional meaning will primarily relate to the action performed by the reader when articulating an actualised meaning, rather than to the sender-receiver interaction (Fairclough, 2003). In my data presentation and discussion all these types of meaning are discussed.

2.2.4 The meaning of messages: an audience reception perspective

Social semiotic and discourse theories have informed qualitative approaches to message interpretation which are variably described as cultural, reception or audience studies (Nightingale and Ross, 2003; Philo 2008). Although the interpretation of texts as messages has been approached from other perspectives – for example from a pure hermeneutic perspective a message text is considered as the depository of specific meanings or truths to be discovered through textual analysis by the researcher (Jensen, 1991a) – the cultural studies/audience approach to reception addresses the relationship between the text and its audience and assumes meanings are contingent upon the users of texts and their contexts (Fouquier, 1988; Fiske, 1991;

Aitken et al, 2008). To quote Fisk (1991:7), “meaning is what occurs when the reader interacts/negotiates with the text of the message”.

In other words, in this theoretical tradition the meaning of a message is seen both as a dynamic process and as an outcome of that process and is assumed to be variable and fluid, not fixed. This position characterises qualitative approaches to message reception and distinguishes these from other theoretical perspectives which approach message reception from a cognitive or effects point of view (e.g. Balasubramanian et al, 2006; Orth et al, 2007). The latter either ignore audience meaning altogether or assume that meaning is largely contained in the message text and can be expressed by the researcher in terms of ‘semantic differential’ scales, which can be used to measure the variability of user responses. Although very prominent in mass media research, these ‘meaning measurement’ approaches have been widely criticised because they do not really afford much insight into the complexity of audience meaning (Aitken et al, 2008).

Qualitative reception studies on the other hand, according to Jensen (1991b)

[illustrate] the prevalence of readings that differ from the relatively few readings anticipated by media professionals or textual scholars, point to the polysemy of discourses and to the existence of quite different interpretative strategies that are applied to the same discourse by different audiences

Jensen (1991b:138)

Larsen (1991) makes the same point when discussing the qualitative analysis of media texts from a reception studies perspective. He points out that media texts aimed at different publics cannot be seen as closed objects containing only predetermined meanings, which wait to be discovered by their readers. He suggests that the text should be viewed “as an indeterminate field of meaning, where intentions and effects intersect” (Larsen, 1991:122) and where a number of different meanings are possible. He distinguishes, for example, between *manifest* and *latent or deep* meanings. *Manifest* or *surface* meanings are seen as directly relating to the actual lexis of the message text (but whether these can be actualised without reference to cultural frames is not always made clear). *Latent* or *deep* meanings are connative meanings – personal to the reader or related to cultural myths or frames shared by cultural groups the reader is a member of (Larsen, 1991; Tietze et al, 2003). Any reader, including employees in organisations interpreting values texts, would be expected to derive both manifest and latent meanings from a message reading (Fouquier, 1988; Larsen, 1991).

2.2.4.1 Agency and structure in message interpretation

The ideas of polysemy and indeterminacy of meaning promoted by qualitative audience research cannot, however, be taken to mean that any interpretation of a given message is possible, only that multiple interpretations are inevitable (Philo, 2008). Although meanings will always be unique to the message user and their context, they will also inevitably be constrained by the text itself –its

content, lexis, rhetorical strategies and general framing (Fairclough, 2003). In other words, whereas it is the structure of the text which can be said to potentiate a number of preferred meanings, it is the interaction between this structure and the agency of the audience which will determine the meanings actualised at the point of reading a message (Hall, 1993; Mick et al, 2004; Philo, 2008).

2.2.4.2 Acceptance, rejection and negotiation of potentiated meanings

Finally, an important development in this area and one which has dominated much qualitative audience research in the last 30 years is Stuart Hall's coding/decoding framework of reception (Hall, 1993) which was based on ethnographic studies of television viewing in the UK. Hall introduced the concept of the 'dominant code' in media messages which potentiates preferred readings and showed that audiences when decoding mass media messages largely constructed three different types of meaning or responses, by accepting, rejecting or negotiating the preferred meanings encoded in the message. Although not without its critics (Dworkin et al, 1999; Philo, 2008), largely because of limitations in the way it conceptualises the relationship between cultural context, dominant codes and audience responses, a point I will return to in the next section, this theoretical model provides a useful initial framework for differentiating between different types of meaning generated by message users (Aitken et al, 2008).

2.2.4.3 Message interpretation and cultural frames

As well as demonstrating the multiplicity of audience meaning, qualitative reception studies have shown that these meanings are shaped by the interaction between the frames present in message texts (Hall's 'dominant code') and frames present in the audience's socio-cultural context (Jensen, 1991b; Dworkin et al, 1999). While earlier studies here take a rather narrow view of cultural context, often locating it in traditional notions of a class struggle between dominant elites and subordinate audiences defined primarily in terms of their class status (e.g. Morley, 1980) more recent studies have tried to address these limitations by taking a broader view of cultural context (Jensen, 1991b; Dworkin et al, 1999; Philo, 2008).

Jensen (1991b), for example, in a study of Danish viewers' decoding and evaluation of Danish television news, interviewed viewers in their homes immediately after watching a news broadcast and asked them to recount the subject matter of the news they had just watched. His results, derived from what Jensen calls a 'linguistic discourse analysis' show that news consumers produced a range of different interpretations for each news story and that these interpretations were anchored on partly shared 'super themes', thematic categories such as 'class', 'war' and 'environment', which reflected the audience's worldview. Jensen suggests that these themes were used by message users "as interpretive procedures which are employed by the audience for the reconstruction of meaning in the news genre" (p.144). In other words, these 'super themes' can be seen as frames deriving from and

reflecting the socio-cultural context within which the news items were interpreted. Significantly, these are not imposed by the researcher, but were derived from the narratives of the interviewees themselves (Jensen, 1991b). See also van Dijk (1991) who uses *schemas* instead of *frames*, to describe a very similar interpretation process.

In reviewing a number of news analysis and reception studies, Tuchman (1991) uses the term 'frames' to talk about the influence of the socio-cultural context on interpretation and highlights the fact that both news producers and news consumers rely on such frames – the former when coding the news and the latter when decoding. In some respects, Tuchman argues, frames can be seen both as perspectives on reality supported by specific discourses, and as meanings embedded in the news texts, which produce potentiated or 'preferred' readings. This does not mean that a frame cannot change and develop or indeed cannot be rejected in preference to an alternative frame, because it antagonises a more salient frame (Graber 1984, quoted in Tuchman, 1991). However "even the rejection of a preferred reading is a response to the frame promulgated by the media [text]" (Tuchman, 1991:90).

2.2.5 Summary of meaning section

So far I have discussed the theoretical principles of linguistic meaning, as it applies to signs and texts, drawing from social semiotics and discourse theories. I then discussed meaning in message interpretation in particular, and outlined some key concepts, drawn from qualitative audience research, which

help shape a discourse approach to the generation of meaning from message texts. More specifically, as well as establishing the notion of multiple, latent and manifest meanings, which are specific to audiences and their contexts, reception studies utilise the social semiotic concept of cultural 'frame' (although in varied terminology) as an important aspect of the interpretation process, and as a link between the context and text in meaning making (see also Roberts 1999 discussed later). They also suggest that cues to such frames are to be found in actual discourses or texts – the message text in the case of potentiated meanings and the discourses of the audiences themselves in the case of actualised user meanings. Finally, they point to the fact that frames invoked in messages – which may potentiate certain meanings – even if recognised are not necessarily accepted, but may be rejected or negotiated (Hall, 1993). Note, finally, that theories of meaning point at the same time to the possibility of multiple personal meanings *and* shared meanings which derive from shared group experiences– personal connotations, as well as group connotations drawn from cultural myths or 'frames' (Barthes, 1973). I now turn to discussing theories and research concerning culture and communication with particular focus on the business context.

2.3 Culture and Communication

2.3.1 Culture as a system of meaning

In this section I explore how the concept of culture as communication context has been approached in intercultural communication research in business settings, with particular focus on the deployment of written texts. Through the discussion of the literature I also trace the development and change of my own thinking about culture in communication research and the way I have finally come to conceptualise culture in relation to my research question.

As explained in the previous chapter, together with many other researchers in the field, I assume, at the outset, a definition of culture as a system of shared meaning which is created and sustained by members of cultural groups (Geertz, 1973; Hall, 1976; Tietze et al, 2003). Geertz (1973) for example defines culture as

an historically transmitted pattern of meanings, embodied in symbols; a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life

Geertz (1973:89)

Culture in this view is seen both as an influencer and as a product of communicative action (Boden, 1994). The latter, as discourse, becomes both the main means of culture making and the central lens through which we can

study culture (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004; Dutta, 2007). As a result, to adopt such an approach to culture is essentially to accept that the process of interpretation (what is meaning) and the process of contextualisation (what is culture) are not clearly distinct territories, but constantly interact, influencing each other and becoming each other. In other words, to paraphrase Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997:44), a 'systems of meaning' view of culture sets up the expectation that meaning and culture would naturally mesh to an extent in the research process.

Despite the important focus on language this perspective affords (Bargiela-Chiappini 2004), it is not the only perspective on the relationship between culture and communication deployed in intercultural business communication research. Below I review the main research paradigms in this area, discuss a range of research conducted from each perspective, and explore what conclusions we can draw from these studies about the relationship between culture and meaning generation.

2.3.2 From universalism to relativism

Intercultural business communication research has grown in response to business globalization, as business communication scholars eventually recognised that empirical research conducted primarily in North American settings would not necessarily produce theories that could explain communication behaviours, predict communication needs and provide appropriate guidance for good communication practice in international

business settings (Lovitt and Goswami, 1999; Varner, 2000; Pan et al, 2002; Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2003). To quote Lovitt:

Understanding professional communication in a global economy represents a formidable challenge, insofar as it implies nothing less as a wholesale re-conceptualization of our discipline. Once we recognize that conceptions of professional communication reflect practices in specific cultural contexts, we can no longer complacently promote insights derived from a single culture as universal, as we have tended to do with U.S.-based models of professional communication

Lovitt, (1999:1)

As the call *against* universalism and *for* cultural relativism in business communication gained momentum (Beamer and Varner, 2001; Pan et al, 2002), to a large extent influenced by what was happening in international business and management research (Schneider and Barsoux, 2003), intercultural business communication researchers set out to explore professional communication practice in different cultural settings. This resulted in, mainly, two types of study: comparative studies where the same type of communication phenomenon or genre was compared across different national settings (Lin,1993; Graves, 1997; Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997; Park et al, 2005) and in-depth studies of one or more communication practices in non-Anglo-Saxon business environments (Louhiala-Salminen, 1997; Beamer, 2003).

Within each of these bodies of work there have been largely two approaches to cultural context. The first, highly influenced by popular cross-cultural management research (Hofstede, 1991; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997; Swartz, 1999) adopted a rather narrow concept of culture, where culture equates effectively with national culture, and national culture is assumed to be both stable and clearly defined in terms of a set of underlying values and characteristics, which can be said to drive communication behaviour in set, predictable patterns. The second, adopted by many business discourse researchers, has largely assumed a rather broader perspective. Cultural context for these researchers can cover a range of cultural influences, including national, organisational and professional (Lovitt and Goswami, 1999; Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 2003). Below I discuss these two approaches and what they tell us about the influence of culture on communication in business.

2.3.3 National culture as a deterministic framework

Researchers who assume that national culture is of primary importance in intercultural business communication are influenced by research which relates national cultural values dimensions to specific communication characteristics (e.g. Gudykunst et al, 1996), most frequently positing a relationship between cultural individualism/collectivism (Hofstede, 1980), high/low context orientation (Hall, 1976) and communicative directness/indirectness.

Geert Hofstede (1980, 1991) and his followers postulated that in individualist cultures (such as that of the US, the UK and many Western cultures) people tend to prefer direct patterns of communication and rejected indirect/inexplicit patterns as less effective. Collectivist cultures, on the other hand, (many Asian cultures for example) privileged indirect/oblique communication patterns and a preference for face to face interaction which enabled the 'correct reading' of such indirect messages through non linguistic communicative clues. Edward Hall's work (Hall 1959 and 1976) which looked at cultures through an anthropological/linguistic lens also demonstrated that different national cultures showed preference for different communicative patterns. Hall identified 'high context' cultures, where communicators rely largely on the shared context of the communication, rather than the explicit message content to communicate effectively, whereas in 'low context' cultures it is the explicit content of the message that is mainly relied upon (Ting-Toomey, 1994; Kim et al, 1996; Gudykunst et al, 1996; Beamer, 2003).

Over the last two decades these two theoretical frameworks exerted a considerable influence on business communication researchers who seemed to adopt them and use them almost uncritically (Lovitt, 1999; Hunsiger, 2006; Cardon, 2008), to produce comparative studies which either aimed to hypothesise and predict, or to describe and explain professional communication differences on the basis of individualism/collectivism and/or high/low context orientation. Many of these studies relied on comparing national cultures with assumed large differences on existing value dimension

scales, primarily the US, with a number of Asian countries. Below I discuss a few such examples.

In a comparative study of Thai and North American manager communication styles, Sriussadaporn-Charoenngam and Japlin (1999) found that the former tended to communicate in 'reserved, respectful, deferential and intimate ways' as opposed to their North American counterparts who were much more direct. In a similar study Gundling (1999) reported that Thai professionals were more favourable toward personal forms of communication and tended not to prefer technological substitutions such as video-conferencing, which, in turn led to message misinterpretation. Park, Dillon and Mitchell (1998) compared letters constructed by Korean and North American managers. Koreans were found to use a less direct organisational pattern and tended to delay placement of the main point. The US group, in contrast, employed a direct organisational style and stated the main point of the letter very early on.

2.3.4 Evidence contesting cultural determinism

Studies such as these reinforced the notion that national cultural differences exerted a stable influence on communication practices in international settings and that communicators and managers had to document, understand and find ways to overcome or at least work with, these differences (Beamer, 2000; Varner, 2000). However, for every study that claims to find a clear link between national cultural dimensions and communication characteristics, there are many more which fail to do so (e.g. Cardon, 2008). For example, in a very similar study to Park et al (1998) discussed above, Thomas (1998)

hypothesised, but failed to find any differences in terms of high/low context communication patterns, corresponding to presupposed cultural differences between Korean and US culture. Instead, she found many similarities between the two letter corpora she studied. Similarly Beamer's analysis of Chinese business letters from the 19th century contradicted her initial expectations that cultural collectivism would lead to indirect patterns of communication. Instead she primarily found instances of rhetorical directness (Beamer, 2003).

Similarly, Park, Lee and Song (2005) in a comparative study of apologies in electronic advertising, found that although Korean ads included many more apologies than US ads, Koreans themselves were neither more likely to use apologies in their email messages, nor perceived ads with apologies more positively than Americans. In that particular study, student groups were used as respondents, but only their ethnicity was taken into account when cultural influences were considered. The students were assumed to be a homogenous group, influenced by their Korean or American ethnicity alone. The commonalities that may have been related to their student identity, for example, were not considered.

In another classroom based experiment which tested responses by a number of different European national groups, Hoeken et al (2003) showed that advertising appeals designed to 'fit' different levels of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980) in different national settings, were met with similar levels of

approval, irrespective of cultural background. Similarly, Hendricks et al (2005) tested the hypothesis that cultural differences would lead readers from the UK and The Netherlands to prefer different versions of the same business newsletter. A more elaborate and a more succinct version were tested. They found however that, although differences in style were recognised by readers, the different newsletter styles had no discernible effect on the way readers from either national group received the newsletters. Interestingly, these findings did not lead the authors to question the premise of their research -that we can predict communication preferences and effects on the basis of what we know about national cultural differences. Rather they concluded that perhaps the style differentiation in the two newsletter samples was not extreme enough to reflect differences accurately, or that the differences between the two cultures studied were not extreme enough. The same pattern of reliance on national culture as the main explanatory lens can also be found in much cross-cultural advertising research. These studies also produce similarly confusing results, in that some of their findings seem to confirm a relationship between cultural values and communication characteristics (Biswas et al, 1992; Lin, 1993), while others do not (Cho et al, 1999; So, 2004).

To summarise, research in cross and intercultural business communication which relies on the theory that national cultural characteristics such as individualism and low context orientation directly affect communication choices in business communication in international settings has produced

pretty confusing results to-date. On the one hand, this work certainly shows us that differences in practice between national business settings and among employees with different cultural backgrounds do exist (although of course similarities do too – see Goby, 1999; Van Nimwegen et al, 2004). On the other hand, they fail to show that these differences are always directly related to the national background of the businesses or the individuals studied. Rather, what they seem to demonstrate in most cases, is that the relationship between communication in business and the cultural context within which this communication is produced is a very complex one, and one that cannot be reduced to a small number of stable, underlying cultural dimensions alone (Bargiela-Chappini et al, 2003; Hunsinger, 2006; Cardon, 2008).

2.3.5 A broader perspective on culture

As a result, this narrow, deterministic approach to culture which privileges national culture over other cultural influences has, over the last decade, attracted some criticism. To quote Lovitt

My concern is that as a heuristic imported from the fields of anthropology and intercultural communication – neither of which are specifically concerned with the production and management of discourse in professional settings – cultural analysis may be both too blunt an instrument to guide communicators' context-sensitive decisions and too focused on audience analysis to address the complexities of communicating in global workplaces

Lovitt (1999:3)

Below I discuss work which has taken an alternative approach to culture, one which largely accepts the limitations of national cultural analysis and takes the complexities of communicating in global workplaces onboard, rather than attempting to reduce them down to simplistic equivalences. Many of these studies are European in origin and belong in the business discourse tradition. Studies in this group also tend to compare the same practice or genre across two or more national boundaries, but it is data, not pre-existing theory that drives findings here (Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 2003).

Results here tend to show that both differences and similarities are to be found in examples of communicative practice in multicultural businesses and that these differences and similarities may be explained by reference to the broader organisational and socio-cultural context, but certainly not national culture alone (particularly where national culture is seen as a narrow framework of predetermined value dimensions). I discuss a few such examples below.

2.3.5.1 A complex picture of differences and similarities

In an early study contrasting American and French business letters, Varner (1988) showed that French letters tended to be less direct in some respects – employed longer, more complicated sentences, covered more abstract concepts without attempting to illustrate those with concrete examples- while in other respects they were more direct. For example, where the American

letters tended to avoid expressing negative sentiments at the end of the letter, even when a concern or complaint was raised, French business writers seemed to be much more open and direct about this point. Varner does not pursue this point, but it is worth noting that this finding would not be supported by theories relating directness with individualism scores (Hofstede, 1991).

A similarly complex picture of similarities and differences in practice is presented by other researchers. For example, working within the same genre, Yli-Yokipii (1998) has shown clear differences in the way requests are expressed in business letters by UK and Finish managers. She finds, for example, that in British business writing, power and distance between the communication interactants is reflected in the writer's linguistic and rhetorical choices (for example how the writer signals familiarity), whereas Finnish writers select not to highlight the power differential in the relationship between message 'sender' and message 'receiver'. On the other hand, both British and Finish writers demonstrate a tendency to employ indirect (evasive) request strategies, a point which cannot be explained by reference to their nationality.

2.3.5.2 The importance of organisational culture and other communities

One of the important insights in work which goes beyond the narrow conceptualisation of culture as national-cultural-values, is the importance of the organisational context as a locus of culture, and the place where many cultures intersect (Nickerson, 1999; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004), coupled with

the understanding that that context both shapes and is shaped by the communicative action which takes place there (Boden, 1994).

In their study of business meetings in a British and an Italian telecoms organisation Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997) showed that these were significantly different in the two settings, in terms for example, of how they were structured and played out, the roles played by participants, such as the role of the chair, and how language was used to interact, achieve objectives and shape identities. The authors suggested that whereas some of these differences could be linked to what we know of broad cultural differences between the two nations, others could not be explained by such frameworks, but in fact they seemed to contradict them. They mention, for example, the strong presence of directness/openness in the verbal behaviour of Italian managers which theoretically goes against the high power distance which supposedly characterises Italian culture (Hofstede, 1980). They suggest that such findings could be explained in terms of other concurrent cultural influences, such as the more immediate context of the organisation.

A similar point about the influence of the immediate organisational culture on communication practices is shown by other researchers, for example by Nickerson in her study of written communicative practices in the Dutch subsidiary of a British owned organisation (Nickerson, 1998 and 1999) and by Ortiz (2005) who studied written communication in a Mexican/US border company. They both found commonalities in the writing styles of managers

from different ethnic backgrounds, which went against extant ideas of national cultural style differences and which could be related to common organisational influences.

Finally, some studies highlight the importance of other cultural influences which cut across both the organisation and the nation. A well known study in this area is that of Webb and Keene (1999) who studied the flow of information and types of documents shared among aerospace engineers in the US, Japan, India, Russia and the Netherlands and concluded that the similarities in the frames shared by this engineering community produced very similar communication needs and patterns and practically overrode any national cultural differences.

In summary, intercultural business discourse work which assumes a broader perspective on cultural context and adopts a data, rather than a theory driven approach to studying the relationship between communication and culture provides a richer, although arguably more challenging, picture of the complexity of that relationship, showing as it does many aspects of culture, simultaneously influencing communicative patterns and choices (see also Poncini, 2002).

2.3.6 The case for a non essentialist approach to culture

I now turn to a much more recent debate about culture and communication, which provides yet a third perspective on the conceptualisation of culture in

business research. As well as questioning the privileging of national culture over other cultural influences, this more recent work has begun to question the conceptualisation of culture as a stable and clearly identifiable layer of contexts, each of which can be isolated and studied separately from other cultural elements (Holliday et al, 2004; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004; Hunsinger, 2006).

This assumption of stability is clearly present in the first stream of research I discussed earlier – i.e. the research that privileges national culture – whereas the position of researchers who take the second approach is not always clear. Some, as is the case with Webb and Keene, for example, assume a similar stability to other aspects of culture – i.e. they may not privilege national culture, but they assume that different aspects of culture, such as professional background can be isolated and studied separately. In others this positioning is much less explicit (e.g. Yli-Jokipii, 1998; Ortiz, 2005). It is only few who specifically suggest their perspective on culture is non-essentialist (e.g. see Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1997).

Those who adopt this non-essentialist view argue, however, that in a multicultural context, where many cultures interact – Bargiela-Chiappini (2004) offers the very apt concept of *interculturality* to describe this process - it is rather problematic to assume that different aspects of that context can be isolated and studied without reference to the context as a whole, (Holliday et

al, 2004; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004). According to Bargiela-Chappini in such environments

Isolating elements of contexts as primary determinants of meaning is an artificial exercise that could even lead to misrepresentation

Bargiela-Chappini (2004:35)

Yuan (1997) was one of the earlier voices against essentialism in business communication research. Presenting a convincing critique of mechanistic approaches to communication as process, and of culture as a stable context within which this process is studied, he suggested that instead of thinking of culture in terms of constancy, inactivity and homogeneity, we should learn to view it in terms of indeterminacy and flux. Hunsinger (2006) criticising the prevalent approach to culture in intercultural communication research, suggests that “difficulties in studying culture stem from a problematic theoretical framework based largely in cultural heuristics and ethnographic descriptions that place too high a value on locating definitive culture” (Hunsinger, 2006:31). Instead, he goes on to argue, “a more flexible, critical way of looking at culture and the cultural” (Hunsinger, 2006:31) would serve us much better.

In an article reviewing Intercultural Business Communication as a field of study, Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson (2003) having argued that “national culture and a discursive approach to cross- (and undoubtedly inter-) cultural business communication, are uneasy bedfellows” go on to propose that like

other organisational research (Gunnarsson, 2000; Parkin, 2000), IBC research may do better to identify the locus of culture in the organisation, rather than in the nation, where “culture(s) are negotiated, rather than fixed” (Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 2003:6).

Our contention is that the internationalisation of IBC requires a re-appraisal of concepts like ‘self’, ‘identity’ and ‘nation’, ideally through the multidisciplinary lens of related disciplines such as organization and management studies, cultural psychology and linguistic anthropology.

Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson (2003:7)

The general argument developing - one which has been made in other areas of inquiry for sometime now (see for example Hall and du Gay, 1996) - is one for looking at culture, not as a series of stable and separate spheres of influence, but rather as an unstable, ever shifting context, where “culture and context are collapsed into one and only construct” (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004: 37). This non-essentialist approach to culture brings to centre stage the concept of cultural identity, again not as a fixed label that defines individuals and determines their attitudes and behaviours, but as a dynamic social concept of self, constructed in discourse (Hall and Du Gay, 1996; Singer, 1998; Holliday et al, 2004; Dutta, 2007).

2.3.7 Cultural identity as a cultural lens

After Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson (2003) and Bargiela-Chiappini (2004) – although she uses the term ‘social identity’- Daphne Jameson (2007) has

been one of the few to suggest that we need to look to the concept of cultural identity as a much more appropriate way of understanding the influence of culture on individuals and their communication behaviour in the multicultural workplace. Jameson argues against the limitations of national culture as a cultural lens and suggests that *cultural identity* which takes in a range of group memberships could be a much more useful concept for approaching, understanding and studying culture in intercultural communication inquiry. She recommends that the cultural identity concept is used as a lens for self exploration and self-reflection and for comparison with others with whom we interact in multicultural business settings. However, although she does argue for a certain level of flux and dynamism in identities, her approach still suggests some level of stability in the concept. Pal and Buzzannell (2008), on the other hand, in their study of an Indian call centre of a multinational US company showed how cultural identities in the global workspace are constantly negotiated through communication, and demonstrated the non-permanency and complexity of these cultural identities, which derived not only from the Indian culture of respondents, but from the work people did and the organisational and broader social context. Later in this section I review further studies which relate identity construction and communicative action and which provide more support for this unstable, dynamic view of cultural identities.

2.3.7.1 Defining cultural identity

The term 'cultural identity' is used very inconsistently in the literature (Hall and Du Gay, 1996; Pullen et al, 2007) as it is deployed both from an essentialist

and a non essentialist perspective (Du Gay et al, 2000). Within the former some researchers equate the term with national cultural background (e.g. Sussman 2000), yet others draw distinctions between personality, identity, social identity and cultural identity (e.g. Triandis, 1989 quoted in Jameson 2007). I will not use cultural identity to make such distinctions. As I have demonstrated in discussing the literature around national culture and communication, such distinctions have largely failed to provide truly useful insights about the influence of culture on intercultural communication and have in fact frequently produced confusing findings.

Rather I will follow those business discourse⁵ scholars I quoted above (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004; Pal and Buzzanell, 2008) who contest the idea of stable and discrete cultural influences on communication and call instead for a re-conceptualisation of cultural identity in terms of a holistic dynamic construction of the self in communicative action. In other words, I adopt a non-essentialist understanding of cultural identity (e.g. Singer, 1998, Collier, 2000, Holliday et al, 2004) which I consider to be interchangeable with the terms *identity* and *social identity* (McAdams, 1993; Grosberg, 1996; Collier, 2000). What characterises this concept of cultural identity is that it is seen as holistic, dynamic and constructed by the individual through communicative action. It does not exist as a category 'box' to which the individual may or may not belong (Holliday et al 2004). As Grosberg suggests, "from this

⁵ As I have previously explained, I take a view of discourse as 'language-as-social-action' (Holliday et al 2004) which is consistent with these researchers' viewpoint.

perspective, identity is an entirely cultural, if not linguistic construction” (Grosberg, 1996:90).

According to Lawler (2008) the concept of identity “hinges on an apparently paradoxical combination of sameness and difference” (Lawler, 2008:2) involving both a process of identification with others and a process of differentiation from others (Lawler, 2008). Identification is a process by which we see ourselves as members of a number of groups or cultures of which national culture or ethnicity is only one (Guirdham, 1999; Holliday et al, 2004).

According to Holiday et al these groupings

are inherently unstable in that they come and go -as individuals enter and leave them- and they change according to the influence of their members

Holiday et al (2004:163)

In other words, cultural identity could be seen as the sum of the individual’s group memberships, but these memberships are neither clearly defined outside the individual, nor stable, neither are they always complementary. To quote Lawler (2008)

No one has only one identity, in the sense that everyone must consciously identify with more than one group, one identity. This is about more than combining multiple identities in an additive way. [] identities impact on each other. It is not as though one could have a gendered identity and then a raced identity and then somewhere on top

of that a sexual identity and so on. Rather race, gender and the rest interact []. Different forms of identity then should be seen as interactive and mutually constitutive, rather than 'additive'. They should also be seen as dynamic.

Lawler (2008:3)

From a non-essentialist perspective, therefore, cultural identities are perceived as dynamic, rather than fixed. Like signs, they derive meaning from sameness and from difference. They are experienced differently at different times and are, significantly, constructed in discourse, i.e. they do not pre-exist outside our communicative action (Guirdham, 1999; Collier, 2000; Tietze et al, 2003). To quote Hall

Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies.

Hall (2000:4)

2.3.7.2 Identities, meaning and cultural context

So far I have outlined the recent arguments in intercultural business communication research which make the case for an alternative, non-essentialist exploration of culture through the lens of cultural identity. I defined cultural identity as a holistic, dynamic concept of self, constructed and reconstructed in communicative action. I now go on to discuss how identity and meaning making have been related in the literature.

From a discourse perspective, identity constructions are themselves approached as instances of meaning making (Bruner, 1990). In discourse terminology (Fairclough, 2003) constructed identities are seen as *identificatory* meanings which can be constructed simultaneously with representational and actional meanings, i.e. arise as a result of the same communicative action. In empirical research, this point is made, for example, by Roberts (1999) who studied the rhetorical strategies employed by management during a crisis in a Canadian banking organisation. In her discussion she shows that the same communicative actions which were employed to construct meanings relating to the crisis, were also used to construct and manage multiple and conflicting 'selves'. She notes the closeness and interplay between language, competing meanings, and identities constructed in

a middle space between text and context, a space where considerable rhetorical action takes place [and] where responses are negotiated, relationships of power and ideology are acted out.

Roberts (1999:114)

The space Roberts talks about is, as I understand it, the discourse space of meaning making, a space where both identities and representational and actional meanings are constructed and the place that provides the metaphorical 'bridge' between context and text. In other words identities and meanings co-exist and shape one another in this discourse space. At the

same time, as linguistic constructions, these identity meanings simultaneously reflect and shape cultural context.

This relationship between cultural identity construction and context is also highlighted in other organisational identity research⁶. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), for example, in their case study of the identity construction of a senior manager in an R&D multinational they call H, show how H invokes the broader organisational discourses of 'creativity' and 'networking' in the construction of her identity ('culture generator' and 'cell ambassador' respectively). They discuss how the organisational context as reflected in these shared discourses, supports the construction of a series of conflicting workplace identities

A variety of managerial identities are possible, between which there are tensions and contradictions, hence the constant struggle bringing about temporary views of the self, where certain identity versions dominate over the others, depending on the context

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003:1183)

A particularly interesting identity they discuss is one which does not seem to be strictly workplace related – unlike 'janitor' or 'cell manager', for example.

This is a 'farmer'/'simple woman' identity which according to Sveningsson

⁶ Identity in organisations has been studied from a number of perspectives (Pullen et al, 2007) and a range of studies exist which employ discursive (e.g. Alvesson and Karemman 2007) and narrative approaches (e.g. Bird 2007) to the study of organisational identities. Although I draw from selective studies to illustrate some key points about my use of the concept in my research, mine is not primarily a study of identities in organisations but rather a study of message interpretation in context. Consequently, a comprehensive review of this literature is outside the scope of this study.

and Alvesson (2003) H uses to make sense of the 'global discourse' in the organisation. In the discussion of my findings I will also show that workplace-derived and non workplace-derived identities are constructed and drawn upon by employees in the process of values message interpretation.

2.3.7.3 Identity and interculturality

Another interesting perspective on the close relationship between dynamic cultural identities, discourse and cultural context is offered by intercultural pragmatics research which examines linguistic interactions between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds (Mori, 2003; Higgins, 2007). These show that cultural differences between members of different groups and cultural memberships such as nationality, gender, or race, do not always become salient in intercultural discourse. Instead in the course of an interaction many different cultural identities emerge, as discourse participants attempt to find common space and mutual understanding (Mori, 2003).

In a study of interactions between Korean shop-keepers and African American customers in the US, for example, Ryoo (2007) showed that it was the situated identities of *customer* and *shop keeper* or *product expert* that were more prominent and influential in the interactions she observed and recorded rather than ethnicity or race. The latter did however emerge in some circumstances, quite often with positive results, as a means of creating common space, what Higgins calls 'comity'. Higgins (2007) whose own study of how Tanzanian journalists constructed shifting in-group/out-group identities

suggests that such studies demonstrate that *interculturality* (the interaction between cultures) is in fact a “continuously dynamic production of identities in practice” (Higgins, 2007:4) More recently Shanta Nair-Venugopal (2009) makes exactly the same point when he argues that we should understand identities constructed in discourse as ‘trajectories of both personhood and nationhood’ or indeed ‘interculturalities’.

In short, the concept of cultural identity has a reciprocal relationship with the concepts of meaning and cultural context. Discursive identities can be seen as identificatory meanings which both influence and are influenced by other meanings generated in the same discourse. At the same time identities can be conceptualised as *interculturalities*, the locus of cultural intersections, simultaneously influenced by the cultural context in which they are generated, reflecting *and* shaping this context, by means of the linguistic action which constructs them. In the field of Intercultural Business Communication, the concept of *interculturality*, defined as “the process and the conditions of cultures in contact” (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004:29) and viewed as linguistic action and as a concept which “seeks to capture culture in the making” (Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007:40) may yet provide an alternative way of understanding the relationship between meanings and culture in intercultural and cross-cultural communicative action research.

2.3.7.4 Identity and narrative

A particularly important strategy for identity construction is story-telling or narrative, which is utilised in discourse by social actors both to shape meaning and to construct identities (Bruner, 1990; Ricoeur, 1991; Bird, 2007). Authors who focus on narrative identities sometimes argue for a middle space between the stability of 'absolute identity' and the 'continual flux' of constructionism (Ricoeur, 1991), by focusing on identity as a continuously developing internal autobiography which can be revealed through the generation and analysis of subjects' 'life stories' (Bruner, 1990; Mick and Buhl, 1992).

In this study, although I approach narrative/storytelling as an important strategy of identity and meaning construction like many other identity researchers do (e.g. Roberts, 1999; Bird, 2007), I adopt a situated discursive concept of identity (Higgins, 2007; Beech and Sims, 2007) rather than a 'life story' approach (McAdams, 1993). As Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) argue it is the former and not the latter which best helps us to understand how identities are constructed in the workplace via discursive action and how identities, organisational context and organisational discourse shape each other.

2.3.8 Summary of the culture section

As systems of shared meaning cultures are closely linked to the use of language, communicative action and meaning making, but studying the

relationship between the two is by no means straightforward. Here I presented three different approaches to conceptualising culture in intercultural business communication research. The first and, arguably, most influential paradigm to date has privileged nationality and ethnicity as the cultural context that is of primary importance and has, furthermore treated such contexts as stable, isolatable, external to the communicative action under study and reducible to a small number of cultural dimensions, which are supposed to influence communication in specific ways. Despite their popularity, such studies have largely failed to illuminate the relationship between cultural context and communication, producing in most cases confusing and inconclusive results. The second approach to culture, found primarily among European business discourse researchers, adopts a data-driven rather than theory-driven approach to studying the relationship between culture and communicative action and tends to locate culture in the organisational context, where a number of cultural influences intersect.

Recently, the perspective which views culture as a stable, external, context for organisational action, in general, and communication, in particular, has been questioned by some researchers and an alternative, non-essentialist paradigm has emerged which sees culture as a dynamic web of multiple meanings, frequently reflected in the concept of cultural identities constructed in discourse. Although identities are extensively studied in organisational research, the connection between identity and cultural influences on message interpretation has not yet been made in the multinational business context,

although insights about the impact of such interculturality can be drawn from a few studies in other areas of inquiry, such as broader organisational communication research and intercultural pragmatics. Finally, I have highlighted the relationship between narrative and the construction of cultural identity in organisational discourse research, which will play a role in my own approach to my data.

2.4 Message reception and cultural context in business settings

Having discussed theories of meaning and message interpretation and theories of cultural context and communication, I now turn to consider empirical research which attempts to relate the two in business settings. Compared to the study of other communicative action (face to face interactions for example) the range of research relating to reception and culture in business remains sparse (Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007; Philo, 2008). Here I will draw from three distinct bodies of literature which are close to my research in different ways: intercultural business discourse studies, studies which explore how employees respond to leader 'framing' of change and, finally, studies which seek to understand meanings derived from advertising messages and their relationship to dynamic cultural identities.

2.4.1 Reception and culture in intercultural business discourse studies

Although, as I already showed in the previous section, a rich body of empirical intercultural business discourse studies exist which examine the relationship between communication and culture (Lovitt and Goswami, 1999; Bargiela-

Chiappini et al, 2007), very little of this research addresses message reception in particular. Most studies have so far focused either on spoken discourse and therefore have concentrated on meaning produced at the point of face to face interaction (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997; Spencer-Oatey, 2000) or on the analysis and description of the form and content of written texts (Graves, 1997; Yli-Jokiipi, 1998; Ortiz 2005).

In the latter cases the focus is primarily on textual/linguistic analysis and the identification and comparison of specific textual characteristics. Where meaning is discussed, this is in the context of how the researcher interprets these texts in relation to the contexts in which they are used, rather than how their users themselves interpret them. These studies are of course very useful and continue to add to our understanding of how language is used in organisations, but they are limited to one perspective, that of the researcher, or occasionally the initiator of the text – i.e. the ‘message sender’ (e.g. Swales and Rogers, 1995). What is largely absent from this body of knowledge so far is the perspective of the audience, those organisational members for whom the organisational texts are produced and who are supposed to interpret them in similar ways. This perspective is essential, however, if we are to understand how organisational messages produce employee meaning.

Only a handful of studies concern message reception in business settings, including international contexts. These, however, tend to focus on narrower aspects of reception, rather than audience meanings and to adopt mostly a

national culture view of cultural context. For example, when Hendricks et al (2005) tested two versions of the same newsletter with audiences in the UK and the Netherlands they focused on questions about which text readers preferred and did not attempt to understand how audiences actually read and understood the two different message texts. Their research, which hypothesised that values differences in the two cultures would drive a preference in the two audiences for a different type of newsletter - more succinct vs more elaborate - failed to find support for this hypothesis. However, only national cultural differences were assumed to affect reader responses, and the influence of other aspects of culture was not questioned at all.

Similarly, Van Meurs et al (2004) discuss an experiment where they used manipulated advertisement texts to test the impact of using English in Dutch job advertisements. When they tested the mixed texts with readers, they did not focus on what meanings were constructed by the various advertisement texts, however. Rather they were interested to find out how the audience evaluated the different advertisements and if the English words in the text were 'properly' understood, not on how the advertisement texts were actually read. Brownell (1999), discussed briefly in the introductory chapter, conducted a comparative case study where, among other things, she compared how US, British and French employees of international hotel chains interpreted the management message of 'quality service'. Her data showed that the term was interpreted very differently by native and non-native speakers of English. Brownell, however, does not make it clear how exactly she derived the various

meanings employees assigned to the 'quality service' message – were categories such as 'meet organizational service standards' and 'behave in a friendly, courteous manner' employee generated or provided by the researcher herself, for example? Also her comparison distinguishes native and non-native speaker responses, which suggests that she pulls together British and US employee data – this is not made clear- presumably assuming that there are no significant cultural differences between the two English speaking groups!

With all these drawbacks, Brownell's study remains one of the very few to consider the employee perspective in the study of intercultural business communication. Brownell herself argues that much more research needs to be conducted from this perspective and claims that her findings indicate that "the meanings these two groups [native and non-native speakers] assign to messages may be influenced by cultural orientation". Furthermore, that this "has implications for business communication educators who are interested in preparing future leaders to effectively manage a diverse workforce" (Brownell, 1999:175).

Finally, as I have already discussed, van Nimwegen et al (2004) conducted a study in a global banking organisation which communicated universal values messages to all its employee audiences. Their survey based study, sought mainly to identify positive or negative responses to the values statements (rather than understand the specific meanings generated) and to relate these

to the national culture of the audience. Their results showed both differences and large similarities in responses (and hinted at a range of similar and diverse meanings in global employee audiences) which, in most cases, could not be explained in terms of national cultural characteristics.

In summary, there are only a few studies in the business discourse research space which focus on reception of written messages in multinational settings and explore the relationship between the cultural context and message interpretation. Because most of these tend to focus on measuring narrow reception effects, rather than on exploring employee meanings and, furthermore, conceptualise culture largely in terms of a deterministic national culture framework, they provide little insight towards addressing my research question, other than to confirm the need for a different approach to the cultural context and for a more detailed look at the meaning making process. For a deeper understanding of how employees in organisations interpret management messages, we have to turn to a different stream of organisational research, one which deals with leader framing of change and employee reception of such framing (Turnbull; 2001; Bean and Hamilton, 2006). I discuss this below.

2.4.2 Reception of leader framing of change

Although researchers in this space do not necessarily consider themselves as conducting business communication research (and as a result largely lack a more focused interest in message texts and the interpretation process), yet,

their research is of interest, because in studying framing of broader change processes in the organisation, they seek to understand differences between management and employee 'frames' of reality, through a focus on discourse and via an interpretive lens. The outcomes of these studies tend to confirm that employees derive different meanings from management message 'frames' and that these are sometimes accepted, but are as often rejected or met with cynicism. Not all studies agree on this point, however. While the relationship between the cultural context and employee responses is not of primary concern here, there are attempts to understand the variability of responses in terms of different contextual influences, which are worth noting.

In her study of the introduction of a Total Quality Vision in a US manufacturing company, through the analysis of workplace leader/member interactions Fairhurst (1993) identified a number of framing devices in use (including 'communicating predicaments', 'possible futures' and 'agenda setting') and showed how these were sometimes adopted and sometimes rejected by employee members. She explained this by suggesting that the uptake or rejection of such framing devices partly depended on the leader/member relationship – i.e. the degree to which employees trusted their leaders- and partly on larger organisational contextual influences, although she does not show enough evidence for this.

On the other hand, Bean and Hamilton (2006), failed to find a direct relationship between contextual influences and management message

rejection or acceptance. They studied the introduction of flexible working combined with a downsizing exercise in a Norwegian telecoms business, and found that management frames which positioned flexible working and self-management as desirable for knowledge workers were accepted by some employees and rejected by others. However, whether the management message was accepted or rejected was not directly related to the effects of the job reductions in the downsizing programme or any other obvious contextual influences. They concluded instead that the reasons which drove employees to these two different interpretations were largely idiosyncratic.

Fleming (2005) who studied attempts by management in an American owned Australian call centre to introduce a 'culture of fun', found that employee responses were similarly divided into two groups, those who largely accepted these frames and those who responded with cynicism. He relates the latter groups' rejection to perceiving the frames as inauthentic and condescending and shows how these alternative meanings were articulated, maintained and strengthened by discursive practices among the latter group of employees.

Turnbull (2001) found a much broader range of responses among middle managers of an aerospace company, who she interviewed about the introduction of a culture change programme -'Worldclass'- which included a new set of corporate values. Although Turnbull's interest is not in these specific texts (constructed around concepts such as 'performance' and 'customers'), but rather in the reception of the overall 'Worldclass' programme,

her findings are of interest as they show responses which range from complete acceptance of management frames ('evangelism) to a range of critical positions –criticism, cynicism, critical thinking – to neutrality, rather than a simple accept/reject dichotomy. Still, for Turnbull, although there are differences of tone in the meanings generated, the majority of responses suggest resistance to the 'dominant code' or ideology, on the part of managers.

Turnbull also found that aspects of the organisational culture were influential in employee interpretations, in particular the collective memory of earlier culture management initiatives, as reflected in the stories told by managers. Influences of personal background, such as function or profession were less clear, although Turnbull suggests that where people worked (geographically) seemed to be more influential on how they interpreted management frames, than which function they worked for. In some cases, but not in all, some aspects of professional identity – although she does not use the 'identity' term - seemed to be salient to interpretations.

Scroggins (2006) is among the few researchers to describe a case study where employee meanings seem to be highly congruent with the meanings leaders seem to privilege in their communication. In his comparison of senior management and supervisor frames relating to the introduction of a culture change programme in a US hospital, a change which sought to reposition patients as *customers* for example, Scroggins found that supervisors largely

described these changes in the same terms as their senior managers and concluded that managers were successful in their attempts to influence supervisor meaning making through a series of communication interventions and training, as a result of which the change appeared to be successful. Scroggins, seems, however, to assume that this congruence is an outcome of managers simply being effective in communicating their frames, but does not look closer at the elements of these communicative texts, or indeed at the context that may have influenced this positive outcome. He says, for example that in the case of one concept where meanings appeared to be incongruent, 'working as a team', that this message appears "not to have been communicated well" (Scroggins 2006:99), but does not explore what that actually entails.

Finally, in an interpretative study looking at 'shared meaning', namely the adoption of common frames of reference between managers and bank tellers in an American Bank, DiSanza (1993) used interviews to generate narratives from bank tellers about how they interpreted the messages management were transmitting regarding selling bank services. He found that, whilst managers were keen to 'frame' selling as providing an extra service to a willing client base and as being part of the teller's job, bank tellers largely rejected that meaning and offered a number of alternative interpretations. DiSanza suggests that this practically wholesale rejection of management frames seems to be down to the alternative frames in employee experiences of what they felt customers actually wanted from them.

In summary, studies of employee interpretations of leader framing of change offer some interesting insights into how employees receive and interpret organisational messages, although they are not focused enough on the specific text – reader relationship. Although there is no wholesale agreement, many of these studies point to a range of meanings generated and many point to relatively high levels of questioning and rejection of management frames by employees. Although these studies do not deal with the complexity of the multinational organisational space, they do explore the influence of the organisational and socio-cultural context on employee responses, although in an inconsistent way (almost every study showing a slightly different approach). Consequently, insights about the influence of the cultural context on interpretations are less consistent across different studies, but again, there are pointers here to organisational and more individual factors influencing interpretation.

2.4.3 Interpretation of advertising messages and cultural identities

I finally want to review two studies which belong in the marketing and advertising reception literature, because they offer unique insights into the relationship between audience meanings and dynamic cultural identities. These studies have emerged as a reaction to the prevailing research paradigm in this area which mainly uses quantitative methodologies to study message effects rather than user meanings, and tends to adopt a narrow conceptualisation of culture, mostly in terms of nationality (Aitken et al, 2008).

While such studies largely demonstrate variability of effects on audiences of different cultural backgrounds, they do not necessarily demonstrate that these are in line with predetermined cultural characteristics (e.g. Orth et al, 2007). More recently there has been a lot of criticism of the limitations of these studies and many calls for more qualitative, meaning based work in this area, although actual empirical work remains sparse (Dutta-Bergman and Pal, 2005; Philo, 2008; Aitken et al, 2008). The two studies I review below illustrate two such attempts at relating the meanings consumers derive from advertising messages to cultural identities constructed in the process of meaning interpretation.

2.4.3.1 Using a cultural identity lens in message interpretation

Both studies I discuss here show a close relationship between cultural identities and message interpretations, albeit in very different ways. Of the two it is only the earlier study (Mick and Buhl, 1992) which explores the multiplicity of cultural identities in detail, whereas the more recent work (Dutta-Bergman and Pal, 2005) focuses on the construction of hybrid ethnic/expatriate identities. Both use discourse based methodologies.

Mick and Buhl (1992) studied how three Danish brothers interpreted a set of consumer advertising messages and how these interpretations related to each brother's constructed cultural identities. They approached those identities through what in narrative psychology (McAdams, 1993; Bruner, 2000) are called *life stories*, i.e. the production of long narratives about the interviewees'

life based on a specific set of questions. These were produced in separate interviews. They then conducted second interviews with the three subjects about a set of advertising messages.

Mick and Buhl analysed the narratives produced by the three brothers for stories and other narrative elements which the brothers used to construct their identities. Their findings showed that despite the three brothers' obvious closeness, they constructed identities which were at least partially different, based on different aspects of their life experiences. Mick and Buhl go on to show that the readings of the consumer ads were aligned with and influenced by the brothers' cultural identities and in particular specific identity themes they call 'life projects'. As a result, even in this very small sample of –in essentialist terms- very culturally similar people, some of the meanings produced were very different. Naturally, common meanings, drawing from shared frames were also found, although the authors focus is on difference and its explanation in terms of discursive/narrative identity as opposed to external identity labels. In their words:

As anticipated we found that idiosyncratic meanings are more than mere error variance. In fact they are demonstrably significant and relatively patterned when observed across ads and analyzed against the backdrop of the individuals' life history and current life-world.

Mick and Buhl (1992:334)

Where Mick and Buhl are interested in how individual cultural identities influence message interpretations, Dutta-Bergman and Pal (2005) are primarily interested in how hybrid identities are negotiated in the course of ad message reception. In their study of Bengali immigrants in the USA they deployed a focus group methodology to explore the relationship between the meanings Bengalis produced when consuming these advertisements and the mixed (Bengali/new American) identities which shaped and were shaped by these meanings. Although Dutta and Pal do not deal with the full range of identities produced in their data and focus on the collective construction of cultural identities, their work, like Mick and Buhl's a decade earlier, shows the explanatory potential of cultural identity as a lens for cultural context in message reception and interpretation work.

2.4.4 Summary of the empirical reception studies section

In this section I have delved into three distinct literatures in order to explore how the relationship between message reception and culture has been studied in empirical research so far. I have argued that the lessons we can draw from extant intercultural business communication research are limited because these studies tend to conceptualise culture in narrow essentialist terms and are, furthermore, more interested in measuring the effects of message texts rather than producing 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of actual meanings.

I then argued that we can draw more interesting insights into employee meanings and their relationship to context from a stream of interpretive management research which deals with leader framing devices and member interpretations in the context of change implementation. Although not about the communication process per se, this research attempts to relate with varying degrees of success different employee responses to different aspects of the organisational cultural context, as well as individual cultural influences. Finally, I reviewed two studies from the advertising meaning based audience reception tradition, which demonstrated the potential of using cultural identities as an alternative lens to cultural context in studying the relationship between culture and message interpretation.

2.5 Chapter overview: addressing the research question

In the previous chapter I articulated a research question which sets out to describe the meanings generated when employees of multinational organisations interpret organisational values messages and to explore the influence on these meanings of culture, where culture is broadly defined as shared systems of meaning. In order to identify a specific approach to the study of message interpretation and culture in the particular business setting of multinational businesses, I reviewed in this chapter a range of theoretical and empirical studies which deal with the notion of meaning, in particular, meaning assigned to messages by message users at the point of interpretation, and with culture as an influencer of communicative action and meaning making. One thing that has emerged from this discussion is how

close the two concepts (meaning and culture) are in practice, but also how many different perspectives are possible in the way that their relationship can be conceptualised and studied.

I began this review by establishing a concept of meaning as the process and outcomes of reading a message. Using social semiotic and discourse theories primarily as used in cultural and audience studies, I explored the types of meanings that a study like mine could generate - potentiated vs actualised, manifest vs latent, actional, representational and identificatory - and how these meanings may emerge. The studies and theories reviewed at this stage, pointed both to the importance of the text itself and the way it has been 'framed', as well as to socio-cultural 'frames' which are accessed by audiences in the process of interpretation. Meanings produced from this process can be according to Hall's coding/decoding framework⁷, in agreement with any meanings the message potentiates, or indeed reject or negotiate these meanings.

I then investigated how culture as communication context has been conceptualised in intercultural and cross-cultural business communication research to date. I discussed two main perspectives. The first equates culture with national culture and views it, furthermore, as a deterministic framework

⁷ As I explained in the introductory chapter, although I use Hall's categories of acceptance, rejection and renegotiation to help describe the different interpretations in my data, I do this because these provide a simple, clear descriptive and explanatory framework. It does not follow however, that I adopt the linear view of communication implied in the coding/decoding terminology. This is consistent with the choices of other researchers who have conducted meaning based audience research (e.g. Mick and Buhl, 1992).

which drives communicative behaviour. I have shown that empirical research which adopts this perspective provides contradictory and inconclusive results and has, consequently, attracted much criticism. The second perspective takes a broader view, seeing culture as a complex set of influences - which include organisational, professional, ethnic and national meaning systems intersecting in the organisational space. I have argued that the latter offers a better descriptive and explanatory framework for my study. Furthermore, I have shown that within this framework, it is possible to view culture either from an essentialist lens -as an external, stable and largely isolatable influence on individuals- or from a non-essentialist perspective, as a constantly shifting, dynamic web of meanings shaped by, and reflected in the discursive action of message users. I have provided mainly theoretical arguments to support a shift to a non-essentialist position. In the next chapter I will discuss an early exploratory study I conducted, the results of which provide further strong support for this choice.

Another point illustrated by this review is that, whereas the relationship between culture and communication in business contexts has produced a wealth of research in many interrelated disciplines, little of this research focuses on the relationship between message interpretation (away from face to face interaction), which is the focus of my research question. Most empirical studies which are concerned with multi-cultural audiences either focus on effects, rather than employee meanings, and/or tend to conceptualise culture in terms of nationality only. As a result, these largely fail to provide a rich

enough insight into the meaning making process and its relationship to culture at the point of interpretation.

On the other hand, research in change contexts which looks at leader/member framing and interpretations, although not strictly speaking, a communication research stream, provides a useful picture of how employees respond to leadership frames and points to multiplicity of meanings and significantly, frequent rejection of the meanings potentiated by such frames. Although culture in multinational contexts is not addressed in these studies, they nevertheless offer interesting insights about the influence of the organisational cultural context, which I intend to re-examine in the discussion of my own findings. Finally, a very interesting insight into culture and interpretation and further support for a non-essentialist approach is offered by studies which relate multiple or hybrid cultural identities to the meanings derived from advertising messages.

In conclusion, I have shown in this chapter that to effectively address my research question, namely what meanings values messages generate in multinational organisations and how culture influences these meanings, I will need to focus on the discourses generated by message readers as the locus of meaning making and as the reflection (and production) of culture itself. Given the dearth of empirical research which takes this approach in relation to message interpretation in business contexts, I will draw from social semiotic, discourse theories and audience reception studies and use concepts and

analytical frameworks developed and tested there, in order to generate and describe employee readings of the values messages under study.

Adopting a non-essentialist, dynamic meanings approach to cultural context, I will seek to locate cultural context in the discourses of message users, rather than any external stable source. To this end I will also analyse user narratives for cultural frames accessed in meaning making and for cultural identities individuals construct in the course of interpretation. Finally, I will explore how apparent cultural frames and identities relate to actualised meanings assigned to specific values texts, for example in terms of their relationship to meanings potentiated by the same texts and also in relation to how meanings are shared among respondents. To my knowledge this is the first time that all these analytical elements have been put together in order to explore the relationship between culture and message interpretation in the multicultural business context and in relation to the interpretation of values messages in particular.

CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Chapter purpose and structure

The purpose of this chapter is to explain how my philosophical perspective has shaped the research approach, from the selection of research strategy and methodology, to the way the research has been conducted, to the data analysis and presentation of findings. The discussion in this chapter is, therefore, in three parts. I begin with a discussion of my ontological and epistemological position and the research strategy choices these have driven me to make. I then discuss these choices in the context of the research question and in relation to the discourse and message reception perspectives I have adopted. This discussion leads to a detailed outline of my specific choice of methodological approach and research methods.

The second part of the chapter deals with the testing of these methods as well as some of my early research assumptions about the conceptualisation of culture, in an exploratory study which I conducted in a global telecoms company. I briefly discuss the process and results of this study, the lessons learned by analysing and reflecting on these results, and the changes I made, as a result, to my conceptualisation of culture and aspects of my research design. Finally, part three discusses the process of data collection and data analysis I deployed for the main part of my research, including issues of research quality and reliability.

3.2 A personal journey: from ambivalence to a complex clarity

Like many management researchers before me, I first came to my research through a frustration with the world I occupied as a business communication practitioner. On the one hand, I did not understand why most managers and practitioners in my field of employee communication chose to ignore academic evidence about the influence of culture on communication and persisted in using universal, Anglo-centric approaches to communicating with their multicultural workforces. On the other, it was not clear to me why academics did not seem to be interested in exploring the actual impact of such practices in real business contexts.⁸ My need to explore the practice of communicating universal values messages in multinationals grew out of this double frustration. As a result I had identified the research problem I wanted to explore and, partly at least, shaped the research questions I wanted to ask, before I had clearly reflected and articulated a philosophical research position.

This, in fact, took some time to emerge with clarity, partly because of my dual role as researcher and practitioner, and partly because in my original exploration of the literatures around communication and culture I encountered many different paradigmatic approaches (see examples in Lindlof and Taylor, 2002; Bargiela-Chiappini et al (2007), among others), which for a while I found almost equally attractive and persuasive. Consequently, for a while I maintained, a truly agnostic and, at times, ambivalent philosophical position.

⁸ Since I engaged with this research I have better understood that it is not necessarily the lack of interest that stops academics from engaging with this kind of inquiry but, most likely, the practicalities and challenges of access among other things.

This, to some extent, is evident in the tensions present in the exploratory study which I discuss later in this chapter. There the largely phenomenological epistemology (Chia, 2002) is tamed by a consultant's crypto-realist ontology, and, significantly, by an essentialist view of culture as a largely stable, isolatable, external influence on interpretation. In discussing this study in more detail, my aim is to show how its findings helped me to clarify my philosophical and methodological approach and, specifically, to transform my conceptualisation of culture, from a slightly confused essentialist position, to a non essentialist, multiple identity based approach⁹. Before I discuss the exploratory study, however, I will outline my research philosophy, strategy and methodology as they relate to the main study discussed in this thesis.

3.3 Research philosophy and methodology

3.3.1 Research ontology: reality and the researcher

A research philosophy has two key elements: an *ontology*, which describes the researcher's position about the nature of the world she engages with in research, and an *epistemology*, which describes the researcher's beliefs about how knowledge about the world can be gained and what the nature of that knowledge is (Chia, 2002). It is largely accepted that there are two main types of ontology (Blaikie, 2007; Mason, 2002). *Realist ontologies* broadly assume that the researcher engages with a real external world which exists outside the mental schemata and linguistic constructions of the researcher and any other human members of that world. *Idealist* ontologies, on the other

⁹ These concepts have already been defined and discussed in the literature review.

hand, primarily assume that no external objective reality exists and that the external world largely consists of multiple subjective realities, or human constructions.

3.3.2 In search of clarity: sailing between subtle realism and idealism

Within these two ontological positions, Blaikie (2007), drawing primarily from Bhaskar's work (1986), highlights further distinctions, which I have found particularly useful in clarifying my own positioning. He distinguishes for example, six different types of realist ontologies and four slightly differentiated idealist positions. Realist ontologies range from a position of *shallow or naïve realism* which subscribes to an unproblematic external reality of objects and events that can be observed, discovered, described and measured, through a number of more complex positions - *conceptual, cautious, and depth realism* - which accept an external reality, but acknowledge the challenges and limitations of knowing this objective reality in a complete way, to a position he describes as *subtle realism*.

Like all other realist positions *subtle realism* accepts the existence of an external reality, but unlike any of the other positions, it dispenses with the idea that this reality can be known in an objective way, as it can only be accessed through social actors' constructions and interpretations. In that, *subtle realism* seems to depart from the wider positivist paradigm largely associated with realist ontologies and appears more congruent with a phenomenological tradition (Hammersley, 1992).

Idealism, on the other hand, is largely seen as an ontology that rejects external reality (Potter, 1996) for a privileging of a view of the world as human construction. Blaikie, again draws some interesting distinctions here. Only *atheistic idealists*, he argues, completely and utterly reject external reality; *agnostic idealists* take no particular view on whether the external world is real, mostly because they have no interest in such a world (also see Gergen, 1994; Potter, 1996). More interesting still, the other two idealist positions do not actually reject an external world at all – although this sounds paradoxical, they still qualify as idealist positions, because they are more interested in social actors' constructions of the world, rather than the world itself (Blaikie, 2007). Both of these positions, *constrained idealism* – which accepts that the external world places some constraints on social actors' interpretations- and *perspective idealism* – which regards constructions of reality as different perspectives on the world (Blaikie, 2007) - are largely congruent with my own ontological position, as is *subtle realism*, as defined in the previous section. Below I will try to draw some further distinctions between these three positions, although, in principle, I do not consider any of them far from my own philosophical stance.

3.3.3 Coming off the fence and landing on the idealist side

As I described above, my personal view of the nature of the world is one that accepts the existence of an external reality, albeit a reality which cannot be known in any objective way, but can only be accessed through the meaning constructions of social actors. This view is represented both by *perspective*

and *constrained idealism*, as well as by *subtle realism*. As I understand it, the main difference between these ontologies lies in the extent to which the researcher is also interested in the external world as reflected in the constructions of social actors (*subtle realism*), or, it is primarily the constructions of social actors that are seen as the main object of inquiry (Blaikie, 2007). Although, as a consultant, I remain very interested in the external world and the influence my work can have on this world, as a researcher my current focus is primarily on the way my respondents construct their world as evidenced through the meanings they generate. My study is about generating, describing and interpreting such constructions. This would suggest that it is perhaps a combination of *perspective* and *constrained idealism*, more than *subtle realism* that describes my ontological position with most accuracy. I will discuss this further as part of my discussion of epistemology and will later review how the two research perspectives, ontological and epistemological, combine to influence my research choices.

3.3.4 Epistemology: knowledge as truth vs knowledge as meaning

Epistemology concerns the researcher's beliefs regarding how we can gain knowledge about the world and what is the nature of that knowledge – i.e. to what extent the knowledge of the world we gain through our research can be said to be a true representation of the external world or not (Chia, 2002; Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). Broadly speaking, epistemological traditions seem to fit within two paradigms – *positivism*, which is consistent with most realist ontological perspectives, and *interpretivism*, which is largely congruent with

idealist perspectives as well as *subtle realism* (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002; Fairclough, 2003; Blaikie, 2007). Blaikie discusses four largely positivist epistemological positions, *rationalism*, *empiricism*, *falsification* and *neo-realism*, all of which assume the possibility and desirability of the objective and precise knowledge of reality to different degrees.

The other two epistemological approaches which are close to my own philosophical perspective reject the assumption that research can produce precise, true knowledge of the world. Instead, they advocate that the only way we can understand the world is through subjective, incomplete experiences, as reflected in the constructions of research subjects, or the constructions of the researcher, herself. The latter are built not as true representations, but as “convenient tools to deal with the world” (Blaikie, 2007:23). The latter position is known as *conventionalism*; the former as *constructionism*. *Constructionism* or *social constructionism* is used to describe a broad social research framework, which combines the type of approach to knowledge generation just discussed with, mainly, idealist ontologies. (Chia, 2002; Lindlof and Taylor, 2002).

As an epistemology, constructionism advances a theory of knowledge not as representation, but as interpretation, and highlights the importance of language and meaning as tools through which we can know the world (Crotty, 1998). This focus on language and meaning fits well both with my overall research interests –centring around the theory and practice of business

communication in multi-cultural contexts - and, in particular, with a discourse perspective, which focuses on language-in-use, namely the analysis and understanding of real 'texts' in real contexts, and on the use of texts as 'constructions' of contexts (Hall and du Gay, 1996; Fairclough, 2003; Heracleous, 2008).

3.3.5 Reflections on research philosophy: a hybrid researcher identity

I have, so far, outlined a spectrum of possible ontological and phenomenological positions open to social researchers and have indicated how my own assumptions about the external world and the nature and generation of knowledge position me on that spectrum. In summary, my view of the nature of the world and the nature of knowledge is best reflected in a constructionist epistemology which is combined with a perspective/constrained idealist ontology. The latter, significantly, does not reject the existence of an external reality, but rather accepts an inter-play between reality and its construction reflected in the discourses of social actors (Blaikie, 2007).

I believe that my desire to maintain a hold on external reality which I see as the ultimate context of my research, a context which continues to constrain how I and my respondents construct the world around us, reflects my hybrid identity as a researcher. On the one hand, as a linguist by training, I remain deeply interested in language, meaning and discourse processes; on the other, as a practitioner, I remain grounded in the 'real world' of communication

practice and seek to generate knowledge that is not only interesting, but also useful to practitioners such as myself. Maintaining a balance between these two positions allows me, therefore, to be true to myself as a researcher *and* as a practitioner, and shapes my research in very specific ways. Below I discuss the implications of these choices for my research strategy and methodology.

3.3.6 The research question and how it can be answered

In this section I discuss how my research question fits with and can be answered through the lens of the particular philosophical position that I have so far outlined. The research question is articulated in three parts:

Q1. How are universal values messages interpreted by employees in multinational organizations, i.e. what meanings do they create?

Q2. To what extent are meanings shared between employees of different cultural backgrounds and to what extent are they different?

Q3. How does culture influence these meanings¹⁰?

As I discussed in the previous two chapters, in order to answer my research question I will need to collect data about two things, the relationship between which I will go on to explore:

- The meanings assigned to specific values texts, when read by employees from different cultural backgrounds, and

¹⁰ If the way this part of the question is articulated implies a conceptualisation of culture as an external, stable influence, this does not reflect the perspective of culture I have finally adopted for this study. I discuss in this section how my conceptualisation of culture has developed from an essentialist to a non essentialist view over the course of this research. In the literature review I provided the arguments that supported this change of perspective. I now understand culture as a complex context of intersecting dynamic meanings to be located in the discourses of organisational members. Provided I made this clear, I felt that I did not need to alter the wording of the research question.

- Meanings which reflect cultural frames employees share and access in the process of interpretation, as well as cultural identities constructed in employee discourses

Overall, the constructionist/idealist philosophy I have adopted in this study would suggest an interpretive approach to deriving, comparing and drawing conclusions from this data (Mason, 2002; Partington, 2002) and an abductive research strategy (Blaikie, 2007). The latter according to Blaikie, aims to describe social life in terms of actors' perspectives and is the only research strategy exclusively deployed by the social sciences which truly fits with constructionism and idealist ontologies, unlike deduction and induction¹¹ both of which have been 'borrowed' from natural sciences and are primarily consistent with positivist epistemologies and realist ontologies (Chia, 2002).

An interpretive, abductive research strategy would, therefore, focus on primarily deriving data from the narratives of social actors (Blaikie, 2007) and would in the analysis process begin with the lay concepts discovered in the language used by social actors, producing through an iterative interpretive process, a technical account of these constructions (Blaikie, 2007). In the

¹¹ Not all social researchers distinguish clearly between inductive and abductive research strategies (see, for example, Hussey and Hussey 1997). Many researchers in the interpretive tradition who work from data towards theory see themselves as following an inductive strategy. However, I believe, the distinction Blaikie highlights between the two strategies is useful: while both strategies are working from data to theory, abductive strategies prioritise social actors' own concepts and, unlike inductive strategies follow spiral rather than linear patterns of reasoning. Subtle as it is the distinction is, I believe, useful when the subject of the research are the meanings social actors generate when they read specific management messages, as it provides a clear direction about how these meanings can be 'captured' and described. This does not, of course, imply that the researcher's perspective is irrelevant, or neutralised, only that the researcher has a clear direction and guidance in her meaning-making process. .

following section I examine each element of the research question in more detail, in order to highlight where these questions could be addressed differently from different philosophical perspectives and to discuss how my own interpretative stance would address each of these.

3.3.6.1 Question 1: Values messages and how they are interpreted

The *how* and *what* of the research question are both significant here as they signal an equal interest in the process of meaning generation -how respondents use language to construct meaning - and in meaning content. An interpretivist research approach to the *how* question would eschew cognitive approaches to meaning generation for a focus on language use and the production of 'thick' descriptions (Geertz, 1973; Morley and Silverstone, 1991) of reception readings for each of the values texts. Similarly, where a positivist approach to the *what* question would seek to generate meanings by means of content analysis or by measuring responses on semantic differential scales (eg Andsanger et al, 2007); an interpretivist reading would seek to describe meanings in terms of discourse fragments representing core themes used by message readers and to present these in a holistic picture of relationships between text, reader and context (Morley and Silverstone, 1991; Mick and Buhl, 1992).

3.3.6.2 Question 2: Determining shared and different meaning patterns

As I explained in the introductory chapter, the purpose of this question is to provide a bridge between the other two questions: on the one hand by

focusing the interpretation process around specific patterns of meanings – those which are prevalent among employees and those that are not – and, on the other, by pointing at possible cultural frames employees use as interpretive devices to construct meanings around specific values messages. The approach I will take in the course of this research in order to answer this part of the question, therefore, is to identify if an interviewee produces and shares with others a particular actualised meaning and to ask questions about the meanings that are shared, and those that are not.

3.3.6.3 Question 3: The relationship between culture and interpretation

As I have already discussed my approach rejects the idea of culture as a stable and deterministic external framework for a holistic, dynamic and complex view of cultural context, which is accessible through the shared frames and identities social actors construct in the process of discourse. This is congruent with an interpretive, constructionist research approach which seeks to locate cues to culture, not in an external reality, but in the narratives of research respondents (Dutta-Bergman and Pal, 2005). Exploring the relationships between such cultural cues (cultural frames and identities as expressed in respondent narratives) and the interpretations of specific values messages would require a systematic, iterative process of comparing respondent narrative fragments, where such meanings and frames/identities are articulated. This does not preclude the possibility that the same narrative fragment reflects both a meaning assigned to a values text and a cultural frame or identity (Roberts, 1999).

3.3.7 Selecting research tools: the case for qualitative methodologies

In this section I discuss the methodological choices which are both appropriate for my philosophical research position and provide the best tools for collecting the data that will allow me to answer the research question. From a theoretical perspective, interpretivist research approaches require the adoption of qualitative methodologies as tools for conducting research (Mason, 2002)¹². Although the term *qualitative methodologies* covers a rich range of approaches to collecting data (Mason, 2002; Lindlof and Taylor, 2002), from ethnography (including observation) to many different types of interviewing and text analysis, to action research (Partington, 2002; Saunders et al, 2003) what distinguishes all of these approaches from quantitative data methods according to Mason (2002) is, arguably

- A grounding in interpretivism
- A sensibility to the context in which data is produced and a flexible approach to that context
- An emphasis on holistic forms of analysis, explanation and argument building, and
- An attempt to understand rather than reduce, or minimise complexity.

In the context of communication research and message reception, in particular, qualitative methodologies are similarly associated with a holistic

¹² This does not necessarily mean that quantitative methods cannot be used to complement qualitative methodologies, only that interpretive research primarily relies on qualitative data (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1997, Dworkin et al 1999)

approach to communicative acts, where the researcher is more interested in meaning and context, rather than in content analysis and effects (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002) Jensen and Jankowski (1991) summarise the key differences between qualitative and quantitative methodologies in audience and reception communication research in terms of the concepts in figure 3.1 below and argue that

where quantitative analysis would focus on the concrete, delimited products of the media's meaning production, qualitative approaches examine meaning production as a process which is contextualised and inextricably integrated with wider social and cultural practices

Jensen and Jankowski (1991:4)

Figure 3.1: Differences between qualitative and quantitative research in audience research

<u>Qualitative</u>	<u>Quantitative</u>
• Meaning	• Information
• Internal	• External
• Occurrence	• Recurrence
• Experience	• Experiment
• Exegesis	• Measurement
• Process	• Product

Source Jensen and Jankowski (1991)

In summary, my research philosophy and methodology best fit within an interpretive research approach which utilises qualitative tools for generating data, and focuses on a holistic understanding of meaning in the social context and an emphasis on understanding rather than reducing complexity. This is fully congruent with qualitative approaches to audience research and with interpretative discourse methodologies which put emphasis on language-in-use as a tool of meaning construction and on the importance of texts as

'places' where contexts are reflected, interpreted and shaped (Hall, 2000; Fairclough, 2003).

3.3.8 Generating message interpretations: the interview as key tool

As my study fits within a qualitative reception and business discourse framework, I will draw particularly from these two areas of inquiry (Jensen and Jankowski, 1991; Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007) to guide me in the choice of specific qualitative methods for data generation and analysis.

As well as discourse analysis approaches to 'reading' the message texts (Jensen, 1991b), the former tradition relies largely on various forms of ethnography and/or interviewing (Larsen, 1991; Mick and Buhl, 1992) to generate and study message interpretations by audiences and to understand the influence of the context on such interpretations. Whereas ethnographic approaches are used when the group of respondents or communities studied is rather homogenous or geographically concentrated (Jankowski and Wester, 1991, talk of the 'smallness of the research setting') and/or the communication phenomenon is such that requires long term immersion in the context for the phenomenon to be observed fully (cf Lull's (1988) study of family television viewing patterns), where geographically dispersed audiences such as the employees of international organisations are the audience group and the phenomenon is very specific, ethnography becomes a less appropriate, or simply less realistic choice (Jankowski and Wester, 1991; Singh and Dickson, 2002). In fact, Jankowski and Wester (1991) argue that many reception

studies which purport to be ethnographic only consist of episodic engagements with audiences within specific contexts, without 'proper immersion' of the researcher in the context.

In many reception studies, therefore, researchers largely rely on interviewing (and when appropriate observing) respondents – viewers and readers of messages – ideally in the actual context of message consumption, and at the point of message consumption (Larsen, 1991; Mick and Buhl, 1992). These interviews are in-depth, open or semi-structured and aim to generate on the one hand, audience interpretations and, on the other, cues about how these interpretations emerge, namely insights about interpretation process and about the influence of context, as reflected in the linguistic constructions of respondents (Jensen, 1991b; Larsen, 1991; Lindlof and Taylor, 2002).

3.3.8.1 The linguistic code as an instrument of meaning making

While language is the main instrument of research as well as of meaning making in these interview settings, many qualitative reception researchers do not pay much attention to the potential influence of the specific linguistic code used in the interview process, mainly because the vast majority of these studies have been conducted and continue to be conducted in monolingual environments (Jensen, 1991b). For the purposes of my research, where employees with a number of native languages are the message 'consumers' and the values messages which are the subject of interpretation are couched in the official organisational English, the language in which data is gathered

through interviewing, as well as later interpreted and presented must be carefully considered, if the research is to produce valid and reliable findings (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002).

Unlike the content analysis/effects approaches to audience studies which largely assume that some kind of meaning equivalence in multicultural audience research is desirable and that this can be achieved through the use of interviewers who are native speakers and/or translated and back translated semantic differential items (Orth et al, 2007), interpretivist discourse based research and, in particular, research which adopts a holistic, non essentialist view of culture and communication (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004), does not seek to establish meaning equivalence across different codes or indeed to neutralise the impact of the particular language used as the research and interpretation instrument (Nickerson, 1998; Ortiz, 2005).

Rather, language is seen as an integral part of the culture and meaning making process studied (Dutta-Bergman and Pal, 2005, Charles, 2007). The language selected for the interviewing and overall research process thus provides not a neutral data collection and analysis tool, but a particular cultural perspective which has to be reconciled with the objectives of the research and understood in the context of the research findings. In this study, because my main focus is on the meanings generated by employees of multicultural companies which use English as their official language, when they read management messages articulated in this English, I have selected

to conduct my research interviews in English. Thus the data produced - the message interpretations- will also reflect the organisational English, making it possible to search for “shared meanings” couched in this English discourse. The final results will clearly reflect this choice of linguistic tool. Later in this chapter and in chapter four where I discuss identities generated in my data I return to the issue of language and explore how my identity as a researcher together with my choice of English (not my native language) as a research instrument may have shaped the process and outcomes of my research in very specific ways.

3.3.9 Language based analysis techniques

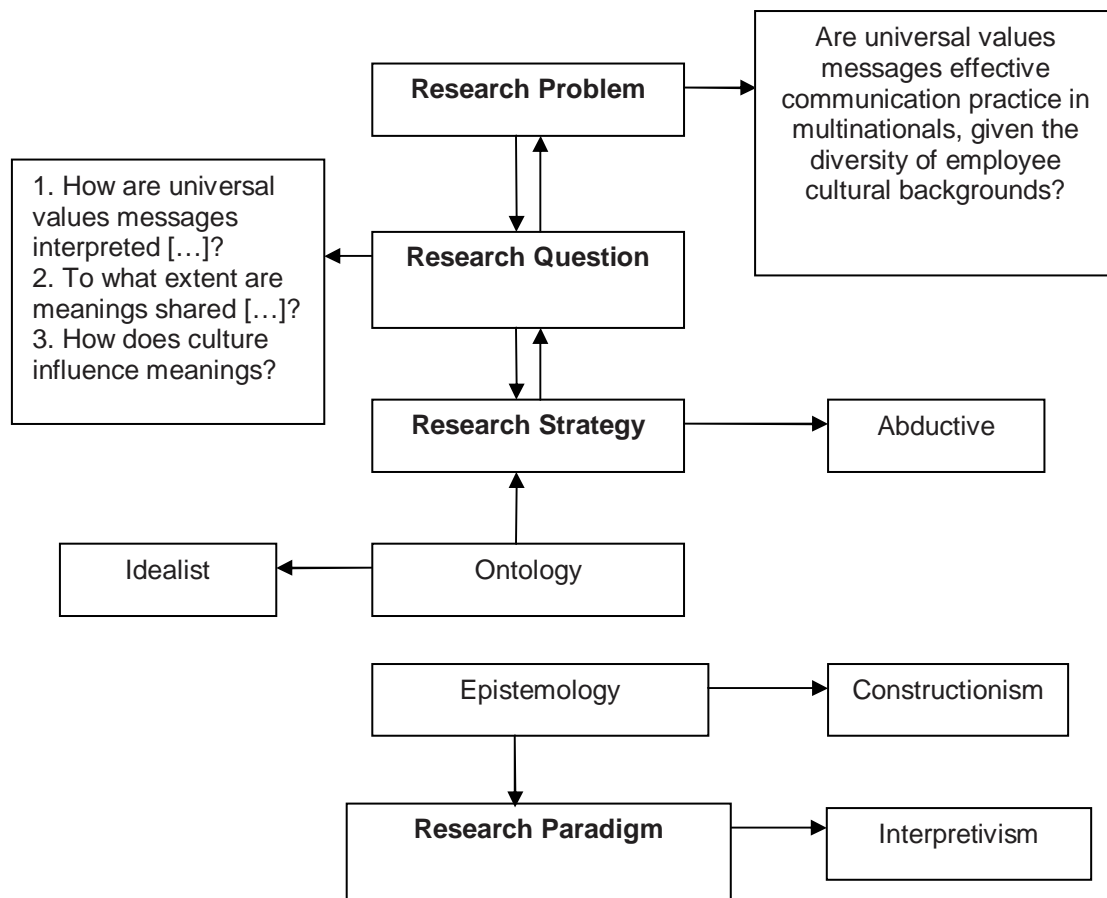
Once the interviews explore how the values texts are read and understood by employees, the interview transcript itself becomes a text to be subjected to discourse analysis (Jensen, 1991b, Fairclough, 2003). The discourse approach prioritises in research a focus on language-in-use and, in the case of studying message interpretations, it points both to the need to pay attention to language in the actual message texts, in order to understand how these texts attempt to frame reality (Larsen, 1991; Hall, 1993) and to the texts produced by message users, when they read the original messages (Jensen, 1991b; Mick and Buhl, 1992; Dworkin et al, 1999). Although discourse analysis approaches differ widely in the qualitative communication and organisational literatures (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002; Heracleous, 2008) most researchers seem to avoid the micro-linguistic analysis route (Brown and Yule, 1983) for either a critical approach (Fairclough, 2001) or, as in my case, an interpretive

approach which focuses on specific linguistic and rhetorical elements of the text, such as the use of pronouns – ‘deixis’ - and the use of metaphorical language, and combines these with a thematic analysis – Larsen (1991) calls this ‘qualitative content analysis’ - in the tradition of many previous qualitative audience studies (e.g. Jensen, 1991b, Mick and Buhl 1992). This approach also highlights an interest in the relationship between actual physical message texts, ‘texts’ employees construct as interviewees, and the ‘texts’ referred to or implied in the data, such as the discourses or ‘frames’ employees share about the organisation and the world. This ‘intertextuality’, namely the way in which texts produced in a particular social setting relate to each other, refer to each other, are part of each other and shape each other (Fairclough, 2003) can be explored and used to understand context, and to understand relationships between elements of that context. Brown and Yule (1983) in fact talk of context as ‘co-text’ and of “the power of a co-text to constrain interpretation” (Brown and Yule, 1983:46).

In summary, drawing from qualitative message reception strategies my research which seeks to generate meanings assigned to message texts in business contexts will utilise in-depth employee interviews to generate data. This data will then be analysed using primarily interpretive discourse approaches in order to understand and relate employee interpretations of explicit, specific values texts with other texts broader meanings or texts present in the interviews which can be said to reflect cultural context. The

relationship between the two types of text will then be explored in order to answer the final part of the research question.

Figure 3.2 Research philosophy and strategy summary



Source: adapted by the author from Blaikie (2007:27)

3.4 Exploratory Study

3.4.1 Introduction: purpose of exploratory study

Early in the research process, I conducted an exploratory study in order to see how my early research design addressed the research question in practice, what data were generated, and how this data helped me answer the research question. I also wanted to test and help clarify my thinking around the conceptualisation of culture, which at the time was rather essentialist, although I can only say this in hindsight. . Although the outcomes did help me to reflect on and fine-tune the whole research design, it was the findings around the relationship between meanings and culture that proved particularly significant and which will mainly concern me here.

At the beginning of this narrative I ask the reader to take a step back to a point in my research journey where my thinking about my research philosophy and my conceptualisation of culture were not as clear as I hope appear in the literature review narrative and in the first section of this chapter. In order to show how my thinking has been challenged and how it has changed in fundamental ways, I have decided to tell the story from the perspective of the researcher I was then, taking the reader through my challenges, puzzles and discoveries as they happened. This necessitates some inconsistency in the conceptual vocabulary I use in this section. For example, when I talk of testing the influence of national culture on meanings, although this contrasts with my current constructionist, non-essentialist perspective, I do it to show how I was thinking at the time and to illustrate, more clearly how that thinking was

challenged by the research itself. I believe that although it adds a level of complexity to my narrative at this point, this eventually makes for a more compelling and much clearer illustration of my final argument for a non-essentialist approach to culture and a holistic view of culture and communication in intercultural communication research.

3.4.2 Approach to culture during the exploratory study

At the early stages of my research, although aware of some of the critical voices in the field, I still subscribed to a rather essentialist concept of culture (although I can see this with hindsight, it was by no means obvious to me at the time). Although I accepted the multiplicity of cultural influences in the multicultural workplace and did not expect that national culture¹³ would be the only influencing factor on the interpretations I was soliciting (see Lovitt, 1999), I still expected to be able to isolate and discuss influences of specific elements of culture on specific aspects of the derived interpretations. Although I resisted hypothesising expected differences or similarities, as I considered myself working within a broadly interpretive paradigm, my expectation was that once meanings were generated through the interpretation of interview data, and once these meanings were analysed for commonalities and differences, I would be able to explain similar meaning patterns across groups in terms of characteristics or common beliefs that my interviewees shared as members of certain cultural communities. I was also particularly interested to see if the two categories of national culture and professional culture which

¹³ In the sense employed in the cross-cultural management literature, relating to underlying assumptions about the world that drive behaviour, attitudes and beliefs (e.g. Hofstede 1991)

researchers in intercultural business communication primarily focused on (Lovitt and Goswammi,1999) would prove to be significant in the context of my research. What I actually found challenged my assumptions, made me reconsider my approach to culture, and led me to a re-examination of the data using a different analytic lens. I discuss this below.

3.4.3 Background: organisation and research design

The organisation I selected for the pilot was a European multinational company with a global presence. Dealing in telecommunications, the company which for the purposes of the research discussion I will call GlobalTelco, is headquartered in the UK and has subsidiary offices in most major European countries. As my approach to culture at the time required selecting respondents from different national backgrounds to enable me to make comparisons between different national cultural groups, I selected to conduct my research in the UK, France and Germany, three of the largest GlobalTelco subsidiary offices. As well as the size of the organization's subsidiaries in these countries, which meant that they provided a larger selection pool for interviewees, two further reasons made that selection salient. The first was that background research on national cultural characteristics for the three countries was easily available particularly in the cross-cultural management literature (e.g. Hall and Hall, 1990) and I could draw on this literature to support my analysis. The second that much comparative inter and cross cultural communication research had so far

concentrated on 'extreme' cultural differences, rather than on comparing national cultures in geographical proximity, particularly in Europe.

Two further factors were important in selecting this particular organisation. Firstly at the time, GlobalTelco was actively communicating messages of corporate values in order to influence employee opinions and behaviours. Secondly, these values statements were largely communicated in the official 'English' of the organisation. Figure 3.3 below presents an excerpt of the GlobalTelco values statement, specifically the text dealing with two values 'trustworthy' and 'straightforward'. In my data discussion next I will mainly draw from the interpretations of these two values texts.

Figure 3.3: GlobalTelCo values statement excerpt

Trustworthy: This means that we need to do what we say we will

- We build open, honest and realistic relationships with customers and with each other
- We are reliable and act with integrity
- We do whatever it takes to deliver

Straightforward: This means that we need to make complex things simple

- We make complex things simpler for customers and for each other
 - We get straight to the point
 - We use our common sense and judgement
-

3.4.3.1 Interviewee selection

In each country subsidiary five to eight respondents were chosen to be interviewed about the values messages. Although selected on a voluntary basis, I asked the organization to ensure that the same professional backgrounds and functional roles were represented in each group. As a result interviewees in each country fell in one of three professional groups - HR managers, communication professionals and operations managers. Both genders were equally represented. Interviews were conducted in English, the language of business and the language of the values messages.

3.4.3.2 Data collection and analysis

Using a semi-structured interview design and the actual values texts (see figure 3.3) I conducted one-to-one in-depth interviews with respondents. The focus of the interview was on how respondents read and understood the values messages the organisation communicated. I also used the interview to draw out background information about the individual respondents and the cultural context within which they were interpreting these messages (using open questions such as 'tell me about yourself' and 'tell me about the organisation').

Interviews were taped and transcribed soon after. I then used NVivo software (Richards, 2006) to store, code and analyse the interview transcripts. Data was initially organised in broad categories which were derived either from the message text or from the main interview questions (see Lindlof and Taylor,

2002) about differentiating between categories and codes in qualitative data indexing; categories are a form of data management, in the sense that they are used as 'bins' to group data together; codes on the other hand signal a process of interpretation). Within the initial categories (for example 'trustworthy meanings') data was coded using labels derived from the language interviewees themselves used in their narratives - fitting with the importance of 'lay concepts' highlighted in abductive research strategies (Blaikie, 2007). The codes used were either actual phrases individuals employed in their interpretations ('do our best'; 'no politics') or summaries of propositions they constructed ('Germans are trustworthy'; 'being direct is negative').

As the focus on respondent language is particularly significant in my type of study, I read and re-read each interview before I started a code reduction process. I then went through the first level codes and using an iterative process (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002; Mason, 2002) grouped codes together until no more groupings emerged. This was easier to do with codes reflecting the cultural/contextual information than with codes which reflected actualised meanings (as seen in tables 3.1-3.3). As a result I only grouped meaning codes together when I was reasonably confident that what I had in front of me was a paraphrase of the same concept (usually this was reflected in very similar linguistic terms being used) rather than a slightly different meaning.

Still there has to be a recognition here that the final meanings derived will always involve an element of secondary interpretation on behalf of the researcher. This is largely accepted in reception and discourse studies as well as in interpretative research in general (Fouquier, 1988, Mick et al, 2004). At the end of the interpretation process I had derived a set of meanings for each of the value statements. These I compared across the groups of interviewees, focusing primarily on national and professional groupings in order to see which meanings were shared and by whom. Some of the results of this analysis are shown in tables 3.1-3.3. Below I discuss how I used these meaning patterns to question my data about clues of cultural influences and the findings that emerged from this process.

Table 3.1, Meanings of the value ‘trustworthy’ – national clusters

Meanings	UK	Germany	France
<i>Do what we say we will / whatever it takes to deliver</i>			
Meet and manage expectations	xxx		X
Deliver to time; meet targets	xxx		
Deliver to quality standards	x		
Do our best	x	x	
<i>We build open and honest relationships.....</i>			
About trust and relationships	xxx		Xx
About honesty		x	
Customer oriented			Xx
Maintain confidentiality	xx		
No politics	x		X
<i>We are reliable and act with integrity</i>			
About professional integrity	xx		Xx
Be accountable		x	X
Be consistent as a manager			X
<i>Other</i>			
A very German statement	x		
Germans are very trustworthy		x	
We (Germans) cannot fulfil promises, if others don't fulfil promises to us		x	
A difficult, absolute promise, we cannot meet	x	x	

Table 3.2: Meanings of the value ‘trustworthy’ – professional clusters

Meanings	OPS	HR	COMMS
<i>Do what we say we will</i>			
Meet and manage expectations	xx	x	X
Deliver to time; meet targets		x	Xx
Deliver to quality standards		x	
Do our best	x	x	
<i>We build open and honest relationships.....</i>			
About trust and relationships	x	xxx	X
About honesty	x		
Customer oriented	x	x	
Maintain confidentiality		x	X
No politics	xx		
<i>We are reliable and act with integrity</i>			
About professional integrity		xxx	X
Be accountable	x	x	
Be consistent as a manager		x	
Other			
A very German statement	x		
Germans are very trustworthy		x	
We (Germans) cannot fulfil promises if others don't fulfil promises to us		x	
A difficult, absolute promise, we cannot meet	x	x	

OPS=Operations, HR=Human Resources, COMMS=Communications

Table 3.3: Meanings of the value ‘straightforward’ – national clusters

Theme	UK	Germany	France
<i>Make complex things simple</i>			
Simple, not complicated	xxx	xx	X
Right wording	x		Xx
Cut through jargon	x		
Transparent		x	
Organization supports complexity	xx	xx	X
<i>We get straight to the point</i>			
Direct	xx	x	X
Not talk at length	xx	xx	
Not losing time or needing more time	x		Xx

Push for progress/get results (vs lacking action)		xxx	
Focused/sticking to time/agenda		xxx	
Abrupt/rough/blunt	xx	x	
Being direct is negative/ a bad thing		x	
<i>We use our common sense and judgement</i>			
Find solution		x	
Pragmatic			X
Other			
Open/openness	x	x	
Honest/sincere		x	X
Say what you think and feel			X
Not reserved	x		
What the British are not (and the Germans, Dutch, French are)	xx	xxx	Xx

3.4.4 Findings overview: lessons from the exploratory study

3.4.4.1 One text, variable meanings

Tables 3.1 to 3.3 above show the meaning distributions for the two values *trustworthy* and *straightforward*, for national backgrounds and for professions or functional roles. As these show, a range of meanings for each value text were generated. In some cases meanings reflected the values text very closely (actualised meanings agreeing with potentiated meanings), in others interviewees delved into their experience to construct meanings that were not obviously present in the text or contradicted frames present in the text. For example, a number of interpretations relating to *openness* and *honesty* were generated when discussing the term *straightforward* (table 3.3) although the explicit definition of the term itself focused primarily on concepts of directness and simplicity. In most cases respondents constructed and were able to sustain more than one meaning for the same value term in the course of the

interview, not necessarily all consistent with each other. As these findings are largely consistent with findings in my main study which I discuss in detail in the next three chapters, I will not discuss them here further. I will concentrate instead on what the exploratory study data revealed about the potential relationship between meaning patterns and external cultural characteristics of national and professional background, which I went on to explore.

3.4.4.2 Comparing meanings across groups: national clusters

As respondents frequently talked about national cultural differences in the process of interpretation, it appeared at first glance that national culture was indeed influential in meaning construction. In some cases, in particular, themes emerged that related specific values to a perceived national characteristic as the quotes below illustrate

‘Straight to the point’ I would say the English people are not famous for getting straight to the point. It’s more putting a lot of words around, trying to be gentle. Sometimes the point is lost, because there are so many ifs and whens and we would and should.

German manager

There is certainly a tendency in the UK not to get straight to the point to slowly narrow your way down to what it is that you want, but to take 10 minutes to do it whereas the Germans would just go in and say ‘the problem is this and this is what we need to talk about and so on’ it saves you 10 minutes.

British Manager

However, these particular meanings were not confined to specific national groups. For example, although possibly related to a well documented cultural difference (Hall and Hall, 1990), the theme *the British are not straightforward* was articulated by all three respondent groups, including by some of the British interviewees. Overall, the evidence of clear national clusters pointing to national cultural influence was weak throughout the pilot data, although not totally absent. One could argue, for example, that the fact that French respondents seemed to locate the meaning of *trustworthy* primarily around concepts of relationships and trust and less so around concepts of delivering commitments and meeting deadlines (see table 3.2), could be explained in terms of national cultural influence – for example, because of the influence of *particularism* (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1997), or *higher femininity* (Hofstede, 1980), or the more *high context, polychronic* elements in the culture (Hall and Hall, 1990).

If national culture were the only influence here, however, how do we explain the fact that the concept of meeting targets and deadlines seems to turn up in the discourse of UK interviewees only and not German interviewees when discussing the value text ‘trustworthy’ (table 3.1)? Given the *low context, mono-chronic* orientation of German culture (Hall and Hall, 1990) one would expect this concept to appear equally strongly, if not more strongly among German interviewees. This is doubly puzzling when we consider that in discussing the value *straightforward*, German interviewees did show a strong

use of time, progress and results oriented themes (as shown on table 3.3). Overall, although national culture influences were at times evident in the data, these seemed rather idiosyncratic and unstable and could not explain why, for example, a particular shared cultural meaning would appear as a response to one message text and not to another, but also why so many meanings would span national groups despite apparent national cultural differences.

3.4.4.3 Comparing meanings across groups: professional clusters

Meaning breakdowns across professional/functional lines (see table 3.2) produced a similarly complex picture. While meanings were spread too thinly across groups to allow for any clear associations between specific meanings and professional or functional cultural influences alone, in some cases common discourses were evident. For example, the concept of *meeting deadlines and targets* associated with the term *trustworthy*, was shared by two communications and one HR manager. Evidence from the interviews suggests that this meaning does indeed relate to the specific professional experience of these respondents, as for example in this quote below

‘Whatever it takes to deliver’. I am quite strict about deadlines. I trained as a journalist, so I am absolutely anal about deadlines

British Communication Manager

Even in the instances, however, where professional cultural influence is evident, as it is here, it is not the case that all interviewees who share the same professional background share the same meanings.

3.4.4.4 Organisational culture influences

While the evidence from the pilot in support of national and professional cultural influences on employee message interpretations seemed at best inconsistent, this is not the case where the organisational cultural context is concerned. Evidence in the data suggested that many of the stronger shared themes were located here. For example, in discussing the *simplicity* meaning of *straightforward*, many respondents came up with a very similar concept, namely that simplicity was countercultural to the organization they worked for.

‘Straightforward: making complex things simple’. Here we are. GlobalTelCo is not seen as a company that makes complex things simple. We make complex things complex and some simple things we make complex.

German manager

But the thing is GlobalTelCo is quite complex and sometimes it is very difficult to make things simple, because of the organisation.

French manager

I have never worked in an organisation in my entire career that makes the simplest things complex. So that is the complete wrong other way round.

British manager

This example, I believe, provides evidence of a shared organisational frame which influences interpretation and which transcends national and professional cultural boundaries. Interestingly, in this case the shared frame

leads employees to articulate a meaning which rejects a meaning arguably potentiated by the value text. A similar counter meaning was shared around the concept of 'inspiring', namely that it is difficult to be inspiring, particularly as individuals. This too was shared across all groups and seemed to draw on common concepts about the size and complexity of the organisation:

Because there is all these small competitors in the market, they started as inspiring companies, but you can take their inspiring ideas... GlobalTelco does not stand as inspiring. GlobalTelco stands for good quality, for reliable, for good financial strength, not necessarily for inspiring, leading edge

German manager

OK so we need to have the confidence etc. to be creative, creative for customers. We do it, but sometimes because the company is so big, and the organisation I think so complicated, I think it is difficult to be creative, or you can be creative, but it is difficult to implement.

French manager

Even meanings which appear at first glance to be influenced by national culture may have more to do with shared organisational cultural frames. For example the meaning *the British are not straightforward*, appears to be much more about the way British managers are perceived in this particular organisation. This is supported by the interview narratives, which show how this particular meaning is shaped through behaviours and interactions in the

business and how it is reinforced, among other things, through cultural myths and artefacts such as the ones mentioned here by a German manager

We have [in the German office] this translation: what the English say and what they mean. If they say 'we should consider it, talk about it' and in another column 'this idea is completely stupid'... You cannot say in a meeting 'this idea is stupid' but if you say 'we will consider it' people take it seriously. If someone says to me 'let's consider it', there is a translation in my mind that this was not a good idea

3.4.5 Reflection on findings: culture and meaning

The overview of the findings of the exploratory study I presented here aimed to show the limitations I came across when I attempted to draw out relationships between shared meanings and external cultural characteristics, such as nationality and professional background. It was not that such relationships were completely absent from the data. Rather that next to meanings which could be said to be consistent with national or professional cultural background many other meanings were articulated which could not be explained, or indeed appeared to be counter to such influences. On the other hand, there was clear evidence that many shared meanings derived from shared frames and discourses located in the organisational context itself.

One response to these findings, therefore, would be to decide to focus primarily on the organisational context and ignore other cultural influences. However, it seemed to me that this would be ignoring an interesting

complexity and a phenomenon which tells us something important about culture and communication. For example, while it was certainly the case that individuals who shared the same professional background did not apparently share many similar meanings, it was nevertheless clear from the interviewee narratives that they frequently related the meanings they constructed to their professional roles. This could also be said to be the case with nationality. Although I could not show patterns of national cultural characteristics affecting meanings in a consistent way across the respondent groups, individual employee narratives, as well as some patterns of shared meanings, did nevertheless suggest that national culture did at times influence interpretation.

This would appear to be paradoxical, unless we began to think about culture and cultural influences in a completely different way. For example, an alternative reading of the data could be derived, if we adopted a cultural identity perspective¹⁴, namely if we assumed that message readers delved into their cultural experience in a rather unpredictable way to construct multiple meanings relating to the values texts, apparently shifting from one aspect of their identity (Mick and Buhl, 1992; Singer, 1998; Holiday et al, 2004) to another, while they did this. If this were indeed the case, it would explain why my previous essentialist approach to the data was simply not rich enough as a conceptual framework with which to explore the influence of culture on message interpretations.

¹⁴In this research I adopt a non-essentialist concept of cultural identity as I discuss in detail in the literature review.

3.4.6 Uncovering identities in the exploratory data

To explore this new perspective I returned to the data and looked for further evidence to support this tentative assumption. It soon became clear to me that the main approach to my data analysis to that point, which primarily coded meanings and themes in the interview transcripts and concentrated on identifying commonalities across transcripts, was not appropriate for 'uncovering' cultural identities. By re-reading the interviews I could see what I thought were 'glimpses' of identity in the data (a German manager talking about his Catholicism, a British HR manager talking about himself as a particular type of 'quiet leader'), but I realised that I needed to apply a different type of analysis to my interview transcripts in order to reveal and understand these identity constructions.

Discourse approaches to identity construction focus on the way social actors construct the self in the way they use language, for example in linguistic constructions such as deixis (I/they) and metaphor, and also in the stories they tell about themselves and others (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Bird, 2007). This focus on language about the self and, in particular, language as narrative (McAdams, 1993; Crossley, 2000) now became the focus of my second level of analysis as I delved again into the interview transcripts.

Although I did not adopt the 'life project' approach sometimes associated with narrative derived identities (I discuss this in more depth in the literature review chapter), I did adopt an overall narrative analysis angle, in that I approached

each interview transcript as a coherent narrative, identifying and categorizing in the first instance the themes, stories, metaphors and images that interviewees used in the course of the conversation to construct the self, as well as the specific lexical constructions they used to articulate their identities (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

The identities I identified ranged from the more obvious, recognisable 'labels' such as 'German' and 'manager' to less expected, more personal group memberships that somehow emerged as significant for the individual in the course of this particular conversation; 'catholic', 'quiet leader' and 'expert' were some of these. Most interviewees shifted between at least two or three identities in the course of the interview; some were more prolific. Some identities were more prominent than others, although this differed widely across interviews. Below I discuss the results of my identity related analysis, using the example of an individual interviewee and show how the identities she constructed shaped some of her interpretations of the values messages. In chapter four I discuss in full detail the identities generated by respondents in my main study.

3.4.7 Relating cultural identities to values interpretations

With the narrative analysis on each interview transcript completed and the main identities identified, I went back to the meanings generated for each value text (as already produced by the previous analysis). I wanted to see what relationship there was, if any, between the identities respondents appeared to construct and the specific values interpretations they articulated. The results, as the following discussion demonstrates were very revealing.

Firstly, it became apparent that there was a lot more subtlety and complexity to the cultural identities interviewees themselves constructed, compared to the essentialist cultural analysis view, which I explored earlier. For example, in an apparently homogenous group of German managers, each person had a subtly different sense of their being German and most constructed their being a manager in different ways too. Furthermore, multiple identities were at least partly related to the way people 'read' the values texts; identities both shaped and were shaped by these interpretations. Table 3.4 shows an example of some of the concepts the identity based analysis revealed and how I pulled these together to consider identities in relation to values meanings.

Table 3.4: Identities relating to values interpretations - excerpt, C (Germany)

Identities	Themes	Imagery/ metaphor	Stories	Values interpretation	
A German	Us vs Them	A war of cultures	<i>Just recently one of my people he tried to set up something which has to do with a share plan. It was so difficult [...] And there were several things where we said, you have to change the text which deals with communication in Germany, this is against the law. And they did it again and again. And later there was an email: 'we really appreciate your emotional involvement'. This was a slap in the face</i>	Straightforward <i>If you compare a German person in general, of course, and an English person, the Germans are much more open. English call it rough and call it blunt. We call it honest.</i>	
	UK- centric	Centre 'at the top of the hill' - edicts, programmes 'rolling down the hill' to the rest of business	<i>But what I started doing....to smooth down, you know, the sharpness of my language in their ears, I say 'I know that you will hate me for saying the following, but please have in mind that I am German, for example...[] or after I've said something and I see in their faces 'oh, what has she said!' and then I can say, 'I know this was very blunt, but I am German, I can't help it!' and then you make some humour around yourself...this helps very much.</i>	Trustworthy <i>Then there is a major issue, and this is what happens all the time; people feel helpless, they want to fulfil....you know how Germans are, they always fulfil what they promise. This is very cultural, you know. Germans have one thing, they are probably more entrepreneurial than others We are very trustworthy. We are trying to be very, very reliable.</i>	
		Organization as 'chain' – subsidiary is the 'last link'			
		Relationship as power struggle – images of physical and emotional violence			
		Sharp/smooth language			

Table 3.4 shows an excerpt from my data analysis, which shows how a particular cultural identity, specifically the ‘German’ identity of a respondent I have called C is constructed in the data and the relationship between this identity and meanings derived from the values message readings. C is a senior HR manager in the German office with experience of working in other multinationals. C clearly defined herself through her narrative as a highly qualified professional (multiple references to studies and degrees), a senior manager (with focus on seniority; she was very conscious of her position in the hierarchy, and frequently talked of how that hierarchy did not work as it should) and, perhaps most strongly, as a German. The latter she developed through the use of two dominant themes, *them and us* and *UK-centrism* and through forcefully told stories about her and her team’s clashes with the British way of doing things. When she came to discussing the values texts, much of her interpretation related straight back to this experience, for example

If you compare a German person in general, of course, and an English person, the Germans are much more open. English call it rough and call it blunt. We call it honest

This is very cultural, you know. Germans have one thing, they are probably more entrepreneurial than others. We are very trustworthy. We are trying to be very, very reliable.

What is surprising is that of the five German interviewees, C was the only one with such a strong ‘German’ identity, constructed almost exclusively through

the imagery of constant strife between the powerful, but 'brutal' and 'unintelligent' power centre and the more highly educated, well meaning subsidiary. Other German interviewees constructed their German identity in slightly different ways and in less emotional terms.

It was interesting for example to contrast C with S, another woman manager, this time on the Operational side. Unlike C, S had been in the organisation from the set-up of the German subsidiary and seemed very connected to the local company. She told the story of the early days, for example, when the company in Germany had the feel of a start-up, where they all '*worked hard, long hours and weekends*' and how it changed over the years, but had still essentially remained a very happy place to work. S had also worked for the business in the UK and had lived in other European countries, including Spain and France. Possibly as a result of this, her discourse was almost totally empty of *them/us* juxtapositions, presenting a largely positive picture of the organization and the communication relationships between the centre and subsidiaries. It took S quite a long time to get to talking about being German – in fact by far her strongest identity was 'people manager' and most of her value interpretations related primarily to this identity. When S did talk about being German, she did so in a distant, almost neutral way. The Germans were almost always *they* or *them*. Only once did she use *we* when she talked of what she perceived as a German characteristic, *not being afraid to be critical*, which she clearly saw as defining her as an individual, too.

Throughout the other interviews there were similar links between identities people constructed and the way they read the values messages. A British HR manager whose identities included *quiet leader*, an identity which was built through stories of his relationship with his team and through the repeated themes of *respect*, *fairness* and *doing your job*, found this identity clashing with a concept of *inspiring* which he related to a particular style of leadership (clearly not his own)

I just think very few are natural born leaders or people who can motivate people in that sense.

Some people may not be that bothered about being inspiring, maybe they are just happy to do their job. Do I need to be thinking of new ways to do things? Do I need to be pushing boundaries all the time? No, I'm just happy doing my job.

It was interesting to note that neither of the two HR professionals discussed so far, defined their identity primarily in terms of being HR managers. They of course talked about HR as their territory, but what seemed to be more significant in terms of defining their identity was their being a manager of people or a highly trained expert. In contrast, the French HR manager very clearly constructed her identity in terms of working in HR. Her discourse was full of references to recruiting and training people, supporting managers, designing and delivering reward programmes, building the business through people. These themes were very prominent also in her values definitions.

Of course I work in HR, so one of my jobs is to talk about values and because in terms of communication it is part of HR, of course. If HR doesn't show the example about values, it is a problem.

Whilst, therefore, people may be assigned similar roles and job titles, we cannot assume that they, as a result, inhabit the same cultural space. In these three cases, at least, the job these individuals did, appeared to affect their identity in subtly different ways, at least in the context of interpreting these particular message texts, at this particular point in time.

3.4.8 Summary: exploratory findings and implications for the main study

Whilst this initial study with GlobalTelco allowed me to test and fine-tune the research design and interview tools, its most important outcome was that it challenged my preconceptions about culture at the time, and provided evidence towards an alternative conceptualisation of culture as multiple, dynamic, possibly competing meanings and cultural identities constructed in discourse. More importantly the GlobalTelco study allowed me to test an alternative approach to analysing the data that would allow me to derive message related meanings and cultural frames, as well as cultural identities from a somewhat different analytical approach to the same transcripts.

As well as bringing out the significance of cultural identities for interpretation, the exploratory study also highlighted (as expected) the presence of strong shared cultural frames among employees which also influenced common

interpretations. These seemed to be primarily related to the organisational cultural context and their presence confirms that as well as a focus on identity, a focus on potentially shared cultural frames must also be maintained in my search of relationships between culture and meaning. A particularly interesting pattern in the data related strong contradictions between actualised employee meanings and meanings which appear to be potentiated by the values texts (e.g. 'this is an organisation that makes simple things complex') with a strong organisational shared frame. This suggested that studying the relationship between text and meaning, as well as between text and context (in terms of cultural frames or identities) was indeed going to be a fruitful strategy.

3.5 Main study research design

In this section I pull together the strands from the philosophy and methodology discussion and from the lessons learned from my exploratory study to outline how my main research project which is the subject of this thesis has been designed and conducted.

3.5.1 Selection of organisation

The GlobalTelco study had some implications for selecting the organisation for the main part of my research. While the original strategy of selecting a European based multinational organisation remained valid – there is certainly a continuing need in Intercultural Business Communication scholarship for building up a library of real case evidence of how culture and communication interact in such business environments (Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007) - the

selection of specific national subsidiaries was no longer necessary, as my non essentialist cultural identity approach suggested a departure from attempts to compare specific national cultural backgrounds. What was important in the new participating organisation was the true multinational character of the business, the deployment of explicit values statements and the use of English as the main language of management and workplace communication which shapes and reinforces specific cultural meanings (Charles 2007).

My aim in identifying such a company was to produce a rich illustrative case study (Yin, 1994) of the interpretation of universal management values statements in an international organisation and to test for the first time an approach to understanding the influence of the cultural context on such interpretations, which locates cultural context on the combined influences of cultural shared frames and individual cultural identities (as described in the literature review and as shown in my exploratory study).which are explored through the lens of the English written and spoken in this particular organisation.¹⁵ I have consequently selected a large European engineering firm with a global reach, large manufacturing operations in France, Germany and the UK¹⁶ and smaller setups in many other parts of the world.

For the purposes of this research I will call this company EuroCo. EuroCo is headquartered in France and employs tens of thousands of people across

¹⁵ I have already discussed some of the methodological issues relating to researching in a non-native language in section 3.3 in this chapter and discuss this again briefly later in this section and in the findings chapters

¹⁶ That these were the same countries as those 'tested' in the pilot study is simply incidental

Europe and internationally. EuroCo employees largely work in integrated teams, on cross-functional projects and many frequently travel between countries and locations. Most work within multicultural teams and many are likely to report to more than one manager, frequently of different nationality to their own and based in a different location. Despite the French headquarters, English is the official company language and employees who are not native speakers frequently use it even in their own country, as part of multinational working. The result is as Charles (2007) has discussed an organisational English which does not necessarily reflect native speaker accuracy or instincts, but is robust in achieving organisational purpose, while accommodating individual language competence. This is the English of the interviews and of the values texts under study.

3.5.2 Access and confidentiality

Access to the company was negotiated via the UK communications director, who I approached through my business network. He in turn ensured that senior management were aware about what I was proposing to do and agreed that my research could take place. A short report describing the purpose of my research and expected outcomes was circulated among managers for that purpose— the report confirmed that any publication of my results (academic or otherwise) would not reveal the name of the company, any market sensitive information, or the names of the employees involved in the research. No commitments were made about editing or withholding my data in any other way. Following that, I was given the ‘green light’ by email and the first series

of interviews were set up with employees in the UK business. I was not required to sign any formal agreement about confidentiality or the use of my research data, although I did commit to maintaining the confidentiality of individual employees, in the way I reported my findings back to the organisation.

I have, however, informally agreed to share my findings with the company in a series of presentations which I will undertake once this thesis is complete. To ensure that my promise of confidentiality is kept, I have used pseudonyms for the name of the company and employee respondents and I have also edited in the data any mention of product or specific market reference that may make it easy to identify the company or its employees. While taking care to be sensitive to the participating organisation's needs, I have also ensured that my research procedures were in line with Cranfield University's ethical code of standards for research (www.cranfield.ac.uk/about/policies), in terms of carefully documenting, critically evaluating and fairly and openly reporting my results. More details on these processes are given below.

3.5.3 Selection of respondents

Based on the exploratory study findings and the resulting decision to locate culture at least partly in cultural identities, I needed to ensure that the interviewees selected represented many different groups in the organisation. The purpose was not any more to attempt to compare homogenous groups (as a matter of fact my approach rejects the idea of pure homogeneity), but,

rather, to avoid ending up with a group of interviewees who were not representative of the type of employees who worked in the organisation overall. To achieve this I worked with my main contact to select from a list of volunteers, people who we felt presented a microcosm of the organisation.

To do this the communications director obtained from the HR department a list of employee functions and grades which we consulted to ensure that by selecting from the volunteer list we did not exclude any EuroCo employee constituencies, such as engineers, project managers, administrators and shop floor workers and that middle and junior managers as well as some senior managers and non managers were represented. We also took care to select people who came from the three countries that made up most of the EuroCo workforce and worked in different locations within these countries. The communications director then emailed our broader pool of selected volunteers – the final interviewees were those who could be available to be interviewed on certain dates on which the organisation allowed me access.

The selected interviewees represented the three main nationalities in the business, came from a range of geographical locations and roles, were members of different important projects and spanned a range of ages and experiences. They all spoke English, although some with strong accents. As I already explained the English spoken by employees were not necessarily the English of native speakers - in fact English native speakers also differed widely in their capacity to generate what would be recognised as grammatical

sentences by linguists. This is not significant to my research, or rather, what is significant is how language is used by organisational members and the discourses produced using this language, not how accurately it reflects the educated native speakers sensibilities (Charles 2007). Equally, because I share the non-essentialist view that language cannot be separated from the cultural context in which it is produced and which it generates, my interest was not on identifying interviewees who could speak English like native speakers. Rather the purpose was to engage with the English produced and 'consumed' in the organisational context and through the analysis of this language understand the process and outcomes of meaning making in that particular context.

Excluding my main contact, the UK communication director, to whom I talked primarily to gain background information, 17 other employees were interviewed about the values statements, eight in the first round, and nine in the second round of interviews (because of problems with access these took place several months apart and resulted in some interesting implications for the study which I fully describe and account for in the next chapter). Of the eight interviewees in the first round three agreed to be interviewed again in the second round (I explain the rationale for this in the next chapter). This resulted in 21 interview transcripts (including the two background interviews with the UK communications director), or a total of 354 pages of transcripts¹⁷.

¹⁷ Typed in Arial 12 with 1.5 lines space

3.5.4 Data collection

As I discussed in the methodology section my selection of semi-structured interviews as my main research tool is based on research strategies, which are consistent with my interpretive research philosophy (Mason, 2002), and with prevalent qualitative reception methodologies (Jankowski and Wester, 1991; Dworkin et al, 1999). Interviews are also consistent with approaches in business discourse studies which focus on language-in-use. Although in this field a range of other methods are possible and used to explore language in the workplace (Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007) the specific data needs created by my research question, namely the generation of 'thick' descriptions of message readings (Fairclough, 2003) and of cultural shared frames (Jensen 1991) and identities (Mick and Buhl 1992; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) point to a method for data generation which relies on interviews as focused conversations with message users and the production of rich narratives from these interviews.

In practice, although interviewees came from many different geographies, interviews with non UK employees were conducted when they were in the UK for their work. These were taped with interviewee consent. I used two devices to record the interviews, a digital device and a mini-tape recorder, thus producing a double record of each interview. For the reasons I have already outlined, interviews were conducted in English - the official language of the organisation and the language of shared meaning-making in this organisation.

Thus the texts produced through the interviews (the transcripts and interpretations of the transcripts) can be seen as reflections of the specific cultural context created by organisational leaders and organisational members and in this particular case by the researcher too, through the use of English as a communication and meaning making tool (Charles 2007).

At the outset of the interview I took time to introduce myself and briefly explain my research to each interviewee. Interviewees were told my research concerned the practice of internal communication management in multinational organisations and that my aim in the interviews was to establish how employees understand the specific value messages the organisation communicated. I told them that it is completely up to them what they wanted to say about each statement and that their confidentiality would be respected. Using a semi-structured interview design, I first asked employees to tell me about themselves and the organisation, encouraging them to expand on short answers. I then asked them to read the values statements and probed them for the meanings they assigned to the messages they were reading. I also asked more general questions about employee general reactions to these messages and explored various themes as they emerged in their narratives. This part of the methodology was already tested in the pilot study with good results.

One thing I did change from the pilot was to control my occasional impatience when interviewees seemed to veer off the point by engaging in what initially

seemed to be an irrelevant story. Having seen how significant stories proved at meaning construction and, more specifically, at identity construction during the exploratory study I was particularly keen to see these stories emerge and did not rush to 'nip them in the bud', but rather let them develop fully, even when it was not obvious where they were leading. This produced much longer narratives, but also narratives which proved much richer data grounds, as I show in my discussion of findings.

At the same time as the main interview data, I conducted two interviews with my main company contact with the purpose of collecting background information about the company context and the purpose of the values statements. These two interviews were conducted at the beginning of the two periods during which I was collecting data in the organisation and were also taped and transcribed. I also collected documents such as management reports and presentations about the re-organisation and current issues of the company magazine. I used these as sources for understanding the organisational context, but did not treat them as data in the same way as the interviews in that I did not apply any form of systematic analysis to them. On the other hand I consider the values statements -which were provided by the organisation in the form of PowerPoint slides and shown in the next chapter- as data, and I will explain below how I approached the analysis of these texts.

3.5.5 Unit of analysis

From an analytical perspective my research provides a rich case study within which each individual respondent and the meanings they construct are individual cases. Within each case I consider the unit of analysis to be the specific instance of interpretation, or meaning constructed in response to the reading of a particular value text.

3.5.6 Data analysis

The interview data was analysed using the double analysis technique I developed and tested during my exploratory study and which I have already described in this chapter. First, using an iterative coding and code reduction process, I analysed respondent interviews focusing on coding message readings and themes relating to the organisational and socio-cultural context and to responses to the values texts, overall. Secondly, I analysed each transcript again focusing on the construction of individual cultural identities. Whereas the focus in the first level of analysis was on cross-sectional indexing (Mason, 2002) – for example coding the meaning for ‘ambitious’ across all interviews in order to be able to compare meanings and determine ‘shared’ meaning around this term - the focus of the second level of analysis was on the single employee case (Mason, 2002).

In the latter process, each interview transcript was treated as a separate narrative in which the story of an individual life, as well as representational meanings, was constructed. To derive and describe the cultural identities my

respondents constructed, I first went through each interview repeatedly, identifying and coding specific narrative/discourse elements – the use of metaphors, images, stories, themes – as well as specific lexis and linguistic constructions (e.g. deixis) which were used by individuals to construct their cultural identities. Sometimes codes for these identities were immediately evident as they were already present in the data, where the interviewees themselves gave their identities labels - '*as an environmental engineer*', for example.

In other cases clear labels took time to emerge, and 'holding' identities were used in the coding process and then changed as it became clearer what the identity was about. For example, an identity which started as a '*global citizen*' became eventually a '*local man who travelled far*' as I reflected more on how the particular individual was relating various experiences in his life to his identity and how his own language and storytelling reflected this identity. Following again an iterative process of interpretation and reduction I went through the data connecting the identity related themes, stories etc with specific identity labels, until a small set of identities emerged for each individual, which appeared to make sense of and connect all the narrative and linguistic identity constructing elements I had identified in the analysis. The outcome was a small set of cultural identities describing each individual respondent – I discuss these in detail in the next chapter. Finally, at this first stage of analysis I carefully read the values texts using linguistic discourse analysis (Jensen, 1991b) to identify potentiated meanings (Mick et al, 2004),

i.e. meanings which appear to be privileged by the selection of specific linguistic and rhetorical terms, the way terms and texts combine or contrast, and characteristics such as the explicitness of language. This I discuss in detail in the next chapter.

During the next stage of interpretation I first compared and categorised the actualised meanings employees constructed with the meanings the two texts potentiated and worked across the transcripts to identify patterns of shared and different meanings. I then searched for connections between each of the actualised meanings and the cultural frames and identities respondents constructed, by looking at where these appeared together or were connected by means of common themes in the same discourse excerpts. I finally looked at how these shared frames and identities related to meaning patterns – namely where a meaning was shared by a majority or a minority of employees. The results are discussed in detail in the next two chapters, where I also reflect on my use of English as a researcher and the relation to my interpretation of findings including identity construction.

3.5.7 Research quality and reliability

Whereas conventional concepts of research reliability and validity do not sit comfortably with interpretative inquiry, particularly where such research focuses so extensively on interviewee constructions and the interpretations of such constructions (Mason, 2002; Johnson and Harris, 2002), qualitative

researchers should not avoid setting some parameters which ensure their research can be considered trustworthy by peers (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002).

Mason (2002) argues that, although qualitative researchers cannot deploy the terms *validity* and *reliability* in the same way positivist researchers do, namely to refer to external objective means of validating their research instruments and results, they can still deploy these terms to demonstrate that their research is accurate, rigorous and accountable. Instead of applying some kind of universal methodological rules, therefore, the qualitative researcher should employ “critical and reflexive practice” to consider and demonstrate the quality of her research (Seale, 1999). This critical and reflexive practice centres around asking some fundamental questions about the design, process and results of the research, such as: “*are my concepts meaningful and appropriate for the phenomenon I am studying; have I designed and carried out the research carefully and accurately; have I analysed my data carefully and accurately? Are my conclusions supported by my data analysis? Are they more widely applicable?*” (Mason, 2002:40) The latter point refers to the idea of generalisability of research. It is of course important for the researcher to both reflect on and to be able to show that her answers to these questions are clear.

Similarly Johnson and Harris (2002) argue that to do that qualitative researchers need to show transparency and authenticity in data interpretation; and that they can do this by:

- making the interpretation process explicit beforehand
- establishing a clear trail of evidence which others can follow
- showing that they are drawing this evidence from across their complete data set (quoting from all interviews for example)
- ensuring that they produce 'thick' descriptions which capture the complexity of the data (see also Miles and Huberman, 1994)
- demonstrating that they have considered rival explanations for their findings

I believe that my research meets the criteria discussed both by Mason (2002) and by Johnson and Harris (2002). I have, for example, spent much of this chapter demonstrating that my research concepts are meaningful in the context of the phenomenon I am studying and that my research methods are both congruent with my philosophy as a researcher and appropriate for answering the research question.

As I discussed in the literature review, my approaches to data analysis are well tested in different literatures (qualitative reception and identity literatures for example) although I put them together here for practically the first time. In discussing my exploratory study process and revised research design I have provided a fairly detailed description of how I conducted my data analysis and gave examples of that analysis. In the data discussion chapters that follow I present my findings in terms of 'thick' descriptions (Miles and Huberman, 1994), I take care to show how I reach certain interpretations and how I draw

conclusions about patterns and relationships in the data, both by explicitly highlighting where alternative explanations are considered and by deploying multiple examples drawn from across my data set.

Finally, on the point of generalisability, I have argued here that my main aim is to provide an exploration of a little studied business communication phenomenon and to build a rich illustrative case study. Where generalisations are possible, I believe they will relate to the particular type of international business environment present in the company under study – I discuss this in the findings. Further generalisations will emerge by relating my findings to other empirical research and extant theory. This I do in chapter six.

3.6 Summary of chapter

In this chapter I first outlined a spectrum of ontological and epistemological positions and located myself in the interpretivist part of that spectrum by identifying my philosophy as a combination of constructionism and perspective/constrained idealism. I then went on to revisit my research question and to discuss the data I would need to generate and the most appropriate methodologies (qualitative) and tools (interviews and discourse analysis) I could employ to generate this data.

The second part of the chapter described in detail an early exploratory study which tested an early research design in a European multinational setting. As well as demonstrating that the research design was successful in producing

message readings which could be described and compared, it most importantly showed up the limitations of an essentialist approach to cultural context and the potential of a non-essentialist identity based approach.

In the third part of the chapter I outlined the research design which guided the present study, and described the practical steps I took to select a research organisation, negotiate access, select a respondent sample and collect and analyse data. I finally reflected on issues of research quality and argued that evidence for this in line with qualitative research protocols has been provided throughout this chapter and will be further provided in the data presentation and discussion chapters by means of demonstrating the clarity and appropriateness of my concepts and methods and by showing that my data properly supports my interpretations and conclusions. In the next three chapters I present my research findings in detail and discuss them against extant literature.

CHAPTER FOUR
TEXTS, CONTEXT AND IDENTITIES:
SETTING THE SCENE FOR THE PRESENTATION OF
FINDINGS

4.1 Chapter purpose and structure

The purpose of this chapter is to set the scene for the detailed discussion of meanings generated by the reading of the EuroCo values statements, by providing information about the macro and micro context within which the value readings were obtained. This will cover the organisational and industry context, background on the individual interviewees, and the context of the interviews in which the data was obtained. I will, finally, briefly discuss the values texts used in the interviews, focusing particularly on any linguistic and rhetorical features which may be seen as providing particular interpretative frames for employees. In the next chapter I will discuss the meanings generated in more detail and relate them both to cultural frames and discourses apparent in the data as well as aspects of cultural identities.

4.2 Organisational context

Before I discuss how the values messages were interpreted by EuroCo employees, I want to briefly outline the context within which these interpretations took shape. Here I draw primarily from direct information provided by my main contact in the company, the UK communications director, in two interviews at the beginning of each research phase, data from the actual employee interviews,¹⁸ as well as external and internal media coverage about the organisation, at the time of the study. Internal media includes the company magazine and a series of management presentations

¹⁸ As explained in the methodology chapter a small part of the interview aimed to generate data about the organisational context

and reports to which I had access throughout my engagement with the organisation.

At the time the first set of interviews were conducted, EuroCo was recovering from a highly publicised delay in the delivery to market of its flagship new product, which I here call 'Pegasus', and an insider trading scandal involving some of its senior executives who had since been removed from post. The new leadership team had embarked upon a major re-organisation plan, which they called the '*Power8 programme*'. This involved the restructuring of the business across the four European countries of operation, with major changes to working processes and reporting lines, in search of '*a more integrated business model*'.¹⁹

One of the restructuring outcomes was the divestment and consolidation of a number of sites, resulting in thousands of employees either losing their jobs or transferring to a new employer. In their official communications leaders framed these changes which also involved a considerable focus on cost saving, in terms of '*safeguarding the company's future*' by '*creating a new industrial footprint*' and a '*truly transnational business model*'. This the company claimed they would do best by concentrating on their '*core competencies*' and working with '*risk sharing partners*' to whom they would be selling some of the sites. Sites at each of the major countries of operation

¹⁹ I use single quotation marks where I quote from actual management communication or from interview data relating to the organisational context. In this particular case, as evidenced in examples of written management communication, 'integrated business model' was used together with 'transnational business' consistently by management to frame some of the changes in working practices and process harmonisation they were putting in place.

(France, UK, Germany) had been identified for selling on or restructuring. The first interviews were thus conducted in the middle of a climate of uncertainty and distrust. Many employees indicated in the interviews that they were worried about their or their friends' future employment status and pension rights. Also, the extensive restructuring in progress, they suggested, meant that many reporting lines had either just changed or were in the process of changing, with communication problems in evidence, particularly where new teams -most of them multicultural, with remote management - had not yet established clear communication lines. This is described in the following quote from a British manager

It's quite difficult in that way. I mean matrix management is something which I'm sure we are aware of, but it's complicated by the fact that your bosses are overseas and they are from different cultures and different backgrounds. So they have one way of working and I have traditionally another way and it's not that either of us are right or wrong, it's just we have to find a way of working together, so communication can be difficult [because] we don't physically see each other very often.

Recent employee opinion research had indicated problems of low morale. That was confirmed by the UK communications director, who talked about motivation as the *'key issue that management has to deal with at the moment'*. A number of official management communications at the time seemed to acknowledge that point – for example an interview with the new HR VP in the company newspaper. Most importantly, when the key strategic

goals of the business were announced, a couple of weeks before my interviews begun 'restoring employee motivation' was included in these as an explicit goal. Employee interviews also reflected this. This administrator in one of the company's British factories, for example, talks about demotivation in her workplace and puts it in the context of some of the things I have already discussed:

I think it's just something that's developed over the last 12/18 months where we're lagging behind in [product] deliveries, we couldn't deliver our Pegasus on time because of problems, we've had a pay issue which has just been settled, which has been going on since last year, senior managers leaving the company, rumours, you know, are always rife about, you are probably aware, you know, that we're having to sell off sites and things to save money and people are losing jobs.

Nine months later, when I returned to complete my interviews, according to both my key informant and to the employees I interviewed, many of the planned changes were in progress, many employees had already transferred to their new employers and the integration appeared to be bedding in, although motivation was still seen as an issue. This is described, for example, by this French project manager

It is becoming more and more important now that they want to, er, how do you say, um, increase people morale; they want to, you know, to be, to have motivation; again with power8 and all those things that we had

to go through, and to deal with, it's quite a change of culture for us, and that's the new message, for me anyway.

At the same time official management communication channels, such as the company magazine and monthly briefing documents about strategy, indicated that the focus in management discourse had shifted from the previous year, from stories of crisis and the need for change, to building a strong future through *'innovation'* and *'eco-efficiency'*. A new vision had just been announced and a plan for achieving that vision, based, according to the UK communications director *'on the four pillars of integration, innovation, internationalisation and engagement'* had been published.

Finally, it is interesting to note that in the context of so much change and uncertainty, some of which touched them personally, most employees conveyed in their interviews a clear pride in the product, the business and its reputation and an interesting mix of excitement and frustration about the present and the future. As this French interviewee put it

[the values messages are there] to reinforce the message that people are working for a great company, and that we need to do our best to make it stay a great company.

In particular, change and integrated working were presented both as a challenge and as a necessity, as an opportunity and as a frustration. While positive aspects of change were frequently linked to individual and team

triumphs, the negative aspects were related to the size, complexity of the organisation and to organisational bureaucracy - as reflected in this quote by a French manager

As we say in French it is difficult to shake a mammoth, that's slang for a big, big organisation for example, [], but that needed to happen and yeah we had to shake the mammoth! So it's not an easy task!

4.3 The values message users: constructing cultural identities

Including my main contact at EuroCo, the UK communications director, I interviewed (in some cases twice) eighteen employees from a range of backgrounds. These included managers, office workers, engineers and manufacturing employees; British, French and German nationals; people based at a number of different geographic locations, including some who had worked in different countries around the world.

Table 4.1 at the end of this section provides a summary of interviewee profiles. The first column identifies the individual interviewee with one or two initials and a transcript number. Column two indicates the external groups in which the individual belongs in terms of nationality, gender and profession – note that although I do use these labels for practical reasons, for example as signposts when I talk about certain interviewees, my purpose here is not to use these labels as determinants of interviewee cultural make-up. As I have explained in the methodology chapter, for this purpose I will look instead to interviewees' own concepts of cultural identity, as these develop throughout

their interviews and as they are reflected in the labels *they* choose for themselves, the stories they tell and the themes they repeatedly access to shape these identities.

The cultural identities employees constructed during the interviews are summarised in column three of table 4.1. I discuss these in more detail below. Finally, the last table column shows the identity code I have assigned to each respondent, based on one or two of their most prominent identities. I do this for practical purposes, so that I can relate quotes from the data to specific individuals, indicating a salient or prominent identity feature at the same time. The reader must be aware that this does not indicate that the particular identity or identities selected to represent respondents are in any way 'fixed' or that they are present in every interpretation of that particular individual.

As is shown in the table below and, I go on to demonstrate in more detail in the next chapter, in most cases the cultural identities my interviewees constructed were somewhat different from external identity markers -such as *German, engineer or manager*- although external labels such as these were used to shape more complex identities. For example, the young German engineer I have called O (Transcript 16) defined her engineering identity very much in contrast to 'old, traditional engineers' who were 'set in their ways' and were not interested in learning and developing.

I think the average age compared to other engineering offices here generally in EuroCo, it is very low average age. There is a lot of young

employees. Within the engineering team there is a lot of people who have done the same scheme as I am doing right now and who are also in the engineering teams so there is a lot of young engineers coming but there is still obviously the senior people, managers, people who have been doing the same job for maybe 20/30 years, who are usually leading the teams, so sometimes there is kind of opposition there, or misunderstandings

To O, her engineering identity was very close to her identity as a recent student and an apprentice, with the emphasis on learning and growing. Similarly, a French engineer who headed a department responsible for environmental affairs (Transcript 9), clearly defined herself as an *environmental engineer* – in contrast to other types of engineers (with the theme of ‘environmental challenges’ prominent throughout her discourse. While both she and a young German project manager (K, Transcript 14) defined themselves as young professionals, it was only the latter to whom being a professional *woman* in a male dominated world seemed to be significant for her identity.

Also being female in a kind of men’s world it’s harder, I think, to get more jobs with more responsibilities. It’s not that, you know, sometimes they kind of no-one would say it, but certain positions, I think, they would rather have a man, because that’s our world, how it is.

Not surprisingly, most constructed identities seem to relate in one way or another to the person's organisational experience, although not necessarily to their professional function or type of work. For example, it is LB's (Transcript 4) experiences as a company representative in many countries across the world rather than his engineer and management backgrounds, that gives him his 'local man who travelled far' identity, and his long affiliation and total identification with the business – proudly telling the story of being there when they built their first ever EuroCo product– that makes him a 'EuroCo man'

EuroCo for me, obviously, being a EuroCo man, it's the number one [product name] manufacturer in the world. We've come from being what I would suggest as like a small acorn, and we've grown into a mighty oak tree now

J (Transcript 3), an HR manager who in her narrative very carefully maintains a discourse close to official 'management speak', presents herself as an HR specialist, but also as an 'expert and strategist', with the latter two much more prominent identities in her talk. A young PA who works in the same UK head-office – LF (Transcript 5) - and has a very fluid role supporting a finance team, sees herself as a 'key communicator', an identity which shifts to 'a key communicator without information' in our second interview nine months later (Transcript 19), when I find her troubled by her relationship with her new boss and her inability to make things work in a new role and team.

I think it takes away your self-confidence and that's where I am at the moment actually. I have a situation where I am trying to resolve a

communication problem with my manager where I can't be transparent with him because um, I can see him switch off, he's not interested. He quite clearly has something in his mind and that's what he wants, but he doesn't actually tell you what he wants.

While the majority of my interviewees worked in multicultural teams and/or had to work with employees from different nationalities on a regular basis, nationality or ethnicity was not always prominent in identity construction. This does not mean that identities which drew on the individual's nationality or nationalities were not constructed, however. As in my pilot data, where such identities were constructed these were not homogenous, but rather pluralistic. R, for example (Transcript 17) a German national of Indian parentage constructed a mixed Indian/German national identity which he admitted constantly shifts depending on where he is and what he is doing. D (Transcript 2), whose discourse constituted a polemic against the new French dominated regime which he contrasted with a somewhat romanticised past of what the UK business used to be, was the only British interviewee who strongly defined himself as a *British manager*.

So for me that was, it was good to be owned by a British company because of the management ethos that was in place at that time. Post 2001 we changed quite significantly to this functionally hierarchical company, which was really run by French guys primarily, and as I detect it, the French management style is quite autocratic. You don't

normally question the French managers' direction, you just say 'yes, how high do you want me to jump?'

I (Transcript 9), a French national working in the UK constructed a shifting French identity by, interestingly, shifting in her discourse between an inclusive 'we' and a differentiating 'they' when talking about her French colleagues.

But the way you think is all to do with how you have been taught, and it makes a big difference in how then you approach problems and go forward and analyse and I think maybe, I have been influenced by both so I am quite lucky because I've got the French more stronger in the theory, I think, and the more pragmatic practical ways of the British side, so I have learned from both, so it's quite good.

Finally, some identities were not work related at all – 'family man' (T1), 'wife and mother' (T8), 'rugged outdoors bloke' (T2)-, although these were not anywhere near as prominent across all cases as the work based identities. This again was consistent with my pilot findings. This British factory worker's identity of 'family man' is constructed through frequent mentions of his family but also by presenting the company, where both he and his father have worked, as another family – which used to take care of its people, in a way it does not do anymore. Both of these themes are present in this poignant story he tells about his father's recent illness

There used to be a lot of compassion. My father used to work here and he's only just finished; he had cancer last year and, er, he was on long term sick for a while. Now EuroCo policy when you are on long term

sick is the human resources rep to visit you once a month and that's written down, but he didn't see anyone for 4 or 5 months. You know the compassion had gone and it's not just in my father's case, it's in a lot of cases.

In my data discussion I will present more evidence of identities as they are constructed in discourse, in order to show how these and the personal themes that helped construct them, influence specific interpretations.

Table 4.1: Interviewees and their constructed identities

Interviewee	Description	Constructed identities	Identity Code (CI)
B (T1)	Factory worker, male, British	Family man Working man Practical man	Working man
D (T2)	Engineer, senior manager, male, British	British manager Involving manager Engineer Rugged outdoors bloke	Involving British manager
J (T3)	HR manager, female, British	Expert Strategist HR specialist Woman manager	Expert, strategist
LB (T4)	Senior project manager, male, British	EuroCo man Local-man-who- travelled far	EuroCo man
LF (T5)	Administrator, female, British	Key communicator People person Solid, reliable team member	Key communicator
W (T6)	Factory administrator male, British	Not a manager Simple northern 'bloke' A man with little power	Not a manager
SF (T7)	Factory supervisor, male, British	Self-made team leader	Self -made team leader
SB (T8)	Factory administrator, female, British	Wife and mother Trustworthy person Team member	Wife and mother

I (T9)	Engineer, female, French	Environmental engineer Team head EuroCo child Young professional (keen to learn) French person at large	Environment engineer, professional
F (T10)	Engineer, male, French	Transnational manager Design engineer Leader of multicultural team Growing Manager Manager in the British tradition	Transnational manager
MP (T11)	Administrator, male, French	HR person Language graduate Not an engineer French	HR person, French
P (T12)	Project manager, male, French	Contributor One of the management Leader who needs direction French	Contributor
T (T13)	Engineer, Male, French	Subcontractor Engineer	Subcontractor, Engineer
K (T14)	Project manager, female, German	Young professional woman In-between-cultures	Professional woman
J (T15)	Engineer, male, German	Little-guy-doing-his-job Engineer	Little-guy-doing-his-job
O (T16)	Engineer, female, German	Apprentice/learner Young engineer A flexible German Team member	Young engineer
R (T17)	Engineer and manager, male German	'Proper' Engineer Team Manager Indian/German	'Proper' engineer, manager
IA (T18)	Communication manager, male, British	Team manager Communicator Father	Team manager
LF (T19) (second interview)	Administrator, female, British	Key communicator - no information Victim Mother	Key communicator – no information
W (T20) (second interview)	Factory administrator Male, British	A man with little power Remote member	A man with little power
IA (T21) (second interview)	Communication manager, male, British	Communicator Team manager Project leader	Communicator

4.4 The values messages

At the time I negotiated access with EuroCo I was told that the company was interested in understanding how its values were being understood by its employees across the business, as they had just undergone a period of crisis, and were in the process of a large re-organisation programme. A new strategy was being put together, but at that stage it was not clear whether this would also lead to a new set of values. At the beginning of my research the values statement I was given to test was one that had pre-existed the re-organisation and one that employees should have seen many times before. That was not in itself a problem, as these statements were still used extensively in leadership communication and in performance management. The interviews did indeed confirm this text's currency and its ability to produce very interesting meanings when read (see the discussion in the next two chapters).

Then I had to deal with an unexpected change. My access to the company to complete my interviews was delayed for a considerable number of months largely due to external market conditions, which had internal repercussions. By the time I returned to complete my interviews, organisational leaders had decided to introduce a new values statement. At that point I had three choices: to ignore the new statement and concentrate on the one I had already collected data on; to start my research all over again, ignoring the data I had already collected and only collect data relating to the new values statement, or to try and collect data on both statements.

As the second values text dealt with many of the same concepts as the first text, but was significantly different from the former in style and language (see figures 4.1 and 4.2 at the end of this section) I felt that by deciding to ignore one or the other I would be compromising the research. Here was an opportunity to study a phenomenon in its real context, with all the complexity that management actions such as the introduction of a new values text presented. To try to manipulate that context or reduce that complexity might have provided an easier research setting, but would have been incongruent with the research philosophy and methodology position I outlined so far (see for example Mason, 2002). Most of all it would have been, I felt, a missed opportunity. Testing the meanings generated by two texts and specifically two texts which dealt with the same concepts in different expressive ways, would produce further insights about how values statements work in real employee settings. This proved to be very interesting as I will show in my findings.

4.4.1 Comparing the language and framing of the two values texts

The earlier of the two values texts (Figure 4.1) consists of six simple one line statements. Each statement starts with a word or phrase that provides a label for the value described by the rest of the statement. These are either adjectives or nouns which seem to define the sort of organization EuroCo is or wants to be seen as - *innovative* or *ambitious*, for example. That these values are to be seen primarily as organisational characteristics, as opposed to, for example, directives for employees to follow, seems to be strengthened by the fact that all six statements are couched in the present tense, combined with

the first person plural – an inclusive ‘we’. So, *we build relationships, we strive for excellence, we deliver our commitments*, and so on. These simple linguistic choices seem to privilege a ‘*this is who we are*’ or ‘*this is the sort of organisation we aim to be*’ meaning over a ‘*this is how we expect you to behave*’ meaning. Employees do not necessarily perceive this, however. Many, influenced perhaps by expectations related to the ‘genre’ of mission/values statements (Swales and Rogers, 1995) see the statement as a description of desired behaviours, as this German engineer suggests:

I think it is just to push people to have the right behaviours, to guide, or maybe putting the values forward is the one that you are going to be judged on and make sure that people are developing the right behaviours

The few words used in each statement provide a broad interpretative framework, rather than detailed instructions. For example, ‘*people make the difference*’ potentiates a first level meaning that people are important, but what exactly this means to the organisation and to its employees remains implicit. A number of meanings are, as a result, equally possible. That the organisation needs good people, for example, or that the organisation takes care of its people, because it values their contribution. Or even that the organisation puts its employees first, ahead of profit, for example. The other statements are similarly short and highly implicit. One assumes that leaders rely largely on a shared context, rather than the text itself to facilitate the right interpretations. This, as I will show in the next section does happen, not

always, however, to produce meanings that organisational leaders would expect or indeed approve of.

In contrast, the new values text, issued in 2009 (figure 4.2) is detailed and highly explicit. This also comprises six values, which in most cases include similar concepts to the ones described in the early statement, but each of the individual values statements provides much more information to employees, as it is comprised of a number of clauses describing specific actions to be taken in order to deliver the 'value'. Thus the organisation can be said to try to control employee interpretations more precisely, by framing each value more explicitly. On the other hand, the sheer amount of information and combination of diverse concepts under the same value heading could be potentially problematic, creating inconsistencies and conflicts.

Why, for instance, are two values which stood separately before, *innovation* and *reliability*, combined here? Surely, the call to *continuously champion change and innovation* while at the same time asking people to *be process focused* and *to make realistic commitments* makes two different sorts of demands on employees, which cannot be easily reconciled? Or is it precisely this marriage of seemingly incompatible concepts such as *standardisation* and *excellence*, that is central to the meaning of these new statements? One could argue, for example, that rather than introducing complexity and inconsistency, what the second text does – albeit not necessarily always very expertly – is to attempt to introduce a new organisational discourse about a much more

measured, realistic approach to doing business, being explicit as it is about both challenges and contradictions and accepting the need for compromises. In contrast, the earlier text arguably takes a much more simplistic approach, presenting a positive, perhaps even heroic, and, one could argue, unattainable, picture of the organisation.

Another key difference with the new values text is its general tone and modality. In short, the new EuroCo values text is no longer the short inclusive identity descriptor of the organisation, but it is rather presented primarily as a set of instructions. This is first evident in the title or heading of each value which more explicitly suggests that these are behaviours for EuroCo people to follow. Although the verbs in these initial head sentences could be seen as expressed in the present tense (as in *EuroCo People...Act with Courage*), the rest of the statements unambiguously use the imperative voice (*build, understand, share the long term vision* and so on). As a result, this second statement unlike the earlier one potentiates a strong ‘*thou shalt do...*’ interpretation. It is very surprising, therefore, that employees do not perceive this difference to any large degree, but rather see the second statement largely as a more detailed version of the first. The following comments from a British administrator and German engineer respectively are indicative of this

They're pretty much in line with what I think we discussed before. I think maybe the wording is just a little bit different.

I don't think it is there to police you or say you have to do this, or otherwise you have a problem. I think overall the company wants to encourage that behaviour, and, if a person is lacking in some of this behaviour then the company can offer certain help.

In summary, while the second values statement covers more or less the same values territory as the earlier one, it presents these values in very different ways; it is much more explicit and openly directive for example, combining concepts which were earlier presented separately, and do not necessarily fit together. While both statements are arguably full of the same popular management rhetoric, the newer text could be said to seek to control more precisely employee interpretations, than the first text ever did. In discussing the data I will examine to what extent this actually happens.

Figure 4.1 Existing EuroCo Values Statement

EuroCo Values:

- Customer focused: Customer satisfaction is our absolute priority
- Ambitious: We strive for excellence – our ambition is for EuroCo to be the reference
- Reliable: We always deliver our commitments
- Innovative: We shape the future
- People: People make the difference!
- Honest: We build relationships that are based on trust

Figure 4.2 New EuroCo Values Statement

<p><u>EuroCo People...Act with Courage</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build, understand, share the long term vision in a meaningful and inspiring way, and check actions are aligned to vision • Take fair and courageous decisions in the interests of EuroCo and take responsibility for their consequences • Deploy/follow policy and SMART objectives 	<p><u>EuroCo People...Practice Teamwork & Global Integration</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get things done through global networks, common process, methods and tools, within and outside EuroCo • Be a team player across cultures and organizations • Use and develop the best resources available wherever they are in the world
<p><u>EuroCO People...Drive Innovation & Deliver Reliably</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make realistic commitments and deliver to internal and external customers on time, cost, and quality • Continuously champion change, innovation, eco-efficiency and improvement • Be process-focused, striving for lean efficiency, standardisation & excellence 	<p><u>EuroCo People...Face Reality & Be Transparent</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge, face and proactively address/solve conflict and problems • Be open in working relationships and trust others to share openly • Act with integrity and in compliance with applicable regulations
<p><u>EuroCo People...Generate Customer Value</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand and anticipate customer needs, expectations and business in order to add value • Bring mature and differentiating innovation in our products, services and technologies to the market 	<p><u>EuroCo People...Develop Myself & Others</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide/contribute to a working environment in which people can develop key competencies, grow and learn from mistakes • Respect, support and recognize others • Continuously learn, coach and engage others

4.5 Summary of chapter

In this chapter I presented background information about the multinational engineering organisation called EuroCo, which provided the business context for my study, the values message texts the organisation deployed and the employees who I interviewed about the meanings they assigned to these messages. My purpose in doing so was to set the scene for the presentation in the next chapter of the meanings employees constructed when reading each of the values texts and the relationships that were apparent in their narratives between these meanings and shared cultural frames and/or cultural identities constructed in discourse.

The first part of this chapter described EuroCo immediately before and during the period I was conducting my research. That period was characterised by upheaval, uncertainty and major change, as the company, attempting to deal with a number of supply, market and management problems, was both divesting itself of plants, products and people and was radically integrating its operations across Europe. The influence of this experience was clearly evident in the employee narratives, although change related discourses were by no means the only shared frames that influenced interpretation. I indicated in this chapter other common themes in the employee transcripts, such as the shared pride in the product and the reputation of the business, which appeared very strong, despite some of the more negative change related experiences. Change itself did not always appear as a negative theme in the

narratives, but was also related to personal and organisational opportunity and success.

I have also presented here an introduction to my interviewees and the identities they constructed and a coding system which uses one or two prevalent identities as a 'short code' to refer to each employee in the data discussion in the next chapter. I also presented some identity examples to show how these identities drew from external group memberships, such as organisational membership, profession or nationality, but were still constructed differently by employees who, on the face of it, seemed to inhabit the same cultural space. Although most identities related to the workplace experience, some seemed to be at least partly external to it. Not all of the identities constructed by employees were equally important in the interpretation process, however. I will show that in the next chapter, where I examine in more detail those identities which did appear to be instrumental in shaping interpretations.

I concluded by discussing the two values statements I explored in the interviews and pointed out how their linguistic and rhetorical features may suggest different potentiated meanings, despite the fact that they appear to cover, more or less the same types of concepts. This assumption, that differences in the way the two message texts have been articulated, although not consciously recognised by respondents, will nevertheless influence interpretations, will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE
PRESENTATION OF DATA

5.1 Chapter purpose and structure

The purpose of this chapter is to present my data in a systematic way in order to address each of the elements of the research question in turn, namely:

Q1. How are universal values messages interpreted by employees in multinational organisations, i.e. what meanings do they create?

Q2. To what extent are meanings shared between employees of different cultural backgrounds and to what extent are they different?

Q3. How does culture²⁰ influence these meanings?

The main discussion in this chapter, therefore, will focus on three areas: Firstly, on the various meanings generated by the readings of the values messages the organisation deployed, and the extent to which these related to the texts themselves, pointing out potentiated vs. actualised meanings and manifest vs. latent meanings, for example. Secondly, on the patterns of meanings generated for each value text, pointing out shared meanings, as well as particularly interesting minority meanings, i.e. meanings which were shared by a minority among the employee respondents. Finally, and most importantly, on the conclusions we can draw about the relationship between meanings and culture, as reflected in shared cultural frames and in cultural identities constructed in discourse.

²⁰ As I have explained in the methodology chapter in this study I understand 'culture' to be a dynamic web of meanings reflected and enacted in discourse and not a stable, deterministic variable external to the discourse under study.

5.2 Actualised meanings, text, context and identity

This section discusses the meanings generated by the two EuroCo values statements and explores the evidence regarding the relationship between these meanings, cultural frames present in the data and cultural identities. Discussion of the evidence is organised in the following way. I begin with the earlier, shorter values text. Taking each one of the values terms in turn, for example the term 'ambitious', I first look to the text for the meanings it, arguably, potentiates, because of the way it has been articulated²¹. I then look to the interview data to show the meanings which were actually generated when employees read the same texts and show how these relate to the potentiated meanings. I then discuss which meanings were shared among message readers and which were not.

Finally, for each of the shared meanings and some of the most interesting individual meanings, I go back to the data to look for cues which point to cultural influences. I present excerpts from the employee narratives which show how specific cultural identities and identity themes interact with different values statements to shape specific meanings. I also show how at several instances respondents appear to access specific shared, organisational

²¹ Although the reading of these potentiated meanings does inevitably reflect my own interpretive frameworks as a management researcher and communication consultant, I believe, like Philo (2008), among others, that the 'framing' of the texts, namely the specific lexico-grammatical choices deployed can be used as reasonable clues to articulate potential meanings by the researcher. By doing so, I am not arguing that I have 'discovered' all the meanings possible in the text, neither that all the meanings I articulate are the meanings leaders would like employees to share. I am simply pointing to what I perceive to be likely interpretations of the texts because of the way these texts have been constructed. This provides a useful starting point against which to discuss the actualised meanings employees themselves constructed.

cultural frames and discourses²² to articulate or support a particular meaning. I begin the discussion as I did in the interviews with the earlier, established statement and draw from readings of the second, 2009 statement to compare and contrast or to support a point, as appropriate.

5.2.1 The meaning of ‘ambitious’

I will begin with the meanings generated by the value statement ‘ambitious’ as this is the only concept which, interestingly, does not appear again in the second values text. This, I believe, is significant as it signals a change in tone and positioning for the company, and a subtle shift from a more heroic organisational discourse presented in the first values text, to a more measured, realistic one constructed in the second.

The ‘ambitious’ statement reads: *Ambitious: We strive for excellence- our ambition is for EuroCo to be the reference.* A number of meanings are potentiated by this statement: that EuroCo is a company that seeks to be top in its industry, and that being at the top necessitates a joint effort among employees to achieve ‘excellence’ – one assumes in everything they do, but particularly in product design and manufacture. These potentiated meanings are certainly actualised and, as is shown in the following examples and in table 5.1 below, they are widely shared among employees.

²²Here I use *discourse* in Watson’s sense “A connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitute a way of talking about a particular issue, thus framing the way people understand and respond to that issue” (1995: 814). I talk of *frames and discourses* in my data, rather than just *frames*, because sometimes the themes accessed by employees are broader and more fluid than single frames. I see frames as linked to broader discourses which shape them (Jensen, 1991b; Tietze et al, 2003).

'Ambitious, strive for excellence', well, obviously we always want the best processes, you know, we want EuroCo to be number one.

British senior project manager/ EuroCo man

'To be the reference' is to try to always be on the top, try to lead by excellence, so try to achieve the best; that we don't be satisfied by something which is just copying the competition. Always try to push the boundaries and be the best company to try new technology

French engineer /Transnational manager

Well, obviously, it's striving to be a world leader and to beat Americo, ambitious in ways, I suppose, in creating new [products] such as the Pegasus, you know, which is obviously probably the biggest investment project, that's ever been launched by EuroCo

British factory worker / Working man

As well as these manifestly potentiated meanings, a number of other meanings were actualised in employee readings. One of these –'to be market leaders, we must beat Americo' (shown in the third quote above) - can be said to be implicit in the text. Others - like 'personal ambition is a good/bad thing'- were more idiosyncratic and may, at first glance, be considered as more personal to individual readers. Table 5.1 summarises the meanings the

'ambitious' text generated and shows which meanings were shared and by whom (this is shown by transcript numbers).

Table 5.1 Summary of actualised meanings for the value 'ambitious'

Type	Meaning	Actualised by
Potentiated (explicitly)	We are/must be market leaders	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T7, T8 T9, T10, T13, T14, T15, T17
	To be market leaders we must pursue technical excellence	T1, T2, T3, T5, T6, T7, T8 T9, T10, T11, T14, T15, T17
Potentiated (implicitly)	To be market leaders we must beat AmeriCo	T1, T3, T4, T5, T7 T10, T11, T13, T17
	Personal ambition is good – I am ambitious	T1, T7, T15
Non potentiated	Personal ambition is bad	T2, T12
	Sometimes you can be ambitious <i>and</i> collaborate with the competition	T9
	Sometimes we cannot be market leaders	T13

A couple of observations are worth making here. Firstly, the vast majority of actualised meanings appear to stay close to the text – the three meanings shared by most respondents are, arguably, the ones that are explicitly or implicitly encouraged by the text framing of 'ambitious'. These are widely shared among all groups of respondents. In comparison, the meanings which are actualised 'against the grain'²³ of the text seem to be in the minority. Two of these are unique to the individuals who construct them and one seems to be shared by a small group of employees. The latter is connected to an,

²³ I use 'against the grain' as Tietze et al (2003) use it, to refer to actualised meanings which are not potentiated and which are, in most cases, either full rejections or partial rejections/negotiations of potentiated text meanings.

arguably, implicitly potentiated meaning about personal ambition, also shared by a minority of respondents. I explore these and their potential cultural influences below.

5.2.1.1 'Ambitious' meanings and shared cultural frames

That the two manifest meanings of the 'ambitious' text – relating to market leadership and technical excellence respectively – are so widely actualised by a broad range of respondents could be used as an argument that universal messages of this type can actually produce universal meanings among employees of multinational organisations, irrespective the cultural context. Another, and much more likely interpretation, however, could be that the shared meanings here are not 'new' meanings, which simply arise as a response to the words in the message employees read, but are based on well rehearsed existing frames and discourses which employees already share. I believe that this is further supported by the actualisation of the implicit '*we must beat AmeriCo*' meaning. Since this meaning was not explicitly spelt out in the text, the reason that it emerged at all must be sought outside the text, in the cultural context employees share. As I show below, the data supports this second proposition.

When asked to talk about the organisation at the beginning of their interviews and throughout their narratives, employees repeatedly and unprompted talked about the importance of technical excellence and innovation to EuroCo. This was frequently linked to a sense of pride in the organisation, its products and

reputation, and also to a discourse about the battle for supremacy between EuroCo and AmeriCo, their main rival. Often these discourses were connected to each other through the story of the flagship Pegasus project.

For me [before I joined the company] I just assumed that every [product of this type] was an AmeriCo [product], and I think a lot of people's perception is still that, and EuroCo want to shake that kind of vision and sort of say 'wait a minute, we are just as good, if not better than what AmeriCo are, so here we are guys'. And I think by bringing in the Pegasus which was something completely different, I think that's what they have done.

British administrator/ Key communicator

I believe that it is discourses such as this, already present in the organisational context, which shape the very strong common interpretations here. Because there is congruence between such existing discourses and the meanings potentiated by the 'ambitious' text, a large level of agreement between the text and employee actualised meanings is also evident. This can only be a conjecture at this point, but I intend to build this argument by providing further evidence from the readings of the other values. If this proposition is valid, I will be able to show that where the text and organisational shared frames and discourses do not agree, then neither will actualised meanings agree with potentiated meanings.

5.2.1.2 'Ambitious' meanings and cultural identities

Although all respondents (with the exception of one) articulated at least one meaning relating to organisational ambition, some also reached for a more personal meaning around individual career progress and growth. As this is not manifestly potentiated by the actual text, it is interesting that it emerges and it emerges both with positive and with negative connotations. I give examples of these below

Well, obviously, I haven't stayed in one place, I wanted to do courses and, get on, you know, I've shown ambition in that way, I suppose

British factory worker/ Working man

Ambitious, if you are ambitious, EuroCo opens you loads of opportunities, if you want to move on you know. Perhaps you have to be ambitious or you have to be active, to get [ahead].

German project manager /Little-guy-doing-his-job

Obviously, myself, I am ambitious and I have got... I know where I want to be and where I want to go, and I don't want to stop, where I am at the moment .

British factory supervisor/ Self-made team leader

In the three quotes above, 'ambitious' is related to progress, movement and opportunity and is seen as a positive personal attribute. In contrast, the two

respondents below reject the idea of personal ambition as a desirable attribute.

I think there is a problem with the word 'ambitious' in my mind, which means, which is associated with over-ambitious, um, arrogant, pushy. Yes, 'prepared to work all the hours that God sends so that I don't have a home life' ambitious. Prepared to tread on other people and you know, selfish, quietly selfish. You don't want to shout about it, but you're gonna get that promotion, whatever it takes. You are gonna get that job over somebody.

British engineer/ Involving British manager

So this one, for me, I am not really ambitious, so ambitious for me means getting up in the organisation, I would say personally speaking, it doesn't mean anything []. So, to me 'the reference' yes,[] I understand what it means, being ambitious as a company doesn't mean you have to be ambitious as an individual

French project manager/ Contributor

If the source of shared meaning about organisational ambition lives in shared organisational frames and discourses, such as the competition with AmeriCo, where do the meanings about personal ambition come from? One could argue that the personal ambition meaning is inherent in the term 'ambitious'. In which case, why is it that this particular meaning is explicitly actualised in some narratives and not in others? Could the cultural identities employees

constructed in the course of the interview provide any answers? In table 5.2 below I pull together salient identity information for the five individuals who articulate the personal ambition meaning – three seeing it as positive, two as negative. This includes constructed identities, such as B’s ‘working man’ and P’s ‘contributor’ and the personal themes used to articulate and support these, such as B’s ‘importance of employment’, J’s ‘constraints vs. opportunities’, and SF’s ‘moving up’. I also provide examples of how these are articulated in the respondents’ narratives.

Table 5.2 Relating cultural identities to the ‘personal ambition’ meaning

	Identity	Themes	Quotes
B (T1)	Working man	Importance of employment Movement as progress	<i>I mean I cannot complain about the employment it's given me and I think you sometimes think there is something better on the other side, but whether you are in that comfort zone I don't know but I can't complain about the employment it's given me.</i>
J (T15)	Little-guy doing-his-job	Little individual vs. the big company Stability vs. flexibility Constraints vs. opportunities	<i>It is a huge company; as an individual you can't change very much you have to stick to the programmes, stick to the procedures you know you have to do your job at the end of the day, but there are big opportunities, if you want to move on</i>

SF(T7)	Self-made team leader	Opportunity Moving up	<i>I've been with the company now for fourteen years, yeah, started in '94 and put myself through various situations, through different departments, worked myself up and eventually ended up working in the [name of department] as a team leader</i>
D (T2)	Involving British manager	Lacking connections British vs. French management style <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fair vs. aggressive • Involving vs. 'top down' Involvement linked to ownership UK company as family/community	<i>I think that was a good idea um perhaps because I was involved [], I think I had more sense of ownership. I could have probably, in the late '90's I could have probably recited you the EuroCo UK vision.</i> <i>I mean that's part of the problem I think with the... part of the issue with EuroCo as it stands at the moment is, you know, you don't bloody know where these things come from. There's some little group somewhere in [France] that nobody knows and out these things pop. Whereas when it was a national company you knew who it was.</i>
P (T12)	Contributor (One of the management team)	In transition Rejection vs. acceptance Importance of motivation A stressful life Misunderstood	<i>I was a candidate for that position and I took the position in 2004 which was very, very interesting and it's always difficult when you are coming from the same area to move up but I think it was ok even for the team and for myself which was good, as I was considered by my bosses to have potential</i> <i>I am more a team member and</i>

		Missed potential	<i>a contributor and also a leader, but once I am sure what to do. I mean when you put me in roles and tell me what to do</i>
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From this table it is already clear that we cannot simply claim that common identities are the reason behind the common meaning, in the sense that, at least in the course of their interviews with me, these men clearly did not construct the same identities. There is, however, a more subtle relationship here. When it comes to the three ‘positive’ voices, for example, all three – B, a British factory worker, J, a middle aged, highly educated engineer from Germany and SF, a young British factory supervisor - put a great emphasis on being employed and on having the opportunity and the flexibility to progress through this employment.

In J’s case – whose most salient identity is ‘a little guy doing his job’- personal progress is presented as a constant battle between extreme opposites – constraints and opportunities, the little individual vs. the huge organisation, the difficulties and necessities of change, and so on. Out of this narrative of strife, being able to present the self as ambitious and willing to grasp opportunities, despite all the constraints put on him, emerges as a little personal triumph. Later in his interview, when J reads the statement which focuses on personal development (in the 2009 values text) he identifies this as the value which is most important for him, relating this again to his theme of ‘opportunities’

Ya, some things are more important for me, you know, some things are less important, like 'develop myself and others'. I think that's important, you know, because you have to give people the opportunity.

B's narrative contrasts his experience with those of his fellow workers in the factory. His flexibility in moving on and in trying new things has secured him employment and job satisfaction; while 'they', in contrast, stuck in the same shop floor role for years, are in a more stagnant, and, perhaps, also more dangerous, place

It's nice to have a change sometimes as well. Um it does, how can I say, well, help motivation. It's certainly helped me in moving from, like, I've known people in the factory, who've stayed in one particular job for 20, 25 years. Now that for me, some people might be happy doing that, but it's nice to have a change, and I think it does you good.

For B, personal ambition is linked both to job satisfaction and to job security, which in turn is linked to his sense of feeling worthy. SF, finally, tells a story of personal achievement, of a fast journey of learning and growth, where personal ability and ambition compensate for lack of formal education. He is clearly fulfilled by doing what he does and thinks ambition is good, because it is his own ambition and agency that has brought him here.

I've been with the company now for fourteen years, yeah, started in '94 and put myself through various situations, through different

departments, worked myself up and eventually ended up working in the [name of department] as a team leader

D, on the other hand, offers a very different narrative. As a veteran senior manager in the British business, D constructs an identity on the basis of constant comparisons between the old British regime (which he romanticises as empowering, involving, exciting, egalitarian) and the new French dominated one, which he presents in largely negative terms. In this context, he sees himself as having gone from being in the centre of things and able to make a difference, to being badly managed and disempowered, misunderstood and missing connections, yet unable to take control, leave and change his fortunes. He feels he needs to justify the fact that he may appear to have not made much progress in his career and therefore he may be seen as not ambitious. This is already evident from his introductory words in our interview

I have been with EuroCo since I left school, which sounds awful, but I regard that as actually pretty positive. Um, there have been times in my career when I've felt like leaving, but every time that happens something crops up, and you get a better job or a different job, so that's been pretty good.

P, a French project manager, tells a story of a career 'in transitions', moving from company to company, from job to job and from opportunity to opportunity, trying to steer his career onto different tracks by getting extra

training, but frequently missing out on his ideal employment and employer because his skills were not recognised, or he was 'misunderstood'. It is important for him to point out the times he was singled out as someone with management potential, even though he might not always have got the job. He is *a manager, one of the management team*, he points out, although his authority is not necessarily recognised by the team he is working with. His strength is not necessarily to be *a leader*, but *a contributor*, although *once he knows what he has to do he can be a leader too*.

Between the lines, he constructs a narrative of missed potential, of a career that has taken many turns and took him to many places, but has not quite made its mark, because his skills were never properly appreciated. At the same time, he says, life is too precious (he was recently diagnosed with diabetes) to be stressed by such failures. *'I am not ambitious, this is not important to me'* seems to be his way of minimising the stress and of explaining away his dissatisfaction with having worked hard to achieve success and status, but not being recognised for it. Understood in this context, D's and P's rejection of 'ambitious' as a positive personal attribute is effectively a rejection of 'the other', the person who may be perceived as more successful in their career, but, who, unlike them, is prepared to compromise much in order to achieve this success. Thus, this specific interpretation, as in SF's case above, can, arguably, be seen as a re-affirmation of the self.

5.2.1.3 Contradicting the self: unique meanings and cultural identities

The two 'ambitious' meanings which are unique to individual respondents are interesting, because the individuals who articulate them, also articulate a somewhat contrasting meaning, sometimes within the same sentence. For example, in the following quote this French engineer negotiates the market leadership meaning of 'ambitious' relating it both to 'being ahead of the competition' and to 'collaborating with the competition' at the same time.

Ambitious we strive for excellence, yeah. On environmental aspects we set very ambitious targets, so we want to lead the way on environment.

There is a lot of initiatives we have taken towards, you know, there is a lot of collaboration with other big companies, but we've on a number of occasions tried to get a bit of an edge, and produced a big project, a guide on the environment for the rest of the sector.

French engineer/ Environmental engineer, professional

As a 'EuroCo child' this French engineer is likely to share the frames that lead to accepting the potentiated meanings about market leadership and 'beating the competition'. As an 'environmental engineer' (one of her more prominent identities), whose experience suggests that collaboration is sometimes the only way to meet 'the environmental challenges' ahead, she has no problem in constructing a meaning of 'ambitious' which includes a different sort of relationship with the competition.

A similar contradiction is apparent in T's interpretation below:

'Our ambition is for EuroCo to be the reference'. It is good ambition, but for me it's already the case. EuroCo is the reference.

But immediately after

For me to be the reference is to be the reference in [two different parts of the industry]. [In one of these] I think it is hard to be the reference. From inside, I think EuroCo is seen as one of the references, but I know, from outside, people don't know too much about [us]: 'EuroCo; what is EuroCo?'

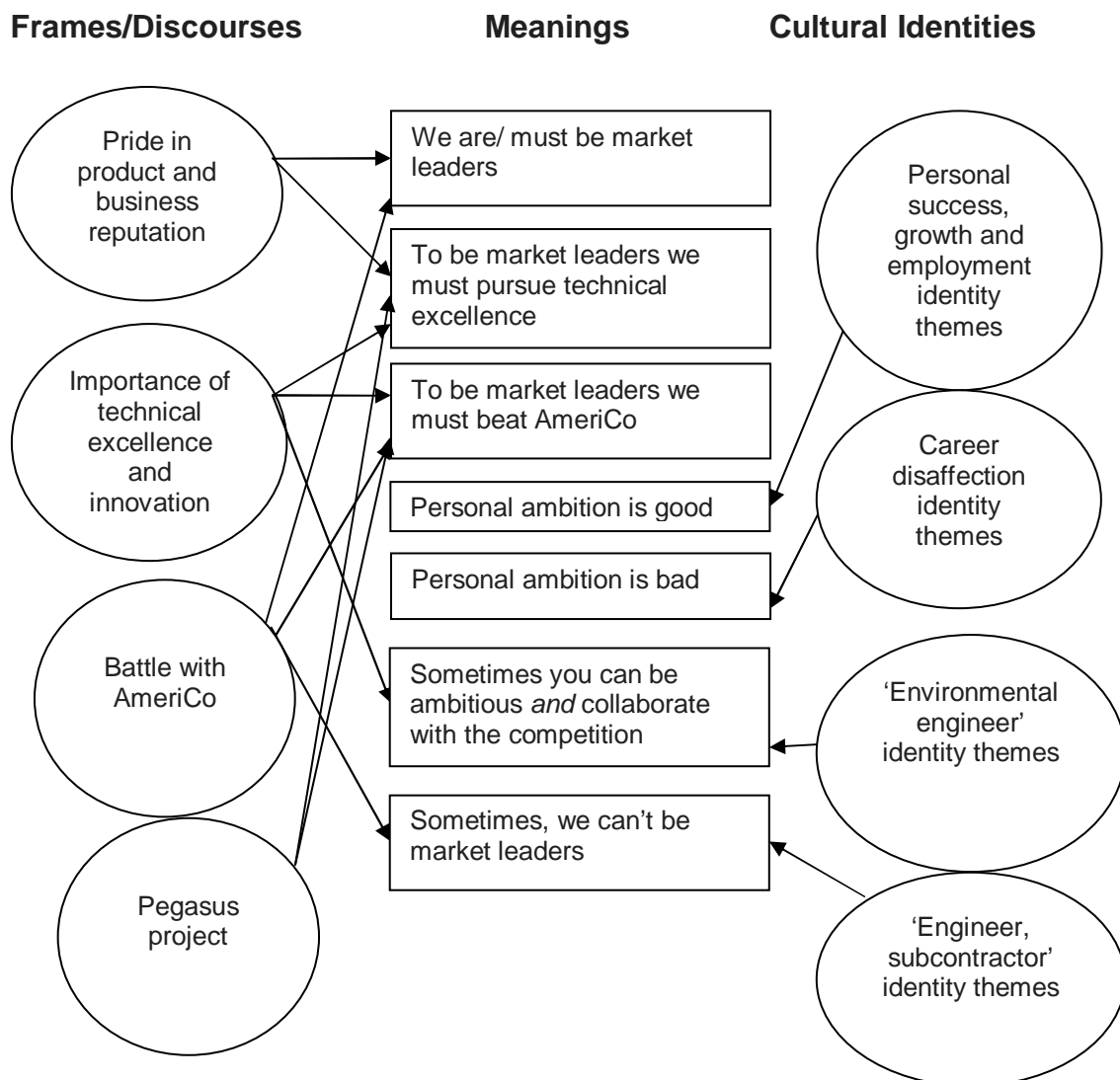
French engineer /Engineer, subcontractor

It is interesting to note in these two examples that it is possible for message users to construct and hold seemingly opposing meanings of the same message at the same time. And that they can find ways in discourse to normalise this contradiction. Note for example in the second excerpt above, T's use of the dual viewpoint perspective 'from inside/from outside'. As a subcontractor to EuroCo, T's identity is full of such dualities. He is both the *insider*, proud to be working for this company and to be part of it, and the *outsider*, employed by someone else, being moved from site to site, maintaining his distance at one point, while minimising it, the next. These two identities are both reflected and constructed in this particular meaning.

5.2.1.4 Summarising the 'ambitious' readings

The diagram on the next page shows the meanings actualised by the reading of the text 'ambitious' and the cultural influences which appear to shape these meanings as discussed so far. In summary, in the readings of this value text, the influence of both strong shared frames and cultural identities and identity themes was evident. While the former appeared to generate meanings which were both consistent with potentiated text meanings and widely shared by respondents, the latter appeared primarily to generate minority and individual meanings. Where shared frames and identity themes appeared to encourage contradictory interpretations, compromised meanings emerged instead. I will continue to discuss similar examples as I go through the data.

Figure 5.1 Cultural influences on the meanings of ‘ambitious’



5.2.2 The meaning of 'customer focused'

I now go on to discuss the rest of the values statements in the first values text, contrasting them, where appropriate, with the equivalent statements in the new, 2009 values text. The first value in the original values message reads: *Customer focused: Customer satisfaction is our absolute priority.* The meanings actualised by the reading of this text are shown in table 5.3.

Table 5.3 Summary of actualised meanings for ‘customer focused’

Type	Meaning	Actualised by
Potentiated (explicitly)	Customer satisfaction is more important than anything else we do	T3, T4, T5 T9, T10, T11, T13, T16
Potentiated (implicitly)	Customer satisfaction is key to organisational success	T1, T3, T4, T5, T8 T9, T10, T11, T12, T14
	Customers are external and internal	T3, T5, T6 T11, T15, T16, T17
	Customer satisfaction is about meeting needs/ expectations	T1, T4, T7, T8 T10, T11, T14, T15, T16, T17
	Customer satisfaction is about giving the customer quality	T3, T4, T5, T7, T8 T11, T14, T16, T17
Non potentiated	Customer satisfaction is about managing expectations	T3, T12, T13
	Customer satisfaction is not the priority, but ultimately what we do is for customers	T9, T13

The text itself, arguably, potentiates the meaning that the organisation puts customers and their satisfaction above everything else and so, therefore, should employees. Again, as with the term ‘ambitious’, this meaning is actualised by many employees. An example is shown below.

For me it's really like putting the customers in the centre of your work and everything needs to be driven by your customer, and you need to understand what they need and be able to translate that into the work

French Engineer / Transnational manager

At the same time a series of meanings are actualised and widely shared which could be said to be latent in the text, perhaps relating to a broader customer service managerial discourse. The first of these relates customer

satisfaction to the success and survival of the company, as in these two quotes below

Um, I know they are special contracts, to make customers valued and to keep them happy and they return. That's the main thing for me, because obviously without customers, we are, you know, we wouldn't exist any more. So that's the main thing.

German project manager/ Professional woman

So for me, my customers are the people out in the business and for me it says that, 'absolute priority', if we don't get customer satisfaction right and in particular going up to the top level, if our customers who buy the [product] don't get what they need when they need it, and quality, then we haven't got a business

British HR manager/ Expert, strategist

The second quote above provides examples of the other latent meanings actualised. For one, it talks about two types of customers – those in the business that the individual directly works for, and the external ones, those who ultimately buy EuroCo products. In most interpretations both of these types of customer are signalled as important. There is also a reference to 'meeting customer needs', a meaning actualised by many others and which I will discuss in more detail later in this section. Finally, it explicitly mentions 'quality' as a prerequisite to customer satisfaction. An explicit mention of

'quality' is, in fact, much more common in transcripts than meeting other potential requirements such as deadlines, as in these quotes below:

We have to produce something at the end of the day and it has to be to a certain standard, so whether it is to the external customer who you are building the [product] for, or whether to the people you work for in the department, you still have to have a good quality product to give at the end of the day

British administrator/ Key communicator

Customer focus just means to me that I have to make sure whatever I deliver is first of all, you know, what my customer wants to have that it is delivered on time and with the quality that they want to have.

German engineer/ Young engineer

This meaning, in particular, I will argue below, points to a specific influence of the cultural context in which these employees operate.

5.2.2.1 'Customer focused' meanings and cultural frames

In the case of the 'customer focused' reading, a majority of actualised meanings are again produced, which are both well shared among respondents and appear to be in agreement with the potentiated meanings of the text. That these meanings are at least partly influenced by organisational culture – or a broader 'customer service' discourse present in that culture-

may be supported by the way employees almost always articulate their interpretation in the context of their immediate work experience. This is shown in most of the quotes above and also in these below

'Customer focus'. I assume that, it's, obviously, we deliver our component to [location] at the moment, so customer focus would be that we send that component 100% complete, the quality again absolutely perfect, so they can't come back to us and say, look we've got an issue with this part.

British factory supervisor /Self-made team leader

Customer can mean anything to me. I mean customer is the person to whom I work directly, for whom I work directly or who's my colleague, or my peer, or another department. So, for me it's like give and take, so if you want quality data and quality responses from your colleagues, from other departments, then you have to give it as well

German engineer/'Proper' engineer, manager

Note again the explicit reference in these two quotes above, to *quality*, as an important aspect of customer satisfaction. This constant reference to quality I believe points to a link between these specific meanings about customer satisfaction and shared cultural frames. The 'quality' meaning of 'customer focused' could be understood for example as being influenced by the shared frames discussed earlier, namely the 'importance of technical excellence'

frame and the widely shared 'pride in the product and the reputation of the business' frame, both evidenced throughout employee narratives, for example

But overall we do produce exciting products. I believe that we do cutting edge engineering even though when it comes to the day-to day work it seems like standard, routine work, but it's still very exciting.

German engineer/Proper' engineer, manager

It is also important to note that this quality discourse is not constrained to those who have a direct relationship with the product (like engineers or project managers) but permeates almost every narrative. In this excerpt from the narrative of a British administrator, for example, there is an explicit link between quality –'absolute highest specification' – and the reputation of EuroCo.

How I understand that is that we should be delivering [products] to the absolute highest specification under the customer's requirements. To build on our reputation.

British administrator/Wife and mother

In rehearsing a discourse about wanting and failing to deliver customer commitments, which becomes much more prominent later in the interviews (when employees discuss the value 'reliable') this respondent provides a further insight into why quality seems to have a special place in organisational

'customer service' discourses – quality is here presented effectively as EuroCo's 'saving grace'.

[Customer focus] is something that we try hard as a business to do. It's really difficult from the manufacturing side of things, you just need a supplier not to deliver something and that will set you as a company back [] so it's really difficult to deliver on time really. [] But at the end of the day what you do get, is top quality. So, I think that's why we have a lot of customers who stick with us and are quite patient with us

British administrator/ Key communicator

To summarise, I believe that the majority of shared actualised meanings which agree with the potentiated meanings of the 'customer focused' text reflect an existing 'customer service' organisational discourse. The strongest evidence for this in the data appears to be in the latent meaning linking quality to customer satisfaction, and the relationship between this meaning and other frames shared by employees about the importance of technical excellence and the pride in the product and the reputation of the business. In discussing the interpretation of the new values text relating to customers later in this section, I will provide further evidence to support this point.

5.2.2.2 'Customer focused' meanings and cultural identities

As I have already shown, one meaning which is widely shared by respondents and could be said to derive from a broader 'customer service' discourse, equates customer satisfaction with meeting customer needs and expectations.

So from that point of view really, I think it is really important that you understand what customers expect of you to be able to deal with, to deliver something that they are expecting

British administrator/ Key communicator

That just means to me that I have to make sure whatever I deliver is first of all, you know, what my customer wants to have, that it is delivered on time and with the quality that they want to have.

German engineer/ Young engineer

At the same time as this 'meeting customer needs' meaning, a minority of employees also construct a somewhat opposing meaning, arguing that customer satisfaction is also about managing, not meeting, customer expectations.

It's a difficult balance, because it's not doing everything that the customer wants, it's trying to meet their needs, but also acting as a bit of, in my particular role acting as a guardian of policies, it's trying to keep a balance between what they need, to make their business successful, but also for me guiding and advising them so that they do what they do in the best way from a people point of view.

British HR manager/ Expert, strategist

OK customer focus. Er, today we see in some parts of the business the customer as the end part of the process, so for me customer focus is

how to satisfy him, is also to understand what he wants on our side, but also asking or telling him what we can do or what we cannot do and why we cannot do it, or what we can do in-between.

French project manager/ Contributor

Again, work related cultural identities and cultural identity themes seem to be at work here, contrasting with a broader 'customer service' discourse. In J's case (the first quote above) this is rather overt, as in the process of constructing her meaning she accesses her identity as an 'expert', whose job it is not only to support her customers, the managers and employees of the business by giving them what they want, but also, to make sure they do things properly, acting as a 'guardian of policies'. In the second quote, P, a French project manager, reflects in his meaning what he calls '*his career in transition*', a constant shifting and changing of roles, which have sometimes placed him in customer facing positions and, in others, as now, in 'behind the scenes' positions where he has to understand and '*fight the corner*' of the manufacturing teams. Finally T's response, below explicitly reflects his engineering identity, through the strong theme of 'technical challenge' which he uses repeatedly to shape this identity (I discuss T and his engineering identity in more detail in relation to the next meaning)

Yeah, so it's really good to have the understanding of customer value, but sometimes, the customer has also to understand our technical challenge. So, in the end we need to tell to the customer, ok, we understood that. You have to understand that certain things are not

physically possible. So yeah, but, in the end it will be the best compromise that we can reach, and it will be the best for the customer.

French engineer/ Engineer, subcontractor

T's engineering identity and his theme of 'technical challenge' is also evident in this next meaning, which appears to first question the idea that customer satisfaction is the main organisational priority and then attempts to find a compromise between a complete rejection of that idea and the meaning potentiated by the text.

Here, for engineering, I think the absolute priority is the technical challenge, and, if we succeed, it is good for the customer, but it is not directly linked, we have to do something, a good technical improvement or something, and it will help the customer at the end for sure, or maybe all the technical improvements are for the customer

French engineer/ Engineer, subcontractor

A similar meaning is articulated by another engineer

As environmental people we have to identify who are our key customers and stakeholders, and we need to keep in mind that you know, who are we doing this for. Because, it's not only all the customers and stakeholders, but um, one absolute necessity is to compare with regulations, to satisfy the authorities and then the customer, any requirements the customer may have to improve the

product from an environmental perspective, those are the key drivers, to drive us to improve our environmental performance.

French engineer/ Environmental engineer, professional

The importance of customers is never really in question, here; where customers come in the hierarchy of priorities, however, is challenged. At the same time, it is explicitly made clear that these seemingly different priorities are always in the end to the benefit of the customer. As a result what is articulated here is not so much a total rejection of a potentiated meaning, but rather a compromise meaning which begins by questioning the main premise of the text and finishes by negotiating a more fitting alternative.

Here again there appears to be a fairly clear link between meaning and identity, as identity is brought forward by respondents themselves in the way they articulate their complex meanings. T, who does define himself as an engineer, puts the 'technical challenge' (a constant theme in his narrative) ahead of the customer in his initial response to the text. I, who through her narrative constructs a very strong 'environmental engineer' identity, talks of environmental regulations and the importance of satisfying these before customers. As mentioned in the previous section this respondent similarly constructed a compromise meaning around the term 'ambitious' which renegotiated the frame of 'we must beat the competition' by offering an alternative meaning – 'sometimes being market leaders means collaborating

with the competition'. There again it was her environmental engineer identity that was referenced.

5.2.2.3 Exploring engineering identities in relation to the 'customer focused' meaning

It is worth considering here why others who also construct engineering identities do not actualise the same meaning with this text. R, for example, a German engineer of Indian extraction, talks extensively of his pride in being a highly trained engineer with a German degree, where to be an engineer is to be something really important. The following story is revealing of the importance of this identity for him

When I joined EuroCo I just visited some family friends and the little boy, 5 years old, 6 years old, and he asked me what do I do and I said I was very proud as I'd just finished my degree and I am an [specific type] engineer and he said how long did you study for this? I said 6 years and I am very proud of this. He said you must be really stupid and I said why, my friend's father has been doing a course while he was working for 6 months and he is an engineer and I said what is he doing. He calls at other people's houses and helps set up telephone lines or whatever, I can't remember what he does, but that's what the perception is of children and they grow up and I don't think that is going to change for engineering in [the UK]; it's not respected.

However, R's interpretation of the 'customer focused' text does not seem to reach for his engineering identity, a 'proper engineer', strong as it is. Instead it centres on the themes of relationships, teamwork and communication which are also important to him

Customer can mean anything to me. I mean customer is the person to whom I work directly, for whom I work directly or who's my colleague, or my peer, or another department. It doesn't need to be in the [external customer] or anything. So, like, for me it's like give and take.

A likely interpretation of the data here would be that, unlike the two previous respondents, R's engineering identity lacks the element of conflict with the potentiated meaning, which produces the negotiated interpretations above. On the other hand his 'manager' identity is largely built on contrasts and challenges and on the themes of communication, relationships and teamwork as shown in the excerpts below. Perhaps as a result, it is this identity and these themes that seem to be more prominent in his 'customer focused' interpretation.

Excerpt's from R's narrative relating to his 'manager' identity

But it is the fault as well, it's not the fault of management, since I am now in management, it's the fault of the normal workforce as well.

I mean it's, it is true for managers to understand their own team and develop them in such a way to get the best out of the people.

Communication, always communication. Everybody, what you talk and what you say is very, very, what you are trying to say and what you say is not always the same thing, not always understood in the same way as you intend it to be, so communication is key.

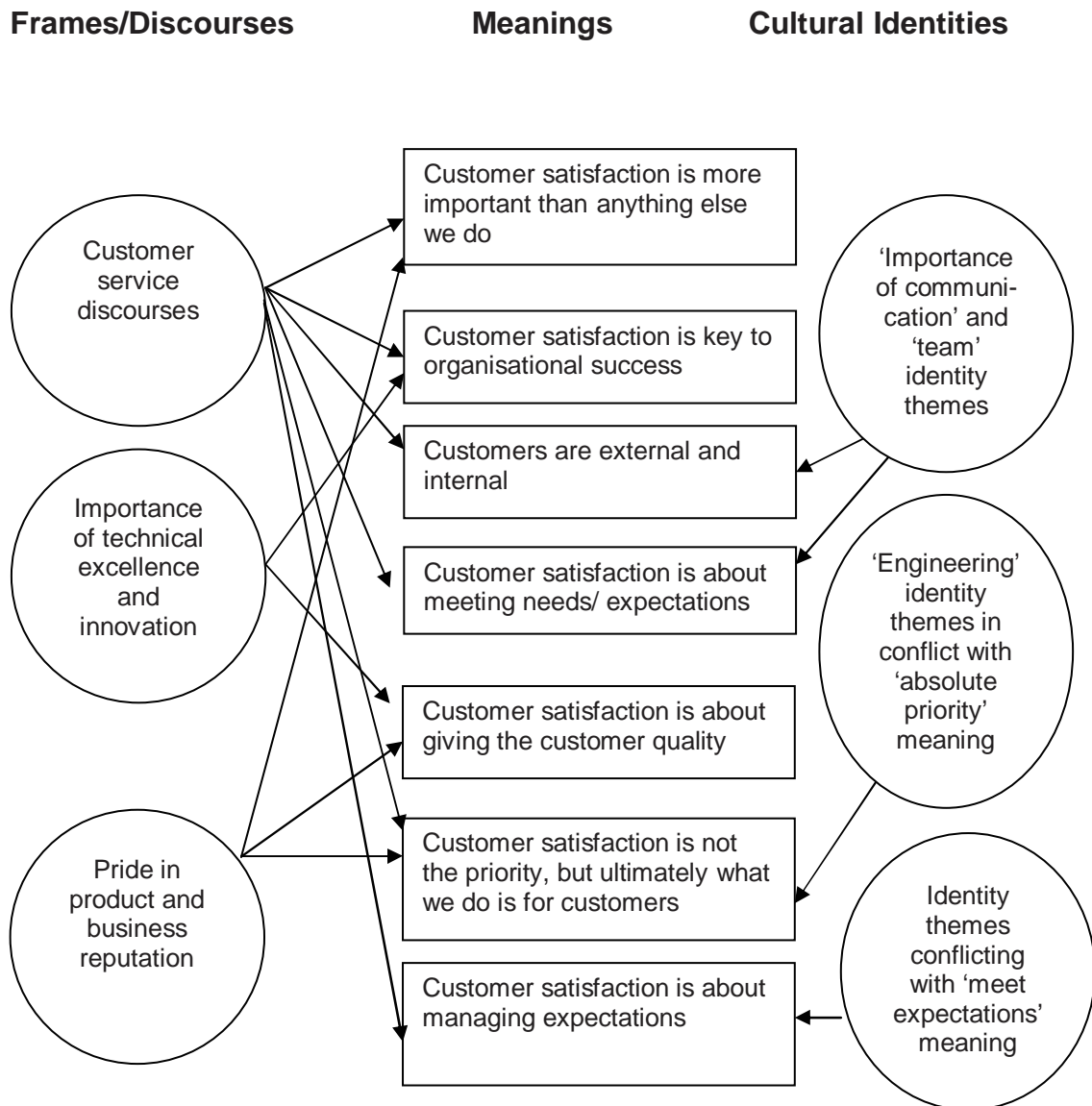
I have here shown two instances of how cultural identity may influence interpretation. These seem to suggest that if the themes used to construct a particular identity are both prominent in the individual's narrative and appear to be in conflict with the message text, they are likely to produce a response 'against the grain' of the text. If conflicting themes are absent from the individual's discourse, however, a strong identity in itself will not necessarily emerge in the negotiation of a particular meaning. In the rest of this chapter I present further examples to support this point.

5.2.2.4 Summary of the 'customer focused' readings

In summary, meanings relating to the 'customer focused' text again seem to agree primarily with meanings implicitly or explicitly potentiated in the text. Of these, the implicit meaning that quality is important to customer satisfaction seems to provide the strongest evidence that specific shared frames in the organisational cultural context are influencing meaning making here. Only two meanings are articulated 'against the grain' of the text – in each case shared by a small minority of employees. In both cases there is evidence in the

narratives to suggest that these are influenced by cultural identities, and cultural identity themes, which appear to be in conflict with the text frames.

Figure 5.2 Cultural influences on the meanings of ‘customer focused’



5.2.3 Comparisons with the new values text

That the quality meaning is influenced by shared frames in the EuroCo culture about the 'importance of technical excellence' and 'pride in the product and

business reputation' is strengthened by the evidence provided by the reading of the 2009 values text, later in the conversation. This text is very different from the text in the first statement. It reads:

EuroCo People...Generate Customer Value

- *Understand and anticipate customer needs, expectations and business in order to add value*
- *Bring mature and differentiating innovation in our products, services and technologies to the market*

Firstly, this new 'value' appears to replace the qualitative, softer concept of *customer satisfaction* with the arguably 'harder' concept of *customer value*. It is also much more explicit than the first text, suggesting that employees should seek to 'add value' by understanding and anticipating customer needs (a meaning already present in any case) and by offering innovative products and services which will differentiate EuroCo from other suppliers (pointing again to the 'battle with AmeriCo' discourse and 'technical excellence' frames). This innovation should be, however, 'mature' to produce wanted and, one assumes, cost effective new products and services. *Customer value*, is thus explicitly linked to technical innovation (as customer satisfaction was not), but innovation tempered by usability and profitability. One could argue, therefore that it is value and, consequently, efficiency and cost that is privileged in this text, over quality. Respondents, however, do not consciously perceive much of a difference in the two texts, but rather see the second text

as a detailed version of the first as this quote from a German engineer suggests.

Yeah. 'Generate customer value' it's for me the same thing like being customer focused. Because being customer focused you want your customer to be satisfied. So it is the same thing for me.

German engineer/ Young engineer

Only one respondent, a French project manager seems to pick up on this management attempt to shift the meaning of the customer related discourse, by introducing an explicit quality/usability debate.

[Customer value means to] really try to move away from what we think is right and to understand what the customer thinks is right, what is important and try to put that back into the design

French project manager/ Transnational manager

It is significant, that this same manager already appeared to be sensitive to the tensions introduced here as this earlier quote from his narrative shows.

Although you are talking about innovation and try to excel [] it is not saying that you need to have the latest technology within your [products] or you need to push to try to get this new technology, but it's not what defines you as a company. So you don't want to have a [product] that is so brilliant, but it costs a fortune and your customers don't want to buy it, for example.

French project manager/ Transnational manager

Note that here F appears to contest not only the text about ‘innovation’ (which I go on to discuss next) but, more significantly, the apparent shared frame relating to the ‘importance of technical excellence’. In fact, F makes this point repeatedly throughout his narrative and suggests that this is a debate which is already happening among the group of people he works with. He talks of himself as ‘deeply embedded in transnationality’ and of his area of working, design, as already advanced in terms of integration and process harmonisation. I believe what we have here is evidence, in F’s narrative, of a new subordinate discourse which is developing in some parts of the EuroCo business and which contrasts with a still predominating ‘importance of technical excellence’ discourse. The dominant/subordinate relationship here is not a relationship of power, however, as it is senior management who are trying to introduce the new subordinate discourse into the organisation and the majority of employees (according to my sample of respondents) who are still maintaining the more dominant one. It is certainly the case that in the rest of the interviews the ‘innovation tempered with profitability or usability’ meaning is not picked up.

This is not to say that nothing changes between the reading of the ‘customer focused’ and the ‘customer value’ texts. What does seem to change is in fact the tone of the meanings generated. Employees may not explicitly pick up on the *usability or value vs. technical excellence* tension, but, whereas before they were talking of ‘*highest quality*’, ‘*100% perfect*’, they now talk of *helping, listening to and supporting* the customer.

The next thing, 'generate customer value', yeah I mean, if I see my customer, the next department that deals with my planning, I have to make sure my planning is credible and understandable by them [] I have to give, help them, I have to support them, and it is always a two-way communication you know

German engineer/ Little- guy-doing-his-job

We may conclude that what the reading of the new text about 'customer value' shows is that a change in the text is not enough to trigger a completely new meaning, particularly when the 'old' meaning is still supported by a powerful organisational discourse. On the other hand, the signalling of a new frame can have some effect on interpretations, even if that is to suppress the explicit actualisation of a particular meaning (in this case the importance of quality for customer satisfaction). What we may be seeing here is the beginning of a change in the organisational shared frames about the importance of technical excellence and innovation vs. the importance of usability and cost. This will of course depend on a number of things above and beyond this specific text and its reading, but it does suggest that texts such as the values texts tested here may after all have a useful function to perform as management communication practices.

5.2.4 The meaning of 'innovative'

The text *Innovative: we shape the future* potentiates a number of possible meanings. At an explicit level there are at least three manifest meanings here.

Firstly that innovation is important to the future of the organisation; secondly, that the organisation has ambitions beyond merely being successful in its field and these ambitions to 'shape the future' are possible because of the focus on innovation. Thirdly, and this depends on how the 'we' of the text is read, a possible meaning is that it is down to employees to drive that innovation and thus 'shape the future'. As table 5.4 shows these meanings are actualised and widely shared as are two, arguably, latent meanings which link innovation with developing new technology and ideas and with continuous improvement. Two non potentiated meanings also emerge, relating innovation with the challenge of change and the proposition that individuals cannot be innovative. Below I discuss cultural influences on these interpretations.

Table 5.4 Summary of distribution of meanings for the value 'innovative'

Type	Meanings	Actualised by
Potentiated (explicitly)	Innovation is important for the future of the organisation	T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T9, T10, T11, T12, T14, T16, T17
	Because we focus on innovation we can shape the (industry and company) future	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T9, T11, T3, T14, T15, T17
	It is down to all employees to be innovative	T3, T5, T7, T9, T10, T11, T12, T16, T17
Potentiated (implicitly)	Innovation is about developing new ideas and technologies	T1, T3, T5, T7, T10, T11, T13, T14, T15, T16, T17
	Innovation is about doing things better, making improvements	T3, T4, T5, T7, T9, T10, T11, T15, T16
Non potentiated	Innovation is about change; change is challenging	T3, T4, T5, T10, T11, T12, T17
	It is difficult for individuals to be innovative	T6, T8, T15

5.2.4.1 'Innovative' meanings and shared cultural frames

As the table above shows, almost all meanings actualised with the reading of the 'innovative' value are shared widely among respondents. The first two meanings in particular, that innovation is important to the future of the organisation and that, because the organisation focuses on innovation, it can shape the future of the industry, are shared very strongly, reflecting as they do the themes of 'importance of technical excellence' and 'pride in the product and company reputation' already discussed in the previous section. In fact in the employee narratives these shared themes are made explicit and connect this text about innovation with the text about organisational ambition as in the third quote below.

'Innovation: shaping the future'. Um, yeah, you know, we are masters of our own destiny.

British senior project manager/ EuroCo man

'Shape the future', yeah I think it's clear that innovation is a key driver for EuroCo.

French engineer / Environmental engineer, professional

Um, 'innovation, we shape the future'. I think that goes with the same thing 'we strive for excellence'. So excellence is to do the best in your field. You have to be innovative you have to look for new

methodologies, new processes, new technology, but I think it goes hand to hand. If you don't innovate, then you stay behind.

German engineer/'Proper' engineer, manager

The third meaning the text potentiates relies on an inclusive reading of the pronoun 'we' in the sentence 'we shape the future' in order to actualise an '*it is down to us, the employees, to shape the future through innovation*' meaning. This interpretation appears in half of the narratives and is frequently moderated by a 'change is challenging' discourse, as below:

We do need people to go further than that and to think of adding value more effectively. That's a hard one to swallow, because potentially if you were looking at changing a process, for instance, it might mean you need less people to do it. So ultimately you could be in a position where you're changing something where somebody would need to be redeployed or they are no longer required to do that skill, so it is quite a difficult one I think for people to get round. But I think we all need to be a bit more innovative.

British HR manager/ Expert, strategist

This is a clear challenge for EuroCo as a whole in design and manufacturing; to change the mindset of the people; to not continue to do what we are used to doing for 40 years [if we need to change it].

And innovation can go through people and without people we cannot do it; we would not be able to achieve it.

French project manager/ Contributor

That individual and team involvement in organisational innovation is here linked to change and change-as-challenge is not surprising, given the level of change underway at the time of interviewing and people's individual experience of it. As I discussed earlier, the challenge and necessity of change appears as a strong theme in the employee narratives.

5.2.4.2 'Innovative' meanings and cultural identities

At the same time as many respondents accept the potentiated meaning of 'we must all be innovative', a counter meaning also develops in some interviews, which resists the idea that individual employees can be innovative.

I don't know. It's quite funny 'we shape the future'. Management shape the future really not we, as in individuals, I suppose. They have all their thoughts and ambitions and they cascade it down to the workforce I suppose.

British office worker/ Not a manager

'Innovative - we shape the future'. I don't know it can depend on what job you are doing I think. I wonder sometimes how easy [this is] to

*achieve... to be innovative. What could I do to shape the future?
Maybe as a company we could, but individually, I'm not sure.*

British administrator/ Wife and mother

'Innovative we shape the future'. I don't know about this, because I think as an individual, we can't change very much, to be honest. Because, it's a huge organisation and I personally, I don't think I can shape, I'll do my best you know, but to get something to change is such a huge process.

German engineer / Engineer, subcontractor

Although compare this discourse from SF, a British factory supervisor

I suppose it's part of my job as well, at the same time, looking for ideas to improve the situation, to make things faster, smarter, whatever you want, to improve the quality, it's always the same.

And later

Yes, I had my own ideas in the past, which have proven to be successful, saved the company a lot of money. We have an innovation scheme here and I've put a number of ideas in and they've come up quite well

Earlier in this chapter I discussed how SF's 'self-made team leader' identity and narrative of self-actualisation and upward-mobility supported a meaning of 'personal ambition as a good thing'. The meaning actualised above, which

can be paraphrased as 'individuals can be innovative, and I am the proof' fits quite well within this identity narrative. Similarly, in the cultural identities of the three employees who produce the counter meaning '*as an individual I cannot be innovative*' a common thread emerges that may be used to explain why this particular meaning is actualised here.

Salient cultural identity information is shown in table 5.5. Even though the specific identities constructed are not the same, what is remarkably similar in all three narratives are the themes of disempowerment and disillusionment with management and the organisation. SB's primary identity as a 'wife and mother' drives her to see the organisation through her husband's eyes. He and his colleagues on the factory shop floor are having a particularly tough time with the current reorganisation. Much of her discourse represents their point of view, as below

It's no good sending out pieces of paper; lads on the shop floor would never, ever see them and yet they are the boys that are building the [products] to satisfy our customers and to make more business. Lads on the shop floor would never see that.

W, a clerk in the factory accounts department lights up when he talks about his hobbies and the fact that he does not have to wake up too early to come to work -to 'break his neck' as he puts it- because they now have flexitime. Relatively new to the organisation, he admits to feeling that he had 'stepped back in time' when he first came here and still sees the organisation as an

'old-fashioned creature', where it is down to management to make things happen and where he has not much say in anything that goes on. He admits to having no ambition of progressing in his job. J, on the other hand, is ambitious; he loves his job, but feels frustrated and constantly thwarted by organisational bureaucracy and complexity:

Yeah and innovation yeah, I mean, as I said before, as an individual it is hard to, if you have lots of ideas of innovation you know, loads gets locked up, forgotten in some drawer or whatever I don't know, the next step up so by the time it comes to, be innovative, you know you have to have really good ideas or proposals.

Again, whereas the meanings each individual constructs for the specific text clearly relate to their identity, the commonality in meanings among the three respondents could best be explained in terms of common identity themes of frustration and alienation with management and the organisation.

Table 5.5 Identities and the 'individuals cannot be innovative' meaning

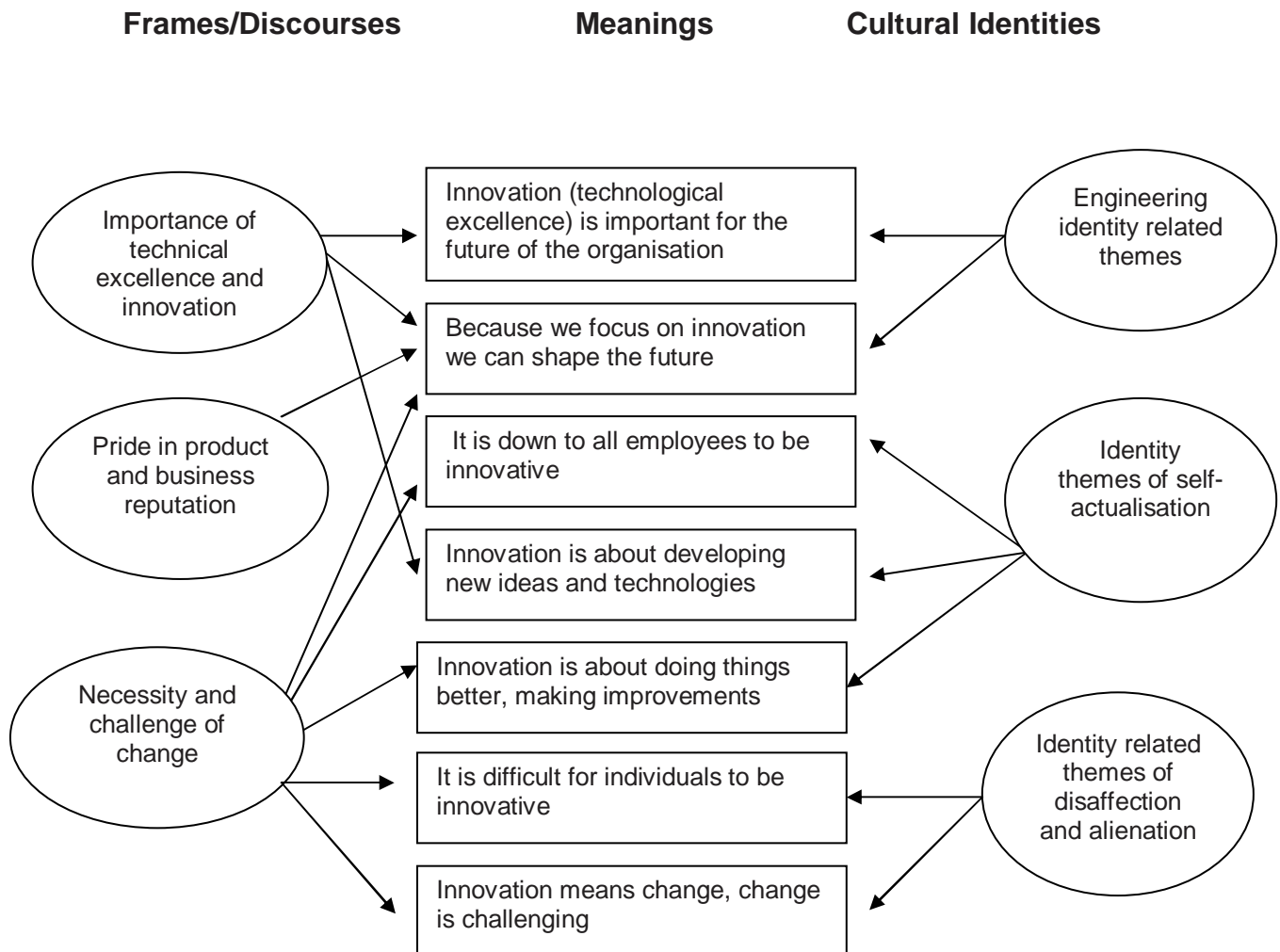
	Identities	Themes	Quotes
SB (T8)	Wife and mother	My husband's experience on the shop floor Management vs shop floor	<i>Because I think the way maybe that the company or certainly management is perceived by the likes of myself in the role that I take on and from the guys who work on the shop floor, is very different.</i>

W (T6)	Not a manager A man with little power	Them and us Lack of ambition Disempowered Big, old fashioned organisation	<i>I've got no ambitions to go any higher than I am now, I'm just sort of quite happy with what I'm doing now.</i> <i>I think a lot of it is, don't do as we do, do as we tell you to do, I think. It's very old fashioned like that.</i>
J (T15)	A little guy doing his job	Little individual vs the big company Difficulty of change vs necessity of change Constraints vs opportunities	<i>It is a huge company .as an individual you can't change very much you have to stick to the programmes, stick to the procedures you know you have to do your job at the end of the day...</i>

5.2.4.3 Summary of 'innovative' readings

In summary, employee readings of the text 'innovative' seem to produce primarily shared meanings, in agreement with the key potentiated meanings of the text and with broader organisational discourses of the importance of technical excellence and the need for and challenge of change. A contrary meaning that relates to personal inability to innovate, on the other hand, which is shared among a small number of respondents seems to derive, primarily, from common identity themes of disempowerment and disengagement with the management and the organisation.

Figure 5.3 Cultural influences on the meanings of ‘innovative’



5.2.5 The meaning of ‘reliable’

With the three values statements discussed so far, namely ‘ambitious’, ‘customer focused’ and ‘innovative’, the key meanings generated were shown to be both related to the message text and mostly shared among employees.

I now turn to a value statement, ‘reliable’ which generated rather different responses. The value text for ‘reliable’ reads: *Reliable: We always deliver our commitments.* This, arguably, potentiates the following meanings: That it is

important to be seen as reliable; that the company should be considered as reliable; that to be reliable one should always deliver commitments, and, that EuroCo should be seen as a company that delivers its commitments. For the first time, not all of these meanings are actualised as the table below shows.

Table 5.6 Summary of actualised meanings for the value ‘reliable’

Type	Meanings	Actualised by
Potentiated (Explicitly)	It is important to be seen as reliable	T1, T2, T3, T4, T7 T9, T10, T13, T14, T15, T17
Non potentiated	We do not always deliver our commitments/not always easy to deliver commitments	T1, T2, T3, T5, T6, T8, T9, T10, T11, T12, T15, T17
	We can still be seen as reliable, because we do our best to deliver and/or we deliver quality	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T7, T9, T10, T11, T15, T16
	I am (always) reliable	T1, T2, T5, T15
	Reliable is about being ‘adequate’	T2

A very interesting thing happens at this point in the interview narratives. Having largely agreed with each of the three statements discussed so far – ‘contrary’ meanings tended to be minority meanings which could be explained primarily in terms of cultural identity themes - employees now find themselves unable to agree with the full statement of the values text. After all, the story of a big failure in delivering commitments is still very raw in the collective memory and respondent after respondent confirms this, as they tell the story of the Pegasus project delays and how these affected the organisation.

Reliable, we always deliver our commitments, or we don't! This is probably well publicised with the delivery of the Pegasus flagship, late. We failed.

British factory administrator/ Wife and mother

Yet, this reflection upon experience does not result in a complete rejection of the message. What employees do in turn is agree with part of the text and reject another part. Between the two, they construct a compromise meaning which effectively suggests that reliability and delivering commitments are not quite the same thing, and that an individual, a team and indeed a company can be considered reliable, even when they occasionally fail to deliver their commitments. After all, EuroCo is a reliable company they claim, despite what happened with the Pegasus. 'Yes we did not deliver on time with that one, but we had to make sure that we delivered a reliable product; we did our best'. The implication is that employees had no choice in what happened and that the result of a 'reliable' new product justifies the delays in its delivery. Below, I present a range of quotes from the narratives to show how this compromise meaning is articulated.

Well, we've had problems with the Pegasus. Obviously all sorts of, um, new plans will have teething problems, so you'll almost be as reliable as you can to your customer, so obviously there's always delays in commitments.

British factory worker/ Working man

I'm not 100% sure of all the commitments that we make in EuroCo, but I can imagine the Pegasus, we committed to the customer that would be delivered on that date and then it was delivered, like, two years later. So obviously on that front we didn't deliver. But then, that's an example. []. So it's, I think, if you take a reliability rate of the company, we are probably doing quite well.

French project manager/ Transnational manager

Well, I mean if you take EuroCo, we had some issues with the Pegasus delays and things like that, but at the end of the day reliability of the product is essential.

French engineer/ Environmental engineer, professional

I believe this is a significant finding in the data. For the first time we have a meaning which is both widely shared and at least partly contradictory to the meaning potentiated by the text, but in a complex way. Most employees do not simply reject the text as not accurate, but negotiate a meaning that can make it possible to accept the value of reliability as 'true' of the organisation and, significantly, of themselves and their teams, while acknowledging that in many instances – they and the organisation fail to deliver what they promise. The significance of this failure is however minimised by being presented either as 'out of our control' or as 'not as important as delivering quality'.

Reliable, we always do the best we can, you know, I mean now when the programme where I work on is delayed 3-4 years, you know, I am

not very happy about it, but I did my share to deliver on time, to deliver my targets, you know. I mean we always deliver, as an individual, my department, or I help others to deliver, to meet targets.

German engineer / Engineer, subcontractor

5.2.5.1 'Reliable' meanings and cultural frames

One could argue that what we have here is a collective act of 'face saving' which reflects and is reflected in an ongoing organisational discourse around the Pegasus experience, which over the last two years must have sought to justify and re-position internally, what externally was increasingly presented as organisational failure. The following excerpt from the narrative of one of the British managers I interviewed provides a good illustration of this point:

But the delays on the Pegasus started there. I mean the company was on a great wave of euphoria, just before that you know 'the Pegasus is a massive achievement'. I mean, 'how the hell we managed to pull that one off'. 'It is just awesome', you know, 'it's an awesome product', um, 'it's really impressive blah, blah', and of course then there were the delays on it. It slipped to six months, 'oooh no', it's slipped to twelve months, 'oooh no', it's slipped to two years, you know, and all the negativity in the press [was] precipitated by the Pegasus problems.

British engineer / Involving British manager

Once more the story of the Pegasus project proves significant for meaning making here, in that EuroCo employees reach for it to construct meanings

around the 'reliability' text, as they did with the 'ambitious' and 'innovative' texts before. Whereas first time round, the references the Pegasus story provided were all about 'pride in the product', 'technological excellence' and 'beating AmeriCo', here the story is told in order to make sense of a painful collective experience and helps to reposition failure as 'inevitable delays' and as 'ensuring quality'. In the end, reliability as an important organisational attribute cannot be denied, but reliability is redefined as 'aiming to do your best', even when the delivery of commitments proves to be unattainable.

Yes, for me reliable is somebody, you know, they would do a good job but they may not necessarily do it in the timescales that you said you would do it in, whereas for me delivering on commitment is, that is a bigger step to deliver on your commitment even though you might be reliable.

British HR manager / Expert, strategist

Yeah, but again for me reliability doesn't mean that you can, if you've done your best, if you've have informed your customers, if you've done what you could within the timescales that you had, with the budget that you had and all the constraints that you had, if you've done your best, if you haven't managed to deliver 100% still that doesn't mean that you are not a reliable person.

French administrator/ HR person, French

Later on I will discuss how the Pegasus story is used yet again by respondents to construct the meaning of yet another value text, 'honest'.

5.2.5.2 'Reliable' meanings and cultural identities

The Pegasus related discourse in relation to the collective failure to deliver commitments is so pervasive in the employee narratives that there is little scope for personal identity related themes to emerge. Of the two minority meanings, one, shared among four respondents, related to personal reliability. Interestingly, three of these respondents also shared the personal ambition meaning discussed earlier. Here again the same themes of the 'importance of employment' and the need for self-affirmation seemed to be at play in the specific interpretations of these individuals.

Well I'd like to think I was reliable you know, I mean I hope that they've never, EuroCo have never had cause to question my reliability. I mean in the sense where I'm never abusive, I've never been late, I mean, I'd like to think I do the best I can.

British factory worker/ Working man

The only person who did not share the personal ambition meaning, but shares the reliability meaning is LF (T5), whose identity as 'key communicator' is built on themes of personal responsibility and teamwork, but also the need to balance structure with flexibility as shown in this quote

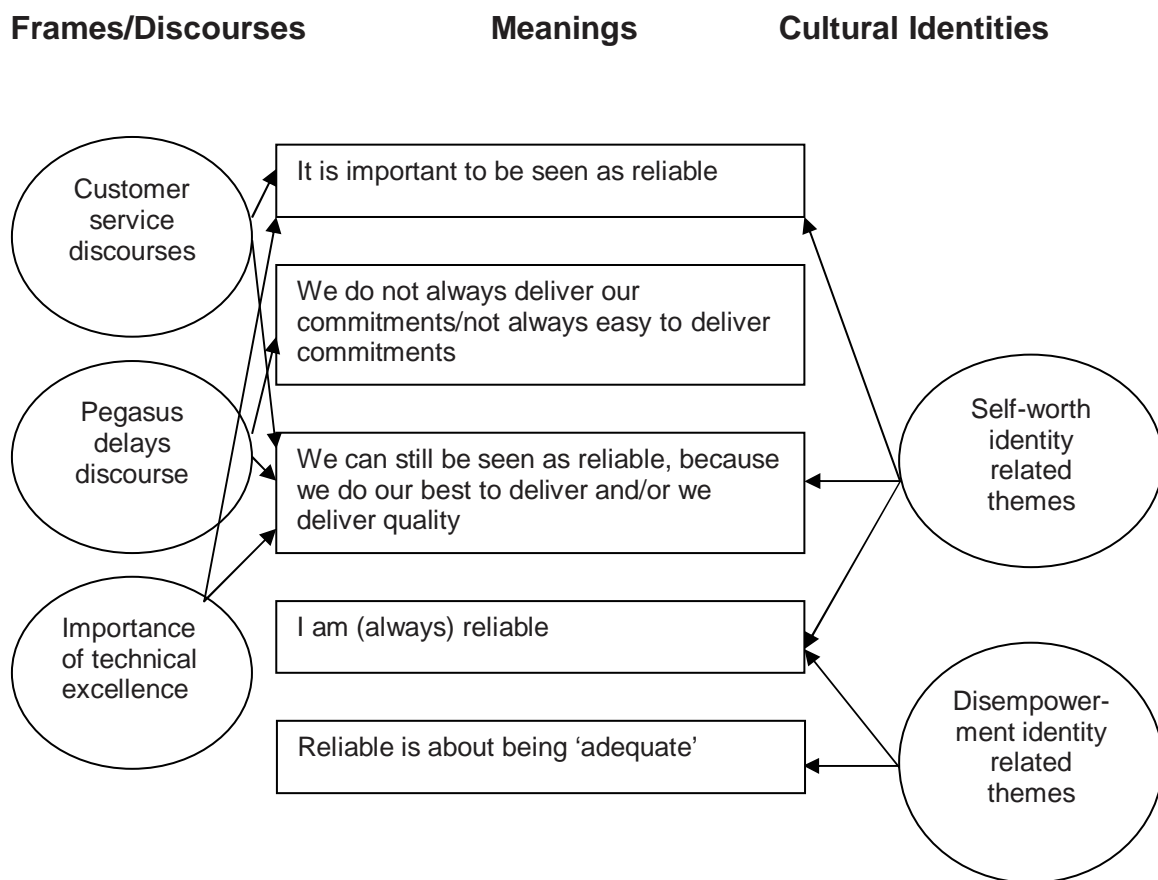
To me individually, I'd like to think that I really was, I work hard at my job, and, you know, I think the job that I do, my role, never seems to be

like that, in the sense that I can get a phone call and it can change my day; cause I've got to re-arrange travel, or book a visitor in, any kind of thing that can change my whole day's routine. But at the end of that I'd still like to think that I am reliable enough for people to trust me to still get those things done.

5.2.5.3 Summary of the 'reliable' readings

In summary, unlike the other values texts so far, the text which articulates a 'reliability' value appears to conflict with organisational experience and, consequently, generates a series of negotiated meanings where respondents partly agree with and partly reject the potentiated management meanings. What emerges is a compromise new meaning about reliability redefined in terms of 'doing your best' and/or 'delivering quality', but not necessarily 'delivering on commitments'. The influence on this particular interpretation of existing organisational frames and discourses as shown in figure 5.4 and, as already discussed, appears to be significant.

Figure 5.4 Cultural influences on the meanings of ‘reliable’



5.2.6 Comparisons with the new values text

Given the link the Pegasus story provides between the readings behind the terms ‘innovation’ and ‘reliability’ – on the one hand the importance of technical excellence, on the other, the failure to deliver on commitments- it is not surprising, perhaps, that in the new values statement, management try to combine the two concepts in one. The text reads:

EuroCo People...Drive Innovation & Deliver Reliably

- *Make realistic commitments and deliver to internal and external customers on time, cost, and quality*

- *Continuously champion change, innovation, eco-efficiency and improvement*
- *Be process-focused, striving for lean efficiency, standardisation & excellence*

At first glance the combination in this text of two very different concepts raises questions of purpose and clarity. The text appears to be full of contradictions. Can employees be asked to be *realistic* and *process focused* on the one hand while *championing change* and *excellence* on the other? However, with the hindsight of the meanings and cultural frames and discourses discussed so far, perhaps another perspective is possible here. Far from being an unfortunate attempt to shoehorn two diverse concepts into one text, this may, actually, be an attempt by leaders to respond to some of the lessons learned from the Pegasus experience by introducing a slightly different discourse around the importance of technical excellence vs. the importance of delivering commitments. As the UK communications director suggests

EuroCo's success is around innovation. It's about being a reliable organisation. So to drive innovation, well we do that anyway, and deliver reliability, perhaps not as well that last part than what we do with innovation. So should it not be 'let's be reliable, deliver reliability'. Why link that with that? Whereas, maybe that's the idea: we know that we are an innovative organisation, but we need to drive to be more reliable.

Still, this is not explicitly set out in the text which on the face of it seems to place equal importance on all concepts presented here – so *standardisation and excellence, realistic commitments and continuous championship of change* are still required by all employees, with no clear guidance as to where the priority lies or how one is supposed to influence or constrain another. As a result it is not clear to see what the desired meanings are here. It may be that all that is signposted by the new text is that delivering other commitments is as important as pursuing technical excellence and that no compromises should ever be acceptable. This is perhaps the reading preferred in the quote below – although note that the interpretation both acknowledges and rejects again the possibility that one can always meet commitments

Actually, here, with this one, is the perfect description of what should happen in a perfect life. But there is so many things linked together that in some cases, it is not always possible to make realistic commitments.

German engineer/ Engineer, subcontractor

If the ‘no compromise’ reading is intended, this is not picked up by most employees, who see the text as a more detailed version of the earlier two values statements and in most cases simply re-articulate some of their earlier meanings.

Yeah, it's the same thing for me, without innovation you just stop at one level you are not moving forward. If we aren't reliable, then we are not being taken seriously, so it's a team work activity to be reliable

German engineer / 'Proper' engineer, manager

What employees do pick up on is the notion of *realistic commitments*, which a couple of them had already voiced in the course of the previous discussion about reliability. This particular wording proves significant in shifting some interpretations towards the meaning that the communications director suggested – *innovation is important and we are good at it, but we also need to get better at delivering commitments and this we can do, by setting realistic commitments*

‘Make realistic commitments’, see for me that’s better, because that means that you don’t go to the top managers to say ‘we can deliver this with that little money, within 2 years’, just to make yourself feel good or, well, ok. You have to be realistic, I think, and people will tend to follow you better, if you prove to them from A to B that you can do that.

French administrator/ HR person, French

Other readings pick up on the importance of *eco-efficiency*, which as I said in the previous chapter appeared repeatedly as a theme in more recent management discourses and also appeared as a frequent theme in one engineer’s identity construction. Other familiar frames, like *‘step by step improvements’, ‘lean processes’* and *‘excellence’* are also singled out as ‘important’, but mostly the meanings articulated here are simple and focus on a single concept – there is no attempt to articulate a complex meaning about relationships between any of these concepts.

It seems to be the case, therefore, that the new detailed text combining the concepts of 'innovation' and 'reliability' partly fails and partly succeeds in its attempt to introduce a new explicit discourse into organisational culture. On the one hand, most employees seem to randomly focus on one or two concepts in their responses, and/or retrace their previous meanings about innovation and reliability. On the other hand, the concept of *realistic commitments* is perhaps the one new aspect of the text that most respondents focus on. By introducing this different discursive frame and by relating it not only to quality, but to time and cost, this text may yet begin to shift frames around commitments and reliability. With the overall evidence, one could, perhaps argue that a simpler text here would have done a better job in highlighting this point.

5.2.7 The meaning of 'honest'

I now turn to another value text which once again brings out the importance of the Pegasus story for the value readings. The text reads: *Honest: We build relationships that are based on trust.* Again a number of potentiated meanings are evident here: that it is important to be honest and that the organisation and its employees should be seen as honest; that to be honest is to be trustworthy and that the organisation and its people are or should be trusted and should trust those they do business with. Apart from the importance of honesty, in principle, employees, however, find it difficult to agree with any of this. In fact, unlike the interpretation of 'reliable', where employees did not agree with part of the potentiated meaning, but invested a lot in coming up

with a compromise interpretation, here the meanings they produce are much more obviously a rejection of the meaning potentiated by the text. This is articulated as three different, but related propositions: ‘the organisation cannot always be trusted’, ‘management cannot always be trusted’ and ‘employees cannot always be trusted – we are not open with each other’. The table below shows the meanings articulated when the ‘honest’ text was read and the distribution of these meanings among respondents.

Table 5.7 Summary of actualised meaning for the value ‘honest’

Type	Meanings	Actualised by
Non-potentiated	It is important, but difficult to be honest	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5 T10, T11, T14, T15, T16, T17
	The organisation cannot (always) be trusted	T3, T4, T5 T13, T14, T15
	Managers cannot (always) be trusted	T1, T2, T4, T6, T7, T12
	Employees cannot (always) be trusted. We are not (always) open/honest with each other	T2, T5 T12, T15, T16, T17
	I trust the people I work with	T8, T16, T17

5.2.7.1 ‘Honest’ meanings and cultural frames and identities

In this section I focus on the three main rejection meanings which were generated in the reading of ‘honest’ and show how these relate both to cultural identities and cultural frames and discourses. I have chosen to discuss cultural frames and cultural identities together in this instance as they appear to interact in complex ways to shape the specific meanings message

users articulate. As some interesting sharing patterns are evident here, these are also discussed and potential reasons for them are explored in the data.

5.2.7.2 'The organisation cannot be trusted' meaning

In reading the 'honest' text some employees produce primarily an 'organisation cannot be trusted' meaning. Although this reflects a broad dissatisfaction with the lack of honesty and openness in the business, and - discourses about the challenge of change and the implications of the Power8 programme, meanings here also seem to draw from themes close to the individual's personal identity construction. In T's case, his strong sub-contractor identity, which allows him to maintain an outsider's view of the organisation at the same time as he constructs a more inclusive identity ('we all work for EuroCo'; 'I am proud to work for EuroCo'), would explain his focus on the supplier perspective here.

'Honest. We build relationships based on trust' wow! Um this one I come back to the supplier thing. It's really hard to trust EuroCo in some cases, because they will tell you one day 'ok you will have the contract for one year, that's fine, and one week later, ah no sorry it's only for 6 months and they change the contract. So, in some part, yeah. I really ask myself where and which relationships are based on trust.

French engineer/ Engineer, subcontractor

L's recent experience as a company representative in China, a core theme in his 'local man who travelled far' identity, is also evident in his interpretation.

Well, in China everything is based on your word and, ur, sometimes I don't think EuroCo with some of our key suppliers have been that honest with them; they have, maybe we've built their expectations up greater than, and then sort of let them down and I felt that maybe sometimes we weren't fair with them.

British senior project manager/ EuroCo man

As well as reflecting a personal identity influence in their interpretations, both employees here seem to home in on the EuroCo/supplier experience as a particular example of lack of trust in the organisation. Others relate this meaning to the relationship between the organisation and customers, frequently accessing once again the Pegasus delays experience, or the organisation and employees, accessing mostly recent reorganisation, change and motivation discourses, although these seem to appear much more strongly in the shaping of the next meaning.

5.2.7.3 The 'management cannot be trusted' meaning

This particular interpretation seems to be linked directly to two broader organisational discourses: the public behaviour of senior managers and, most significantly, the painful, for many, recent re-organisation experience. These are reinforced in some narratives by related personal identity themes, such as B's 'importance of employment' which helps construct his 'working man' identity. A strong 'them & us' theme is frequently present in each of the meanings here, where *them* are the senior managers of the organisation and

the *us* definition varies from individual to individual. In the first quote below *they* (the senior managers who made the decisions that led to job losses) are contrasted with *the guys* (the local managers who are part of the extended business family this respondent feels she belongs to)

'Relationships based on trust'; I don't know about trust. I think, I believe, there are so many jobs going on the shop floor,[] I mean the guys didn't know anything about it, the middle management, I believe. And that's not trust, is it? I think that's a bit of a no-no.

British factory administrator/ Wife and mother

Um, I go from the mantra to always be honest. I, um, and maybe not from my own experience, but I think a lot of people in the factory don't trust the management.

British factory worker/ Working man

So being honest, yes, I feel to be honest again when you are in a management position, it's difficult to explain how you can cascade them down to the workshop level when they know that all the top management of EuroCo is in the media, in the court and they have thousands, millions outside of the company and now you ask for a management plan to reduce the overheads to be more efficient etc etc.

French project manager/ Contributor

It is also worth pointing out here that this meaning is very prominent among British employees and rather absent in non British narratives (with the exception of the French project manager quoted above). As most British interviews were conducted during the first interviewing phase, when the organisation was still in the process of reorganisation, it is quite possible that the prevalence of this meaning relates to the immediate context of the interviews – the change programme and imminent redundancies - rather than any particular national cultural influence. A similar pattern is evident with the ‘people’ meaning, which I discuss later in this chapter.

5.2.7.4 The ‘employees cannot always be trusted’ meaning

This third meaning focuses on the relationships between employees and, once again, brings up the Pegasus experience. What seems to have created problems during the time the Pegasus prototype was being built, these employees argue, is people’s unwillingness to own up to problems in the design and manufacturing process. A new frame now emerges in the conversation: the organisation’s ‘green culture’.

You know we had this thing, the traffic lights, so you make a report and you say ‘it’s green, that’s good to go; it’s amber, there are some concerns, we’re a bit worried about a few things, but it’s not too bad really; and red, oh no panic! We’re not going to succeed. All of the reports on the Pegasus were, as I understand it, people would say

*'yeah it's good to go, we're on top, we're on schedule, we're on target'
and the reality was they were miles behind.*

British senior project manager/ EuroCo man

I mean you know sometimes you can fake the KPIs, you know, the key performance indicators or you know the chart, but at the end the truth comes out. So I think in general after the Pegasus delays disaster, which was probably because people didn't tell the truth, there were so many problems, but they kept it quiet, so EuroCo has learned from this.

German engineer/ Little- guy-doing- his-job

This particular interpretation of 'honest', therefore, draws again on the Pegasus experience and reflects on a particular aspect of the organisational culture, which actively discourages openly admitting mistakes and problems for fear of being personally blamed – what respondents call the 'green culture'. The evidence of a common cultural frame, the 'green culture' is here overwhelming.

We were saying that EuroCo had this green culture which is 'it's green', you know, when you pass the milestone and you say green, amber, or red. Everybody was saying it was green, even if they had problems and then these problems started to grow and grow and then you get to the Pegasus, when you are on the assembly line and things are not

working. So some people would say why wasn't it identified before, and they say 'well it's because of the green culture'.

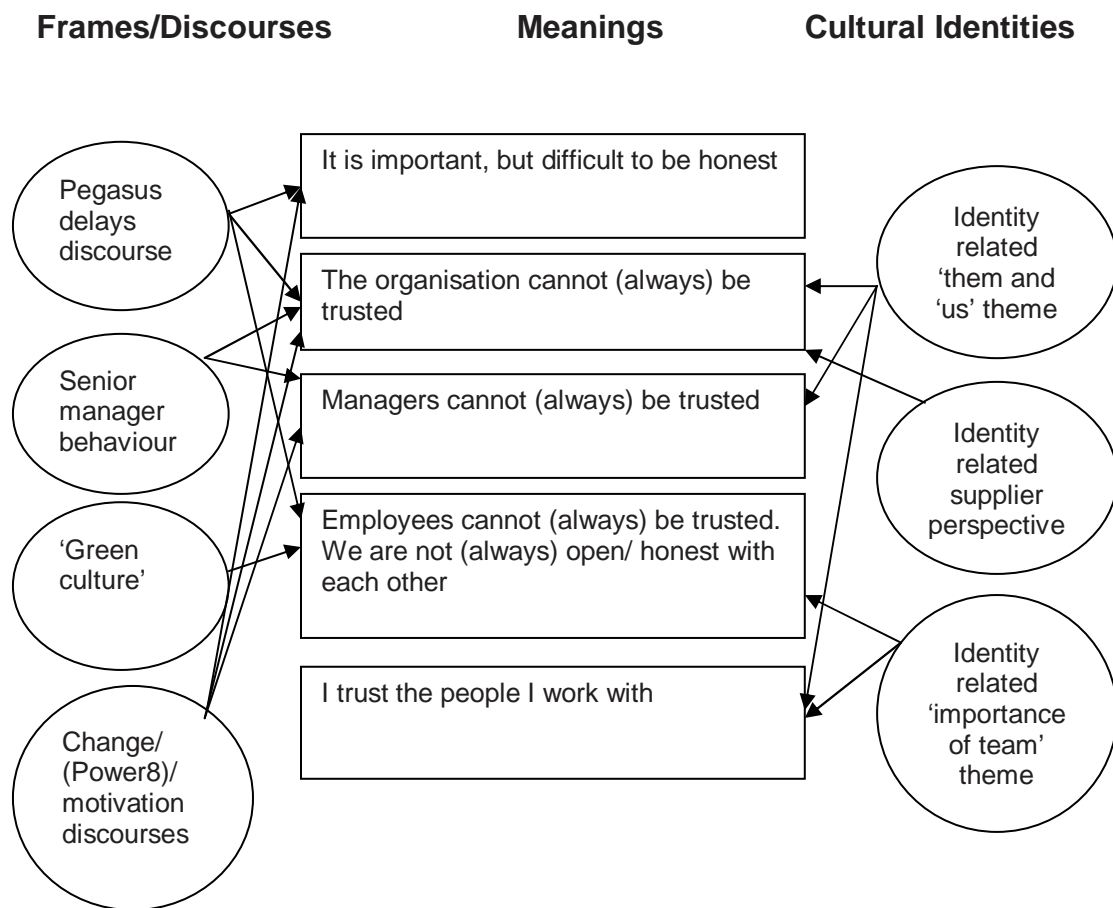
French project manager/ Trans-national manager

5.2.7.5 Summary of 'honest' readings

In summary, in interpreting the value term 'honest', employees accept that, in principle, honesty is a desirable attribute, but largely reject the meaning that, in practice, it can always be applied to the organisation, its management, or its employees. These shared meanings of rejection draw both from organisational and personal themes, which, in many cases, appear to work together to produce contradictory meanings. The Pegasus experience is once again accessed to construct meaning here, in this case combined with a new, strongly shared cultural frame, EuroCo's 'green culture', which appears to describe a ritualised way of dealing with avoidance of blame and which made it very difficult for individuals and teams to own up to problems and mistakes.

This is, arguably, the second instance in the data where organisational rhetoric clearly fails to reflect organisational culture, as for example it does with values such as 'ambitious' or 'innovative'. However, unlike the reading of 'reliable' where a face saving compromise meaning is negotiated, here there is little attempt to minimise the rejection of the potentiated meaning.

Figure 5.5 Cultural influences on the meanings of 'honest'



5.2.8 Comparisons with the new values text

Having rejected the initial text as not reflecting the truth, employees respond favourably to the new values text which seems to acknowledge precisely what they have been talking about – the need to be more open and trusting against the 'green culture' realities. The text reads:

Face Reality & Be Transparent

- Acknowledge, face and proactively address/solve conflict and problems
- Be open in working relationships and trust others to share openly

- *Act with integrity and in compliance with applicable regulations*

It isn't that the new text makes being open and trusting easier or simpler; as employees acknowledge, the issues that make this a difficult path to tread still remain. However, the directness and explicitness of the language here is perhaps a sign of leadership acknowledging the problems of the 'green culture' and attempting to at least bring the shortcomings of this particular aspect of the culture out in the open for discussion. If nothing else, this is precisely, what the text achieves.

I mean some people may try and hide things to avoid conflict, but it's not the way forward at all. It is a shame if they have to do it, it is not their fault, because they feel that there is a lack of trust. [] So 'transparent' is a very important word, yes. As a professional you know you act for EuroCo first and this is a big link to putting the company first, as opposed to your individual, personal aspirations.

French engineer/ Environmental engineer, professional

I think that's why they've put these values forward so that people realise that [it does not serve them to hide the truth]. On a global scale, if everybody did that, you know, you wouldn't get anything done really, so I think that's a really important value. Before innovation and so on you have to trust your team mates to deliver and then see if you can improve on that.

German engineer/ Young engineer

It is interesting that in both these examples respondents seem to agree with the potentiated meaning of the text, while at the same time invoking a particular aspect of their constructed identity – *professional* in the first case, *the importance of team* in the second. From this we could perhaps argue that in the same way a conflicting identity or identity theme leads to a rejection or renegotiation of a potentiated meaning, a congruent identity or identity theme may support the emergence of a potentiated meaning.

In summary, by introducing a text which explicitly asks employees to proactively acknowledge and solve problems and conflicts and to try to be open in working relationships, management are seen as acknowledging and trying to bring out into the open the problems of ‘green culture’ which were so apparent in the course of the Pegasus experience. Where the rather implicit text around the value ‘honest’ seemed to trigger rather negative responses which were framed in terms of the ‘green culture’ discourse by respondents, this text, seems to be able to shift the discourse on to a more neutral, even positive, ground.

5.2.9 The meaning of ‘people’

Yet another example of shared meaning is presented in the interpretations of the final value text ‘*People: people make the difference*’. This rather broad statement leaves much room for interpretation. Is ‘people’ to be read as meaning ‘employees’ for example, and what exactly is meant by ‘making the difference?’ Readers, however, have no problem in decoding this text,

generating two main meanings, both of which are shared. These are shown in the table below

Table 5.8 Summary of actualised meaning for the value ‘people’

Type	Meanings	Actualised by
Potentiated (implicitly)	Employees are important to the organisation: we need people with good skills to succeed	T3, T5, T9, T10, T11, T12, T14, T15, T16, T17
	Employees are important to the organisation: we must take good care of our people	T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T6, T8

The first of these two meanings which relates the importance of people to their skills and that of their skills to organisational success is the most prevalent in the data

People make the difference, yeah, it's just that in EuroCo the people are the main asset, because we are coming up with new ideas. All these ones can be achieved, if you have the right people in the right places and the right skills.

French project manager/ Transnational manager

Yeah, I mean, we have good people you know people make the difference. If you have the right people, right team, team spirit then you can change things.

German engineer / Engineer, subcontractor

People make the difference, they do, yeah. Sometimes you get people who have been working in EuroCo for far too long, I think they're getting a lot, they get stale and you know in bad habits, I suppose. They get fresh ideas, it makes a difference.

British factory office worker/ Not a manager

The second meaning which relates the importance of people to looking after employees is more of a minority meaning and, for the first time in the data, it is only shared by employees of one nationality, more specifically British employees.

It's absolutely true, you know, we don't actually live by that value um we treat people quite poorly in ways um we treat people very well in other ways as well, but we can treat people quite poorly. You can expect a heck of a lot of them and do very little to support them.

British engineer / Involving British Manager

So for me they do make the difference and the only way I think you can measure that is to make sure that on a day to day basis people are treated right.

British HR manager/ Expert, strategist

If you haven't got good people, employing good people or you are not treating them right, you are not going to have a good business.

British senior project manager/ EuroCo man

5.2.9.1 'People' meanings and cultural frames

Some British employees, as is shown above, do construct both actualised meanings, but it is perhaps significant that the second meaning ('we must look after our people') is only to be found in British interpretations. Given this is an uncommon pattern (the only other instance of a meaning constructed on nationality lines seemed to be the 'management cannot be trusted' interpretation of 'honest' which I discussed in the previous section), the reason is worth exploring. What is happening here? The answer cannot be found in a common British identity, as no such thing is constructed – and even if it were, this would not explain the specific focus on taking care of people. Which aspect of British culture would be linked to that, exactly?

The most likely reason for this unexpected pattern I believe lies in the combination of two different contextual elements. Firstly, the presence of a very strong 'organisation as family' theme in many British narratives which may be linked to the 'old' culture of the British organisation – according to employees until recently national companies operated with relative autonomy and had rather different working cultures:

They were the employers of their generation...and in a lot of the business and the shop floor you've got a lot of family connections; you might have a father and his sons here, or daughters; it's quite a family business in that sense.

British administrator / Key communicator

When we worked for, when EuroCo UK was a corporate entity in its own right, managers in EuroCo UK were quite a tight-knit group and, I would say, I knew probably at least 50% of the senior management in the group [] I knew pretty much all of those guys and a big number of the power players within EuroCo UK and the culture of the company was a British company.

British engineer/ Involving British manager

Secondly, and probably most importantly, the timing of most of the British interviews may be significant here. Unlike the German and French interviews these were conducted during the earlier part of the re-organisation programme, when worry and uncertainty among employees were at their highest. This is reflected in the comments below

I do feel though you are only a number and a lot of people feel the same at the moment, to be honest.

British factory worker / Working man

I think again, you know, we have got an issue at the moment where I think generally people are fairly demotivated, [] that's out in the business, you know, we've got to reduce the numbers of people, we've got to cut costs and to keep people motivated at the same time is quite difficult

British HR manager/ Expert, strategist

No, I think the only other thing to say is we do need to be careful about the communications around power8 because whatever way you dress that up, that's about cost saving, it's about reducing head count, it's about nasty things done to people.

British engineer/ Involving British manager

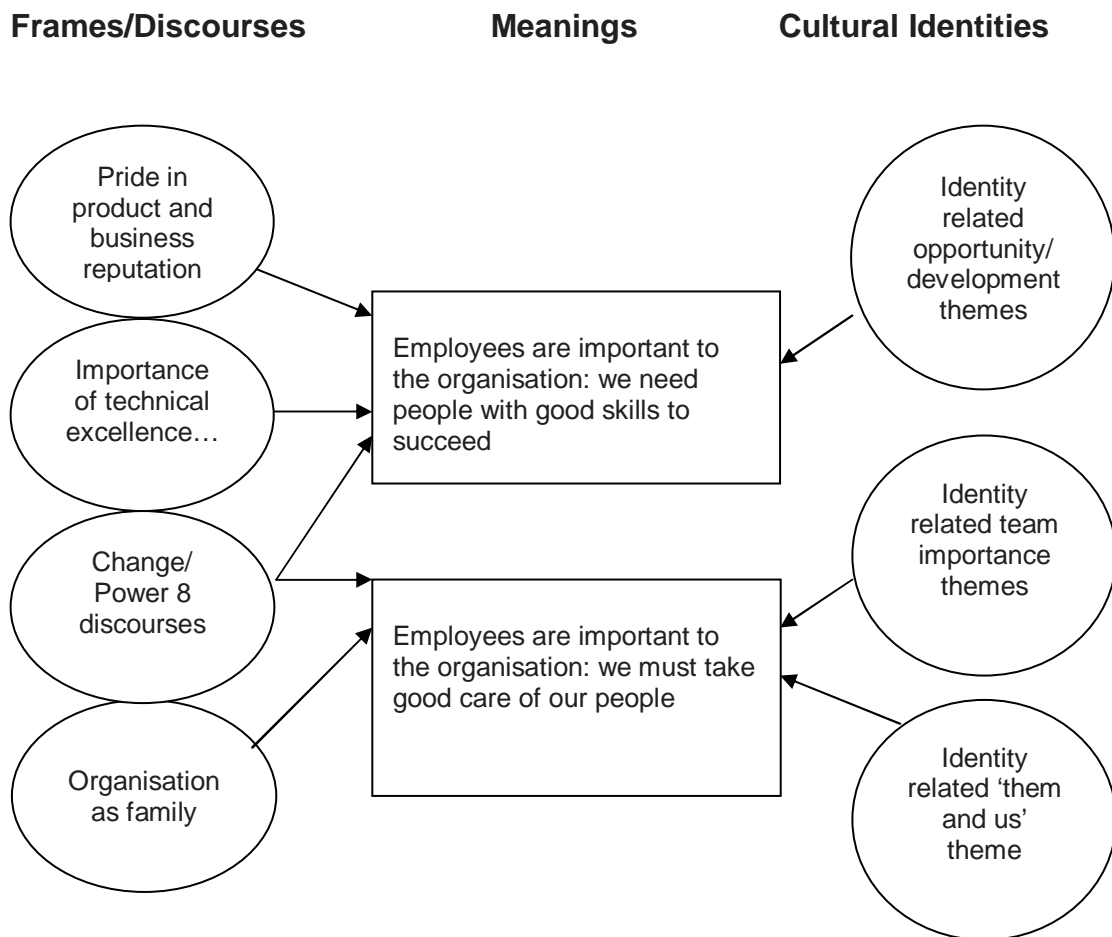
Although this experience does not seem to have overly influenced the interpretations of the other values texts (with the exception of the 'honest' text as discussed earlier), it is likely that it did influence the specific response to the 'people' text, because of its obvious focus on employees who were seen as being treated hard by the organisation. This point suggests that important aspects of the immediate context, while influential on meaning making, will not necessarily affect all meanings in the same way. The relationship between contextual frames and actualised meanings seems to be clearly mediated by the text itself.

5.2.9.2 Summary of the 'people' readings

The 'people' text produced two main actualised meanings, both of which could be said to be implicitly encouraged by the text. The most prominent of these was strongly shared and was linked to frames and discourses of pride in organisational success, technical excellence and motivation. Although I have not discussed identities specifically above, these same interpretations frequently showed that cultural identity themes of 'personal development' and

'opportunity' were also present in these meanings. The second meaning relating the reading of the value 'people' with a paternalistic approach to people management seemed to derive from frames shared by British employees, in particular, which in turn related to the re-organisation project, and the uncertainty this entailed, as well as to a strong 'organisation as family' shared frame.

Figure 5.6 Cultural influences on the meaning of 'people'



5.2.10 Comparisons with the new values text

Finally, it is worth pointing out that in the new values statement the 'people' value is re-articulated as 'develop myself and others', with the rest of the text also clearly putting the focus on individuals developing skills and on managers supporting and encouraging that development. The text reads

EuroCo People...Develop Myself & Others

- *Provide/contribute to a working environment in which people can develop key competencies, grow and learn from mistakes*
- *Respect, support and recognize others*
- *Continuously learn, coach and engage others*

As a result of the explicitness of this message, the meanings now actualised are almost exclusively about developing skills - the 'looking after our employees' meaning seems to be marginalised. There are two key meanings actualised here; one relates to personal responsibility to learn and develop, and the other to the responsibility of managers to support and reward that development. Both of these meanings are articulated and, perhaps because of the way the message is framed, cultural identities and identity themes appear to be very prominent in shaping these meanings.

[As a manager] you have to develop your people and to motivate your people and have support as much as possible really. You shouldn't have a blame culture or anything. Any mistakes should be leading to

lessons and you should be learning. Yeah that's really about motivating your people as well.

French engineer/ Environmental engineer, professional

For myself, that's a big point because I'm on the training scheme, so obviously I'm getting a lot of opportunities to develop myself, but it is also part of my training that I give something back to help other people to develop, like going into school activities or community relations and so on, and obviously it's important in your team as well

German engineer /Young engineer

If the purpose here is to control interpretations more precisely, by being more explicit in the way the values text is articulated, this purpose is, arguably, achieved in this case.

5.2.11 Further comments on the new values text

In this final section I would like to discuss the meanings constructed when the value *'practice teamwork and global integration'* was read. This is a new message introduced in the 2009 values statement. I select it for discussion because I believe that it provides a further example of how a message text can trigger existing organisational discourses or frames to create complex meanings. In this particular case both supporting and conflicting discourses are accessed, which result in negotiated, compromise meanings. The *'teamwork and global integration'* value consists of three instruction-type statements:

- *Get things done through global networks, common process, methods and tools, within and outside EuroCo*
- *Be a team player across cultures and organizations*
- *Use and develop the best resources available wherever they are in the world*

This text clearly reflects the official management strategy of 'internationalisation and integration' which had been consistently highlighted in official documents and formal internal communication and is also reflected in the more informal organisational discourse of 'transnationality' present in many employee narratives. Some examples are given below:

The organisation I would say is very transnational. Certainly over the last 12/18 months we are working in a more integrated way so people in the UK, France and Germany could have bosses or teams working in any of the four countries so really the working together and communication is key because, if your boss is, you know, several hundred miles away then that can cause its own difficulties.

British HR manager/ Expert, strategist

Actually, a lot of the activities I have supported were transnational. Because EuroCo is more and more [transnational] since 2001 and the integration is ongoing really

French engineer/Environmental engineer, professional

I would say, when I introduce myself, I am part of a transnational organisation, I work pretty much with all the four countries on a daily basis, so it's, we have to work that way because if you are just in France working on the [assembly line?] then it doesn't really matter.

French project manager/ Transnational manager

This prominent theme of a transnational organisation – one where people work in integrated ways across borders, projects and nationalities – is very strongly linked in the employee narratives with two other interrelated themes, the existence of cultural and working differences and the need to overcome communication problems. The following excerpts are examples of this

Yeah, so I think it's the only weak point of the company, it's the communication. We can see here that we do not have the same processes than in France. In Germany we don't have the same process as well, and there is no communication, we ask for something and we give them something else

German engineer/ Engineer, subcontractor

I think you really see the differences in nationalities, the differences in behaviours and also in management in terms of how our teams are managed. How you have the English/American influence that you find in the UK; it is more a flatter organisation where people are more empowered and more trusted by managers and on the other side for

France or Spain it's really an organisation where your boss on top will decide and people on the bottom are less empowered.

French project manager/ Transnational manager

It is clear from such excerpts that an integrated way of working is a reality in the business, but as employees perceive it, it is not a reality without its problems. In fact the management rhetoric of 'harmonisation', if employees are to be believed is far from being achieved, whereas communication issues and differences in ways of working do impede effective teamwork. At the same time employees appear to be learning to overcome these problems and to recognise some of the strengths of the integrated way of working. As a result, the meanings generated here, as respondents tap into both negative and positive discourses about integrated working, are largely negotiated, compromise meanings, which however acknowledge the reality of 'transnationality'.

I mean teamwork is very important in EuroCo. All my managers were really focused on good team work, [] and 'global integration', yes, I mean we are an international company; there are so many different nationalities and, there is always differences, you know, but in general, integration-wise, I can't complain, I think you know people get involved with different nationalities in all parts of the world and they all fit into the programme.

German engineer/ Little- guy- doing- his- job

I think what we also have to do is kind of, I don't want to say forget your nationality, but it's, like, not that important because you are working for EuroCo, it doesn't matter if I'm German or French. [] I think this could be a really big advantage for us especially, in you know, opposite to our competitors as we have all those different nationalities and I think we could make much more out of it, than we've done so far.

German project manager / Professional woman

If anything, it appears to be the case that in negotiating the conflict between the two strong frames – transnationality and cross-cultural working differences – respondents appear to generate a meaning which attempts to minimise the negative element of the second frame, thus producing a meaning close to the meaning, arguably, the text potentiates – that integrated transnational working is a good thing for the organisation and its employees, that it is feasible and furthermore that it is ultimately desirable – a goal to be pursued. In other words, what seems to be happening here is that a value statement articulated by leaders makes explicit and brings to the fore for discussion a discourse (transnationality and integration) which has already been prominent in the business. By doing so, leaders seem to influence the development of that discourse and any related negative discourses - cultural and working differences; communication problems - in a positive way.

5.3 Summary of chapter

In this chapter I presented my research data in a systematic way in order to show what meanings were constructed when the two EuroCo values statements were read by employees from a number of backgrounds and to explore to what extent and how these meanings related to the texts themselves and to shared cultural frames and cultural identities. I also discussed the extent to which meanings were shared among employees and explored if this sharing of meanings could be explained in terms of shared cultural influences evidenced in the transcripts.

The data shows that whereas multiple meanings for each statement were generated, these were not as varied as one might initially expect –in most cases each text was related to a small cluster of meanings. A good number of these seemed to agree with meanings potentiated by the values texts. This was particularly the case when the text seemed to invoke themes which were consistent with existing shared frames and discourses and in some cases with identities or identity themes. Where employees contradicted or rejected a potentiated interpretation, it was again because of the existence of such prevalent underlying discourses or frames, which this time contradicted the meanings invoked by the text, or in some cases, because of strong opposing identities or identity related themes. Whereas cultural identities did clearly play a role in interpretations, particularly where a text triggered a strong affinity or conflict with an individual's identity or identity themes, these appeared to be less prevalent in the interpretation process compared to the shared

organisational frames and discourses respondents accessed to construct their meanings.

The data also showed that whereas employees did not consciously recognise the differences in tone and style between the two different values statements (they seemed to focus primarily on content as reflected in the lexis of the text) they were in many cases subconsciously influenced by the second text to construct subtly different meanings. This seemed to be more evident where leaders were better at articulating a clearer, more explicit message which seemed to pick up on an existing cultural frame or discourse and bring this out into the open, for discussion. I now turn to drawing further conclusions from these findings, firstly by exploring the answers they provide for each of the elements of the research question, and, secondly, by examining them against existing theories and other empirical research, where appropriate.

CHAPTER SIX
DATA DISCUSSION
MESSAGE INTERPRETATIONS AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

6.1 Chapter purpose and structure

In this chapter I return to the research question and explore how the insights I gained from the findings I outlined in the previous chapters help to address its different elements, namely

- Q1. How are universal values messages interpreted by employees in multinational organisations, i.e. what meanings do they create?
- Q2. To what extent are meanings shared among employees of different cultural backgrounds and to what extent are they different?
- Q3. How does culture²⁴ influence these meanings?

As I showed in earlier chapters, in the heart of my research lies the need to explore and understand the relationship between meanings and meaning patterns on the one hand, and cultural context on the other. It is, consequently, the discussion of this relationship, based on the evidence presented so far, that will take up the main part of this chapter. To set out this discussion I will first summarise the findings as relate to the first two questions, namely the types of meanings EuroCo employees constructed when they read the two values statements, and the way these meanings were shared among the different respondents. I will then turn to how the various meanings and meaning patterns could perhaps be explained in terms of the cultural context, as this is reflected in shared cultural frames and discourses and in cultural identities constructed by respondents in the course of their

²⁴ Where culture is understood as webs or dynamic systems of meaning, constructed and sustained through communication, so the relationship in question here is one between a range of meanings, reflected and enacted in a range of texts

interviews. Finally, I will discuss what we can learn from the comparisons between the first and second EuroCo values texts and the similarities and differences in meanings these were shown to generate. In the course of the discussion I will compare the findings from my own data with extant literature, in order to draw further conclusions relating to the key themes of my study. In the next chapter I will be reviewing and summarising this discussion, with a particular view towards highlighting the contribution of this piece of research to knowledge.

6.2 Meanings derived from values messages

6.2.1 Overview findings: multiple, yet shared meanings

At the outset of my study, I argued that leader expectations that universal values messages in multinational businesses will be interpreted largely in the same way by their employees and that, furthermore, employee meanings will coincide with the meanings intended by leaders, should at least be tested, if not challenged. This argument was based on theories which support a relativist approach to culture and communication (Gudykunst, 2000; Beamer and Varner, 2001) and on empirical reception studies which show that meanings generated when a message is read are multiple and frequently at odds with the meanings intended by message 'senders' (Fiske, 1991; Larsen, 1991; Hall, 1993). In organisational research, in particular, studies which explore how employees react to the way leaders frame change seem to suggest that such frames are frequently questioned or rejected (DiSanza, 1993; Turnbull, 2001; Bean and Hamilton, 2006).

My findings appear to offer evidence on behalf of both positions. In the EuroCo case, there is, on the one hand, evidence of multiplicity of actualised meanings. On the other, many meanings appear to be shared by a number of employees with very different backgrounds. There are also several instances where these meanings appear to agree with the meanings potentiated by the values texts. In the discussion that follows I will explore these apparent contradictions, asking whether the cultural influences shown in the data can explain such meaning patterns and, if not, how else these can be explained – by considering the findings in the context of other studies.

6.2.2 Actualised meanings relating to the organisation

In this section I briefly discuss what my data has shown in relation to question one of my research question, namely how employees interpreted the values messages and the types of messages that were generated.

Having read the values texts, respondents used paraphrasing, contextualising²⁵ and longer narrative or storytelling (for example the story about the Pegasus project) to construct a variety of actualised meanings. In Fairclough's (2003) terminology, these covered all three meaning types - *actional* meanings, relating to the acceptance, rejection or negotiation of a privileged frame, *representational* meanings, relating to the description of the respondents' world, and *identificatory* meanings relating to the shaping of

²⁵ Using phrases such as in 'my case', 'in my work as...' in our department' to construct a meaning based in the context of their own specific experience.

cultural identities (Fairclough, 2003). Frequently a discourse fragment constructed all three types of meaning at the same time (cf Roberts, 1999). Later in this chapter I will summarise what the apparent relationships between these different actualised meanings tell us about the link between text, culture and interpretation. Before that I offer a more detailed summary of the types of meanings generated when the values texts were read by focusing on the relationship between the text and actual interpretations.

6.2.2.1 Potentiated meanings

- A large number of actualised meanings agreed with meanings explicitly potentiated in the text by means of specific lexical items or framing strategies. Such a meaning was, for example, the meaning associated with the term 'ambitious' that technical excellence is important to the success of the organisation, or the meaning associated with 'customer focused' that customer satisfaction is the most important thing for the organisation and its employees.
- In many cases, meanings were generated which seemed to agree with an implicitly potentiated meaning in the text, namely a meaning which was not manifestly present in the lexis of the text, yet appeared to be triggered by it. An example of this is the widely shared meaning relating the importance of quality to customer satisfaction or the 'beat AmeriCo' meaning related to the 'ambitious' text.

6.2.2.2 Non-potentiating meanings

At the same time, a number of actualised meanings were constructed 'against the grain' of the values texts.

- In some cases an actualised meaning clearly contradicted some of the potentiating meanings of the text. This happened, for example, in the reading of the value 'honest', where the potentiating meaning 'the organisation, its management and its employees are and should be seen as trustworthy' was largely rejected and opposing meanings were instead generated.
- In other cases, because respondents found themselves unable to completely agree with a potentiating meaning, but did not want to go as far as reject it altogether, a new, compromise meaning was negotiated. The most prominent example of this in the data is the case of the text 'reliable', where respondents negotiated a meaning which suggested that reliability does not necessarily entail delivering one's commitments, and that an individual and a company can be reliable despite failing to deliver commitments.

6.2.3 Actualised meanings relating to the individual

My data showed that in most cases each respondent generated more than one meaning for each message text. As discussed above, most of these meanings derived from the explicit or implicit frames in the actual message and accepted, contradicted or negotiated these frames. Interestingly, in many

instances, the same employee appeared able to construct and maintain apparently contradictory meanings about the same text – e.g. ‘the customers are *and* are not our highest priority’, ‘ambition means beating the competition *and* collaborating with the competition’ ‘we are *and* are not market leaders’ – sometimes even within the same sentence. Although most meanings were related to the organisation, some intensely personal meanings were also generated, for example ‘I am not ambitious, ambition is not a good thing’. However personal these meanings appeared to be, they were not always unique to one individual. Some interesting patterns of minority shared meanings were, for example, apparent which appeared to point to common or similar cultural identity themes. I will discuss this further in the cultural context section. Below I offer a summary of all the types of meaning in my data in the form of a typology, with examples for each category.

Table 6.1

Typology of meanings generated by the readings of the values texts

	Agreed with	Negotiated	Disagreed with
Organisational Manifest (explicitly potentiated)	Customer focused <i>(Customer satisfaction is in the heart of what we do)</i>	Reliable <i>(Can be reliable without delivering commitments)</i>	Honest <i>(Organisation is not trustworthy)</i>
Organisational Latent (implicitly potentiated)	Ambitious <i>(We must beat AmeriCo)</i>	Honest <i>(Important, but difficult to be honest)</i>	Customer focused <i>(Manage, not meet customer expectations)</i>
Personal (potentiated and non potentiated)	Ambitious <i>(Good to be ambitious)</i>	Ambitious <i>(sometimes you can be ambitious and collaborate with the competition)</i>	Innovative <i>(individuals cannot be innovative)</i>

6.2.4 Discussing actualised meanings in relation to the literature

Table 6.1 above summarises the different types of meanings present in the data, as I have just discussed. This evidence agrees with the outcomes of most qualitative reception studies which show that multiple meanings are generated when a message is received (Jensen, 1991b; Dworkin et al, 1999; Dutta-Bergman and Pal, 2005) and that these meanings represent varying responses to the frames present in the message text – namely they agree, disagree or negotiate the meanings these texts potentiate. (Hall, 1993). That there appears to be less variability between meanings in the EuroCo data and

meanings in the average study of news/ads reception (Jensen, 1991b; Mick and Buhl, 1992; Dworkin et al, 1999; Aitken et al, 2008), may be explained in terms of both the specific context in which the text is read and in terms of the text itself. It is quite possible that both these structures (text and organisation) constrain interpretations more tightly than the broader social context within which we consume advertising messages or news programmes. I will explore this point further in the culture section, where I will also discuss cultural frames (a lens into culture frequently employed by qualitative reception studies) and how these influence interpretation.

Within a more specific business context, my findings again broadly agree with those studies of employee reception of leader message frames which show that these frames are not always accepted unquestioningly, but that a range of responses are possible, from widespread acceptance to complete rejection and cynicism (DiSanza, 1993; Scroggins, 2006; Bean and Hamilton, 2006).

Turnbull's (2001) study of the reception by middle managers of a new culture change programme in an organisation similar to the one in my case, is a particular example, where a broad spectrum of responses by employees to the change programme are recorded. Interestingly, when she comes to create her typology, she focuses on types of respondents, rather than types of meanings. She categorises respondents, for example, into six types - *critical thinker, open cynic, sceptic, untouched professional, actor, evangelist*. These categories indeed suggest, as my data does, different levels of acceptance,

rejection and renegotiation/compromise in employee responses to the same management frames.

However, Turnbull's analysis assumes that the same individual has a largely consistent response to the same set of messages. This appears to be the general approach in the other studies of this type – namely individual respondents are treated as constructing one, relatively stable meaning relating to a given frame (Mills, 2000; Bean and Hamilton, 2006). My data, as evidenced, for example, in the meaning distribution tables for each of the values texts in the previous chapter, clearly shows that this is not the case, but that individual interpretations of corporate messages are much more unstable and fluid - a respondent can agree with one potentiated meaning about change, partly agree with another, and reject a third. Furthermore, it is possible for the same respondent to construct two diametrically opposing responses to the same message, which derive from different cultural influences.

I am not arguing here that my findings reject previous approaches to leadership frame interpretations; rather that they enhance these approaches by showing, through a more focused study of the readings of specific message texts, that employee interpretations are more varied and more fluid than has been previously assumed, and that variability does not only characterise the responses of different employees in a sample, but also the responses of the same employee, as he or she negotiates different message

texts, and even, more importantly, the same message text. It may, as a result be useful for such studies to enhance their 'meso/macro' sense-making approach to researching responses to management framing with a more 'micro' approach to frame interpretation, by testing, for example, employee reactions to specific management texts, as well as general reactions to change programmes and aspects of change programmes. Again I will explore this further in the culture section.

6.3 The sharing of actualised meanings

In this section, I briefly discuss my findings in relation to question two, namely the sharing of actualised meanings. There are two points to explore here. One relates to how meanings are shared in general (i.e. whether shared meanings are generated) and the other to who shares what meanings with particular reference to cultural backgrounds. The latter is aimed to provide a starting point for the discussion about culture and meaning, raised by question three. I discuss these two points separately.

6.3.1 Shared meanings in the EuroCo case

In presenting my findings in the previous chapter, I showed, by means of separate distribution tables, how each of the meanings generated by the reading of the first message text was shared among all respondents. These findings can be summarised as follows:

- Meanings shared by a majority of respondents: These were primarily meanings which agreed with the meanings the text potentiated. In fact

only two majority meanings were actualised which were not potentiated meanings, i.e. they were actualised 'against the grain' of the text which— those related to the texts 'reliable' and 'honest'. The differences in these patterns I believe can be explained in terms of cultural influences as I will show in the next section.

- Meanings shared by a large minority of respondents. There are only a handful of meanings generated in the first values text reading that fit this pattern. In fact only the 'people' meaning discussed above and the three meanings relating to the reading of 'honest' – 'the organisation cannot be trusted', 'managers cannot be trusted' and 'employees cannot be trusted' - belong in this category. Again I have shown that the reasons for these patterns are to be found in specific shared cultural frames and this is discussed further in the next section
- Meanings shared by a minority of respondents. These meanings, shared in most cases by two or three respondents, primarily came about as a result of potentiated text meanings being rejected or negotiated. With the exception of the texts 'reliable' and 'honest', nearly all rejected or negotiated meanings appear to be minority meanings and appear to relate to respondents' cultural identities.
- Meanings unique to individuals. There were fewer unique individual meanings than expected in the data, compared, for example, with general reception studies (cf. Mick and Buhl, 1992). These seemed to be related to cultural identities and identity themes as I discuss in the culture section of this chapter.

These patterns reflect the readings of the first management text which I discussed in detail in chapter five. As I explained in the data presentation when the second values text was read, because of the detail and explicitness of that text, meanings were more spread out among respondents, so overall more minority meanings were generated. However, in that case also, most meanings shared by the majority of respondents were again meanings potentiated by the text (for example, in relation to the 'transparency', 'globalisation' and 'people development' texts). What was different was that more minority and individual meanings were generated and that some of these meanings were in agreement with potentiated text meanings – the most prominent of those being the one relating to the 'temper innovation with usability/profitability' message. This indicates that shared meaning patterns should be considered both in terms of the cultural frames that may produce and sustain them, but also in terms of the texts that produce them. I address both of these points separately later in this chapter.

6.3.2 Shared meanings across cultural backgrounds

The majority of shared meanings found in the data seemed to cut across both established external cultural groups (national, professional, gender background) and more complex identities as constructed by employees themselves, with few exceptions (a prevalent British pattern in the meanings related to the value 'people' and one of the meanings of 'honest'), which I already discussed in the data presentation. The tables below provide an

illustration of the typical distribution patterns of different meanings and show how meanings are shared among individuals with very different backgrounds.

Table 6.2 Actualised, potentiated meanings – the ‘ambitious’ example

Meaning	Employees who shared this meaning
We are/must be market leaders	British factory worker/ Working man British engineer/Involving British manager British HR manager/ Expert, strategist British senior project manager/ EuroCo man British administrator/ Key communicator British factory supervisor/ Self-made team leader British administrator/Wife and mother French engineer/ Environmental engineer, professional French engineer /Transnational manager German engineer /Engineer, subcontractor German project manager/ Professional woman German project manager /Little-guy-doing-his-job German engineer/'Proper' engineer, manager
To be market leaders we must pursue technical excellence	British factory worker/ Working man British engineer/Involving British manager British HR manager/ Expert, strategist British administrator/ Key communicator British office worker/ Not a manager British factory supervisor/ Self-made team leader British administrator/Wife and mother French engineer/ Environmental engineer, professional French engineer /Transnational manager French administrator/ HR person, French German project manager/Professional woman German project manager /Little-guy-doing-his-job German engineer/'Proper' engineer, manager
To be market leaders we must beat AmeriCo	British factory worker/ Working man British HR manager/ Expert, strategist British senior project manager/ EuroCo man British administrator/ Key communicator British factory supervisor/ Self-made team leader French engineer /Transnational manager French administrator/ HR person, French German engineer /Engineer, subcontractor German engineer/'Proper' engineer, manager

6.3 Actualised, non potentiated meanings– the ‘reliability’ example

Meaning	Employees who shared this meaning
We do not always deliver our commitments/ not always easy to deliver commitments	British factory worker/ Working man British engineer/ Involving British manager British HR manager/ Expert, strategist British administrator/ Key communicator British office worker/ Not a manager British administrator/ Wife and mother French engineer/ Environmental engineer, professional French engineer / Transnational manager French administrator/ HR person, French French project manager/ Contributor German project manager / Little-guy-doing-his-job German engineer/ ‘Proper’ engineer, manager
We can still be seen as reliable, because we do our best to deliver and/or we deliver quality	British factory worker/ Working man British engineer/ Involving British manager British HR manager/ Expert, strategist British senior project manager/ EuroCo man British administrator/ Key communicator British factory floor manager/ Self-made team leader French engineer/ Environmental engineer, professional French engineer / Transnational manager French administrator/ HR person, French German project manager / Little-guy-doing-his-job German engineer/ Young engineer

6.4 Examples of minority shared meanings

Meaning	Employees who shared this meaning
Personal ambition is good – I am ambitious	British factory worker/ Working man British factory supervisor/ Self-made team leader German project manager / Little-guy-doing-his-job
Customer satisfaction is about managing expectations	British HR manager/ Expert, strategist French project manager/ Contributor German engineer / Engineer, subcontractor
It is difficult for individuals to be innovative	British office worker/ Not a manager British administrator/ Wife and mother German project manager / Little-guy-doing-his-job

6.3.3 Discussion of shared meanings against the literature

Although at first glance the evidence shown here could be used to support the idea promoted by popular management literature (Collins and Porras, 1996; Kotter and Heskett, 1996; Deetz et al, 2000) and adopted by managers, that messages of this type (i.e. universal values messages) could produce common meanings among employees of very different cultural backgrounds, I believe that the picture which my data paints does only partly support this point. Although the values texts in the EuroCo case do appear to have an influence as 'framing devices' (Fairhurst, 1993; Tietze et al, 2003) in shaping and maintaining existing common discourses as well as in making explicit, repositioning and shifting some discourses, they do not by themselves 'cause' the commonality of meanings observed in the data. It is rather the complex interplay between the explicit texts and the cultural context, namely the implicit organisational shared meanings and individual cultural identities constructed in the process of interpretation, which does that as I have shown in the data presentation and discuss again in the next section. This is clearly shown in the fact that some of the strongest shared meanings are meanings that are not explicitly potentiated by the texts, for example the meaning linking the importance of quality to customer satisfaction, or the meaning about lack of trust in the organisation, which builds on the strongly shared 'green culture' frame.

The data does however show that the use of universal messages to address culturally diverse audiences in organisations should not be dismissed on the

basis of the assumption that cultural diversity on the part of the audience is bound to produce diverse meanings (Beamer and Varner, 2001) and that it is important to shape messages to suit audiences' cultural perspectives (Brownwell, 1999). If anything, my data clearly shows that although meanings are shared among the respondents in my study, they are certainly not shared in clearly defined cultural groups. We should not therefore assume that audiences either in intercultural communication research or in intercultural communication practice can be defined, understood or targeted in terms of nationality or any other external cultural characteristic alone (cf. Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 2003; Jameson, 2007, for the same point). In the next section I will look at the conclusions we can draw about cultural influences on interpretation and what the implications are for the universalism vs relativism debate in communication management.

6.4 Summary of discussion so far – meanings and shared meanings

I have so far addressed aspects one and two of the research question, describing in some detail the types of meanings that EuroCo employees constructed when they read the values messages, and highlighting how meanings were shared by respondents. I first presented a typology which showed that the meanings generated by the values readings can be categorised in terms of agreement, negotiation and rejection of the message text, as well as in terms of responses to explicitly or implicitly potentiated frames about the organisation, or to personal connotations. I then briefly discussed how each individual respondent seemed to be able to construct a

number of meanings for the same text, some of which were contradictory to each other. In discussing these findings in relation to the literature, I concluded that while the first point, as presented in the typology, is largely in line with audience reception theories and organisation based empirical studies, the second point about the fluidity of individual meanings has not really been made in organisational studies to date, where individual respondents are mostly assumed to construct one largely stable response to a given message.

The discussion of meaning sharing suggested that many actualised meanings appeared to be shared widely, and that most of these, with some notable exceptions, coincided with meanings potentiated by the texts. In contrast, non potentiated meanings were mostly shared by a minority of respondents, or were unique to individuals. There were some differences here between the readings of the first and second values texts, which could be related both to the style of the text and the familiarity employees had with it. This I will address in more detail at the end of the chapter. Overall, however, it was the prevalence of shared meanings, rather than the number of minority or individual meanings that stood out. In reviewing the evidence about how meanings were shared among respondents of different cultural backgrounds I reflected that the data does not support a narrow conceptualisation of culture in terms of nationality alone, or indeed any other external group membership category, as it presents a complex picture of meanings shared among individuals with very different cultural backgrounds. Overall this evidence

points to at least partial support for the assumption that universal messages can be effectively used to influence diverse employee audiences in multinational environments, although as I have already shown it is not simply the text that can have that impact, but rather the way the text interacts with the cultural context to trigger existing shared frames and discourses. I will now turn to exploring this relationship between meanings, meaning patterns and culture more fully.

6.5 Influence of culture

At the outset of my study I adopted a definition of culture as patterns or systems of meaning (Geertz, 1973) which are expressed, shared and reinforced through communicative action. In this view of culture, both the values texts and the meanings constructed by employees when they read the texts are cultural, as well as communicative products. In fact the relationship between the two (culture and communication) is so close and reciprocal that often the distinction between the two becomes rather blurred (Hall, 1976).

In my literature review I presented a number of approaches to culture within the framework of business communication studies and concluded that most approaches which considered culture as an external and stable context (frequently equated with national culture) were not adequate to capture the complexity and fluidity of the relationship between culture and meaning making. I argued instead that a non-essentialist approach which allows for a complex, dynamic view of culture, collapses culture and context into one

construct, and seeks to understand cultural influence on a communicative act primarily from within the communicative act itself (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004; Dutta, 2007) is much more likely to produce a richer understanding of the complex relationship between culture and meaning. More specifically, I identified two types of discursive construction that I wanted to generate and study in relation to message readings. The first, *cultural frames*, frequently employed in social semiotic research (Tietze et al, 2003) and empirical audience reception studies (Jensen, 1991b; Philo, 2008), is a well established means of exploring the influence of the cultural context on message interpretations.

The second, *cultural identity*²⁶, is gaining popularity both in intercultural communication research (Mori, 2004; Higgins, 2007; Jameson, 2007) and in organisational research in general (Pullman et al , 2007; Lawler, 2008), but, with a couple of exceptions , (Mick and Buhl , 1992; Dutta-Bergman and Pal, 2005) has not yet been used empirically as a lens to study cultural influences on message interpretation. In my methodology chapter I discussed how my exploratory study findings provided strong support for using cultural identity as a lens to study message reception and interpretation by showing how a cultural identity reading was able to explain much more satisfactorily, meaning patterns in the data which appeared initially puzzling, when viewed from an

²⁶ In this study I adopt a non essentialist concept of cultural identity which does not distinguish between different types of identity (in that cultural identity is the same as 'socio-cultural identity' and 'identity'). The concept describes dynamic and multiple selves reflecting group memberships constructed by the individual in the course of communication. See the literature review and methodology chapters for a detailed discussion of the concept, and how and why I use it in this study.

external/stable cultural lens. Below I discuss the cultural frames and identities constructed in my data and the relationship between these and the meanings generated when my respondents read the EuroCo values texts.

6.5.1 Cultural frames and meanings

As I showed in the data presentation chapters, EuroCo employees reached for a number of shared cultural frames and discourses²⁷ to construct meanings when reading the values message texts. These are summarised in the tables below for the first and second values text respectively.

Table 6.5 Frames and discourses accessed in interpreting the first values text

Values	Frames/discourses
Ambitious	'Importance of Technical Excellence/Innovation' frame 'Pride in product and business reputation' frame 'Battle with AmeriCo' frame/discourse 'Pegasus project' discourse
Customer focused	'Importance of Technical Excellence/Innovation' frame 'Pride in product and business reputation' frame 'Customer service' discourse
Innovative	'Importance of Technical Excellence/Innovation' frame 'Pride in product and business reputation' frame 'Necessity and challenge of change' frame/discourse
Reliable	'Importance of Technical Excellence/Innovation' frame 'Customer service' discourse 'Pegasus delays' discourse
Honest	'Green culture' frame 'Senior manager behaviour' discourse 'Pegasus delays' discourse 'Change/Power 8/motivation' discourses
People	'Importance of Technical Excellence /innovation' frame 'Organisation as family' frame 'Change/Power 8/motivation' discourses

²⁷ See page 179 for a definition of the two terms

Table 6.6 Frames and discourses accessed in interpreting the new values text

Value	Frame and discourses
Drive Innovation and Deliver Reliably	'Importance of Technical Excellence/Innovation' frame 'Pride in product and business reputation' frame 'Necessity and challenge of change' frame/discourse 'Pegasus delays' discourse 'Green culture' frame <i>'Quality vs profitability/usability' discourse</i> <i>'Eco-efficiency' discourse</i>
Generate Customer Value	'Customer service' discourse 'Importance of Technical Excellence /Innovation' frame <i>'Quality vs profitability/usability' discourse</i>
Practice Teamwork and Global Integration	<i>'Transnationality' frame/discourse</i> <i>'Cultural difference/Communication problems' discourse</i> 'Necessity and challenge of change' frame/discourse
Face reality and Be transparent	'Green culture' frame 'Pegasus delays' discourse 'Necessity and challenge of change' frame/discourse
Develop Myself and Others	'Personal development' frame 'Change/Power 8/motivation' discourses 'Importance of Technical Excellence /Innovation' frame

The tables above show that respondents in the EuroCo study accessed a relatively small set of frames and discourses (framing devices) in constructing their message interpretations. It is worth noting that all of these frames are anchored in the broader organisational context. Cues to these frames were evident throughout respondent narratives, i.e. they seemed to appear both in conjunction with specific meanings assigned to specific message texts and independently of these, for example, when employees talked about the organisation at the beginning of the interviews. The strongest amongst these frames and discourses (for example, the 'Importance of technical excellence' frame, the Pegasus delays discourse) appear repeatedly in narratives and are accessed frequently to make sense of a number of different texts, whereas

others (eg the 'green culture' frame and 'customer service' discourse) appear more selectively.

In the second values text, while many of the same frames are triggered as many of the concepts remain the same, there is also evidence of some new discourses and frames appearing. These are not yet shared as strongly as the earlier frames – in fact the 'quality vs profitability/usability' frame is not shared at all, but I have included it in this table as an indication of how perhaps a new such discourse begins to emerge in an organisation. Below I discuss how I believe the cultural frames and discourses present in my data influenced the meanings EuroCo employees constructed when reading the values statements.

6.5.2 The influence of shared frames and discourses on actualised meanings

In this section I will present an explanation, which I believe is supported by the data, of how the cultural frames and discourses discussed above appear to influence the actualisation of different types of meaning and different meaning patterns in the data. This has been discussed in relation to each of the values texts in the data presentation. Here I will summarise what I believe the findings show about the influences of cultural frames on meanings in this multinational business context.

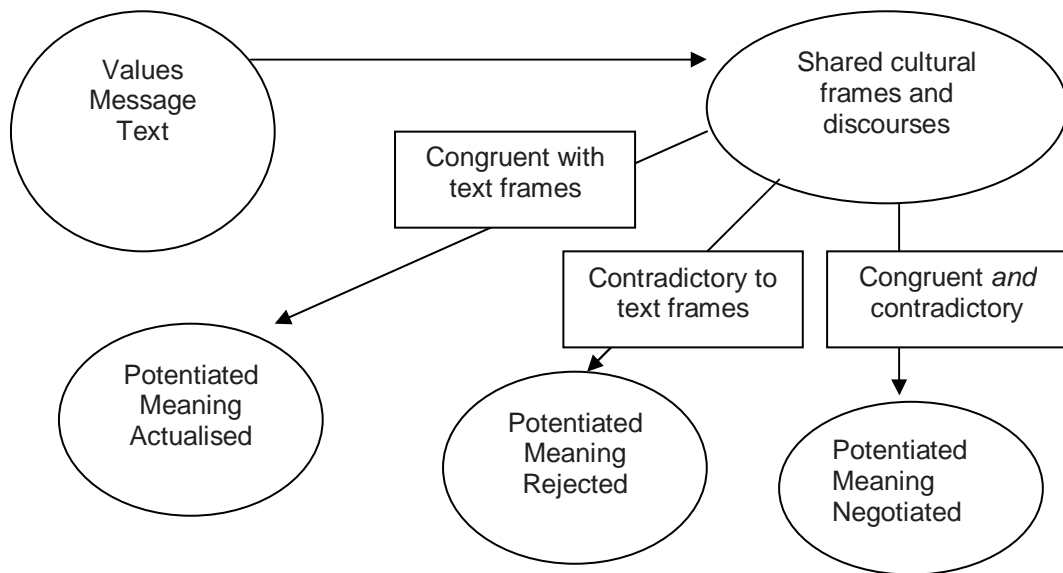
The cultural frames and discourses highlighted in the study so far appear to be almost exclusively related to the broader organisational context of EuroCo. As my data shows these frames and discourses exert a strong influence on the meanings actualised by employees. More specifically, different frames and discourses appear to be triggered by the text when employees read it and these are then used either explicitly or implicitly to construct specific meanings for each value text. The relationship of these frames and discourses to the meanings potentiated by the text can explain to a great extent why some actualised meanings agree with the text and others do not²⁸.

Specifically, it appears to be the case that when the text contains frames which potentiate meanings which are congruent with or supportive of existing cultural frames and discourses, the actualised meanings generated are largely in agreement with potentiated meanings. This for example is the case with the main frames and framing devices triggered by the texts 'customer focused', 'ambitious' and 'innovative'. When, however, the text primarily triggers frames which are not supportive of the meanings it appears to potentiate, then these frames give rise to contrary or 'against the grain' meanings. Where frames conflict with each other (some are supportive of a given potentiated meaning and some are not), or when frames and identity themes are in conflict, negotiated or compromise meanings appear to emerge. This for example happens with the frames and discourses triggered by the text 'reliable'.

²⁸ The conflict with cultural identities will also need to be examined in relation to this point for completeness – I do that later in this section

Otherwise, potentiated meanings are not actualised; in fact they are often rejected. An example of this is provided in the data by the text ‘honest’. The figure below shows how these relationships between text, cultural frames and meanings, may be summarised in the case of the EuroCo data.

Figure 6.1 The influence of cultural frames and discourses on message interpretations



In summary, in the particular case of EuroCo, the meanings generated by the values texts seem to be strongly influenced by cultural frames and discourses primarily located in the organisational context. It is, furthermore, the congruent or contradictory relationship between frame and text that primarily determines whether the meanings actualised by respondents agree with the meanings potentiated by the text or not.

6.5.3 Cultural identities and meaning generation

At the same time as showing a strong influence on interpretation by organisational cultural frames and discourses, my data also shows that multiple cultural identities were constructed in the course of the interviews by employees, and that these identities also influenced interpretations. Identities, which were connected to external cultural group memberships, but in complex ways, were shaped in employee interview narratives, through a combination of self-labelling (e.g. 'as an engineer', 'as a manager'), the articulation and re-articulation of personal themes ('the importance of family' 'the importance of employment', 'connected vs disconnected', 'insider/outsider' and so on) and the strengthening and embellishment of these themes through stories and vivid imagery. Each interviewee constructed a number of different identities, a small number of which appeared dominant. Extended examples of these are given in the presentation of the data in chapter five and a full list of identities is presented in chapter four.

Below I summarise what my data shows about the relationship between cultural identities and message interpretation in the EuroCo case.

- Cultural identities tend to generate mostly minority meanings, i.e. meanings which are either personal to the individual or are shared among a few individuals who share similar identity themes.
- Cultural identities can be triggered at the same time as shared cultural frames, giving rise to conflicting meanings, which are then negotiated to produce new compromise meanings, such as 'customers are not our

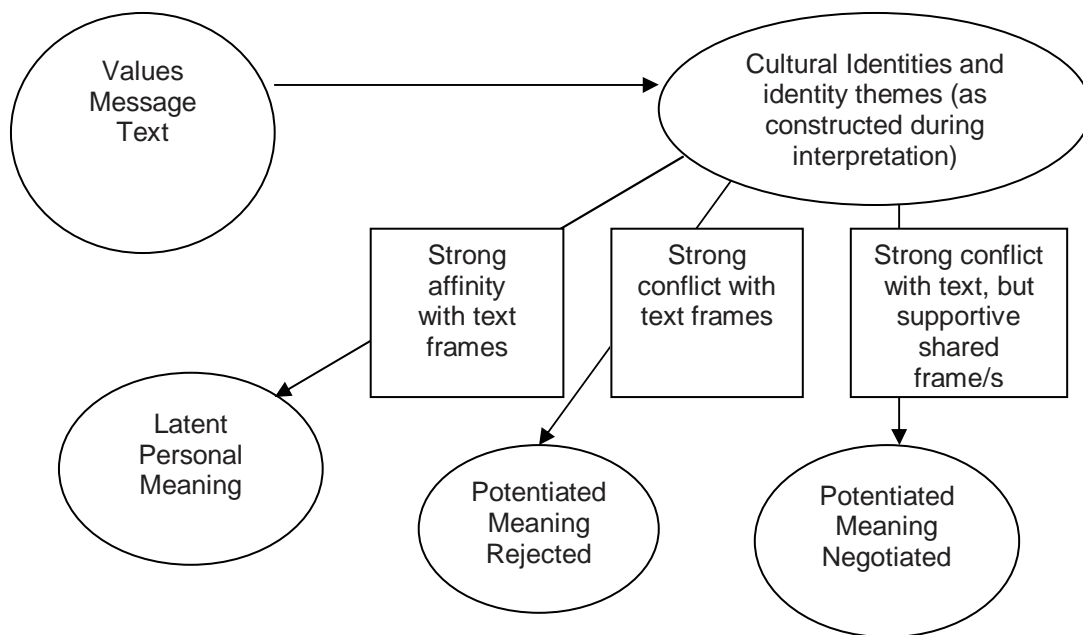
highest priority, yet all we do is for the benefit of the customers'. In such cases the reference to the cultural identity is frequently made explicit in the interpretation narrative.

- Not all similar identities and related identity themes are necessarily triggered by the same message text. For example, where the customer satisfaction text triggered two engineering identity driven compromise meanings, it did not influence all readers who constructed strong engineering identities, in the same way. In that case the presence of conflict between the identity themes and the text themes seemed to be instrumental. In other cases a strong affinity between an identity or identity theme and a frame in the text which appears to potentiate a particular interpretation may explain the emergence of identity related personal meanings ('I am ambitious', 'I am reliable'). In short, identities are more likely to be invoked in meaning making when the message user perceives either a strong affinity or, more often, a strong conflict with the meaning potentiated in the message text and aspects of their identity, as constructed at the point of interpretation.

In summary, in the EuroCo data identities tended to be related mainly to minority or individual meanings, and to conflicting, 'against the grain' meanings. Furthermore, an identity based reading mainly appeared to emerge when a strong affinity or conflict between the text and identities or identity themes were apparent. This may suggest that cultural identities, as opposed to shared frames and discourses, emerge and influence the interpretation

process, as a need to (re)affirm the self. The figure below summarises the relationship between cultural identities and interpretation in the EuroCo case.

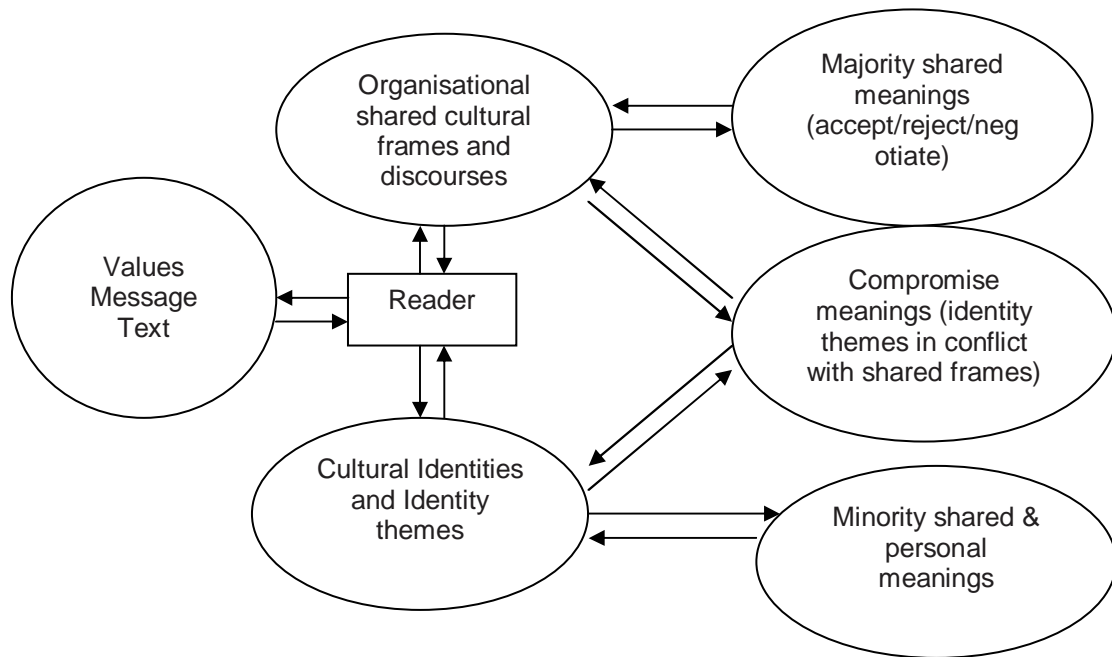
Figure 6.2 The influence of cultural identities on message interpretations



6.5.4 Frames, identities and shared meanings

I have so far shown that the majority of meanings found in the EuroCo data can be shown to be influenced either by the triggering of shared cultural frames and discourses, located in the broader organisational context, and/or by individual cultural identities or identity themes. Sometimes these work independently to create meaning, at other times meanings are constructed as a result of conflict either between different frames and discourses or between frames and discourses on the one hand, and identities and identity themes, on the other. This is summarised in figure 6.3 below.

Figure 6.3 Summary of cultural influences on message interpretations



At the same time there is a clear distinction in the data between majority shared meanings and minority or individual meanings. With a few exceptions (mostly to do with the new values text as I discuss at the end of this chapter), meanings that are extensively shared among respondents tend to be based on strong shared organisational frames or discourses, whereas minority meanings are wholly or partly driven by cultural identities and identity themes. On this evidence we can argue that it is the congruence between the text and organisational shared frames and discourses that is of primary importance in actualising potentiated shared readings of organisational values texts. Below I discuss the findings so far in relation to a number of related areas in the literature.

6.5.5 Discussion of cultural influences against the literature

6.5.5.1 The EuroCo case findings and qualitative reception studies

Firstly, my findings appear in line with qualitative reception studies to the extent that they indicate a strong relationship between cultural frames accessed at the point of reception and the interpretation of specific message texts. Whereas reception researchers use varied terminology to describe such common frames - schemata or themes for example (van Dijk, 1991; Jensen, 1991b; Mick et al, 2004) they nevertheless show a clear relationship between such discursive constructions and the interpretation of messages. The only significant difference between such studies and mine is that the shared frames and discourses in the EuroCo study (and in fact in my exploratory study at GlobalTelco) are clearly anchored in the organisational and not the broader socio-cultural context, producing a narrower range of meanings as a result. This again provides evidence for the combined influence of text and context on interpretation, a point that is made by qualitative reception studies and communication research as a whole (Fiske, 1991; Philo, 2008).

Where the EuroCo case may add further insights to such studies is in the concept of cultural identity and the relationship it demonstrates between the cultural identities message users construct at the point of interpretation and the more personal actualised meanings these generate. Although most qualitative reception studies identify meanings unique to individuals relating to personal themes (personal connotations in Barthes' terminology), they generally, with very few exceptions (Mick and Buhl, 1992), do not go as far as

relating dynamic cultural identities (in the detail I have shown here) with specific actualised meanings. If anything, earlier audience studies (e.g. Morley, 1980) have more recently been criticised for adopting a rather narrow approach to audience cultural identity which was largely based on group memberships such as class or gender and for assuming almost a deterministic influence of such membership on audience interpretations (Philo, 2008; Aitken et al, 2008) – in other words assuming the hegemony of structure over agency. More recent studies have shown that both structure (media, texts and contexts) *and* the agency of audiences have a say in interpretations (Jensen, 1991b; Mick and Buhl, 1992, Dworkin et al, 1999; Dutta-Bergman and Pal, 2005). The EuroCo study appears to concur with this point.

However, whereas these recent studies criticise the earlier adoption of simplistic cultural labels for audiences, very few explore dynamic cultural identities as an interpretive lens on message consumption. Those that do show both that much more fluid cultural identities are being shaped in the course of advertising consumption and that these hybrid identities in turn shape interpretations (Mick and Buhl, 1992; Dutta-Bergman and Pal, 2005). Mick and Buhl, in particular, although they adopt a ‘life story’ approach to producing identity scripts from which they derive identities and identity themes²⁹, show a similar relationship between cultural identities and message readings to the one I have shown in my data and a similar relationship

²⁹ They distinguish between more stable (life themes) and more fluid/developing themes (life projects), but that distinction cannot be made in my data.

between shared themes and individual identity themes in the construction of meanings when advertising messages are decoded. Mick and Buhl argue that the cultural identity approach to studying audience interpretations can show over and above other approaches that “idiosyncratic meanings are more than mere error variance [but that] in fact they are demonstrably significant” (Mick and Buhl, 1992: 333). My findings appear to support this contention.

6.5.5.2 The EuroCo case findings and change framing studies

In the organisational context, my findings broadly agree with studies which look at leader framing and employee reception of change frames (DiSanza, 1993; Turnbull, 2001; Fleming, 2005; Bean and Hamilton, 2006) in that they also show that in responding to leadership messages, employees actualise a range of responses, from acceptance to rejection, although in the EuroCo case, actualised meanings appear to be more in agreement with potentiated meanings, than some of these studies indicate (e.g. DiSanza, 1993). I believe that these differences are not incidental, but may be explained in terms of the relationship between interpretation, message text frame and cultural context – as reflected in shared frames and cultural identities. This, however, will be difficult to show with any clarity as these studies look at contextual influences in different ways, frequently reaching inconclusive results. With this proviso, I will try to make some connections between their findings and mine.

In his study of bank teller responses to a new ‘sales as part of your job’ frame, in an American Bank, DiSanza showed a wholesale rejection of the desired

management meaning in preference to alternative meanings constructed by the workforce. This he explained in terms of contradictions between the leadership frame and actual employee experience – in their experience, ‘real’ customers were not like the customers presented in organisational messaging. This conclusion is not far from my own finding that potentiated meanings are only actualised, if the message texts trigger supporting shared frames and discourses, or that contrary meanings are actualised, if such frames/discourses contradict a potentiated meaning. In DiSanza’s case, the frame employees shared of the ‘typical bank customer and their needs’ simply did not correspond to the frame of the hypothetical customer presented by Bank leaders in their communication. Similarly, DiSanza shows that other leadership messages, relating for example to what behaviours were rewarded in the Bank, did not support the hypothetical customer frame, either.

Scroggins (2005), on the other hand, in his study of implementation of change in a US hospital, shows large consistency between leader and supervisor meanings around change messages with a few exceptions. For example, this is the case with the meaning of ‘teamwork’ which seems to be rejected or negotiated by supervisors. Scroggins suggests that the reason here is failure of communication – namely where a frame has been communicated well, large levels of agreement are evident, whereas where communication was poor, a message is mostly rejected. I believe such an explanation is rather simplistic, assuming as it does that it is the message sender who primarily controls interpretation. It also does not explain why leaders would fail to

communicate well in the case of only one particular message, which was part of the same broad change plan, while being effective in communicating other messages.

A much better explanation could, I believe, be found in the relationship between message meanings and shared frames. For example, the intended 'teamwork' meaning may have been rejected because of strong contradictory shared frames and discourses, whereas other potentiated meanings may not have met with such resistance. Seen from this perspective, DiSanza's and Scroggin's findings, while diametrically opposite to each other, appear both to be consistent with a theory of cultural influences on interpretation based on shared cultural frames (the identities aspect is less easy to see in their data).

Other studies in this area show a range of interpretations and contextual influences. Turnbull (2001), for example, attempts to relate the different responses in her data to the different groups her respondents belong to (in terms of profession, function, location, age, gender etc) and ends up with largely inconclusive findings, as no clear group patterns emerge, although some groupings, like where people work (cf also Mills, 2000) appear to be slightly more influential than, say, gender or job title. This again is consistent with what both my pilot and my main study have shown relating to the conceptualisation of culture as a stable context consisting of external memberships. Namely, that by themselves these external group memberships cannot successfully explain the complexity and fluidity of meaning making.

On the other hand, a cultural frames/cultural identities framework may provide a much more successful explanation.

Turnbull's data is not analysed in terms of this framework, of course, and it is not, therefore, possible to show the presence of these discursive constructions with any certainty, but there are clues in her data which point to the presence of both cultural frames and cultural identities in the meaning making process. For example, a frame Turnbull herself mentions is that of the rather traumatic collective experience of previous culture change efforts which are accessed by her respondents in the course of interpreting the new management messages about change. At the same time, some of the quotes she presents, like the one below seem to point to identities and identity themes present at the point of interpretation: *'I'll be the good soldier. I'm a company man and I'll still be a company man despite the difficulties with it' [] so I decided to buy in'*; (Turnbull, 2001:240). It is possible, therefore, that where Turnbull's attempt to explain her findings in terms of stable external contextual factors was not very successful, an alternative reading of her findings in terms of shared frames and discourses and cultural identities would have produced a much more convincing explanation of the influence of the cultural context on the different responses she identified.

Bean and Hamilton (2006), similarly show that employees in the Norwegian telecoms company they studied, either accepted or rejected the positive 'flexible working' leadership frame, by engaging with one of two alternative

discourses about the organisation. This in itself is consistent with my relating frames or discourses to different types of actualised meanings. The choice of discourses, however, appeared to Bean and Hamilton, to be idiosyncratic, as was the later choice by some employees to continue to accept this frame and by others to reject it, when a new downsizing programme was introduced in the mix. Again, a possible alternative explanation here could be that different employee responses are not random as Bean and Hamilton assumed, but rather derive from different dynamic relationships (congruence or conflict) between management frames, organisational discourses and cultural identities. Seeing their data from the perspective of the more detailed framework I presented here, may in fact provide a convincing explanation for the differences in interpretation patterns Bean and Hamilton found. Rather than idiosyncratic, the different meaning choices people make, will then appear to be, in Mick and Buhl's words (1992), 'ultimately significant'.

In other similar studies clues of cultural frames and identities are also evident, although these are not analysed systematically and in relationship to meaning. In Fleming's study of the introduction of a 'culture of fun' in an Australian call centre (Fleming 2005), there is evidence for example that identities are related both to the acceptance and rejection of the 'work as fun' frame. These are best shown in the discourses of those employees who construct rejection responses, as Fleming is particularly interested in these and reproduces many examples of meaning constructions among this group. In this group, for example, there is one respondent who keeps talking about the fact that she is

not 'hip and cool and fashionable' like many of the younger people in the organisation. She constructs an identity of a 'serious adult', among other things. This identity contrasts with the main themes in the 'culture of fun' frame, as she sees it. Again the data is not enough here to allow us to conclude this with any certainty. Overall, however, I believe that the combined evidence of all these studies, does point to the explanatory potential of a combined cultural frames/cultural identities framework vs other contextual frameworks used in this work.

6.5.5.3 The EuroCo case findings and Intercultural Business Studies

I finally turn to studies which are concerned with the practice of communication in the intercultural business context and are, from that perspective, closest to the context of my own study. As I discussed in the literature review, among these, the few studies which address reception in multicultural businesses, adopt a narrow, essentialist view of culture, combined in most cases with an effects focus on reception. Perhaps as a result of this, many of these studies produce rather inconclusive outcomes, showing both differences and similarities in their data (Van Nimwegen et al, 2004) which furthermore cannot easily be explained in terms of national cultural differences (Van Meurs et al, 2003; Hoeken et al, 2003; Van Nimwegen et al, 2004) or language alone (Brownwell, 1999). When these studies compare European cultures, in particular, these inconclusive results are explained away in terms of small cultural differences between

respondents, the assumption being that small cultural differences cannot be detected in studies of this type.

In contrast, my research has produced a rich picture of message interpretation in a multinational organisation, where employees from three European national backgrounds, but much more complex cultural identities, work together in transnational projects and use English as their language of business. The responses these employees constructed when they read the universal English text of the corporate values messages, showed at first glance many patterns of similarities and differences, but these could convincingly be explained in terms of cultural influences based on shared organisational cultural frames and discourses and on cultural identities and identity themes.

Although this would need to be validated by other similar studies, I believe that my work has produced an alternative analytical framework to national cultural differences, which appears to have more explanatory power in the study of message reception in multinational contexts. The cultural identity analysis in particular, combined with the thematic analysis of the respondents' discourses, shows that it is not the cultural and geographic proximity per se that results in similarities of effects in some comparative research. Rather, what the EuroCo case shows is that there is a clear difference between the perception of the 'other' culture at the group level, and the way one's own cultural influences come through in communicative action and drive that

communicative action (Holliday et al, 2004). While national cultural differences in terms of behaviours and practices are experienced by employees in the EuroCo case, it is not these cultural differences that influence individual interpretations. To the extent that nationality influences interpretation in my data, it is in the way nationality is experienced and constructed by each individual as part of their cultural identity.

If this could be shown to apply to other communication behaviour, for example constructing texts, not just interpreting them, it might then go some way to explain why comparative studies which aim to identify predetermined national cultural characteristics, such as directness or implicitness in written communication examples produced in different national contexts (e.g. Beamer, 2003), fail to do so. Having said that, I am not arguing that my framework could be applied as it stands to the analysis of written texts, because other elements will have to be taken into account for such studies - for example, the influence of 'genre' (Swales and Rogers, 1995; Graves, 1997) as well as questions of message intent and the relationship between those who construct the texts and the text is aimed for, which have played little role in this study (Fairclough, 2003).

With these limitations, I still believe that my findings provide further support for recent criticisms of essentialist approaches to culture in intercultural communication research (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004; Hunsinger, 2006), showing as they do that employees of a number of cultural backgrounds can

construct very similar meanings when they read universal management messages and that these meanings are negotiated through an interplay between identity, text and shared cultural frames, rather than influenced by external cultural characteristics. At the same time, my findings because they show the central role of organisational shared frames and discourses in interpretation, are also consistent with those empirical studies which find that communication practices in multinational companies are strongly influenced by the organisational culture of the multinational organisation itself (e.g. Nickerson, 1998 and 1999; Ortiz, 2005).

Finally, the concept of cultural identity as I have used it in this study, namely as a non essentialist, fluid, dynamic collection of identities constructed by the individual in the process of discourse, is a new addition to the intercultural business communication conversation, at least at the level of empirical research. Although some writers have suggested the concept of identity should be further explored in intercultural business communication (Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 2003; Jameson, 2007) and some have explored the construction of identities in multinational environments (Pal and Buzzannell, 2008), this is the first time identities have been used as a lens through which to understand the influence of the socio-cultural context on communication inside multicultural businesses. By showing how cultural identities interact with more prominent shared frames and discourses in the organisation to produce meanings, I believe I have provided an illustration of what Bargiela-Chiappini (2004) has termed 'interculturality' in international business communication

discourse, namely the connectedness and interaction of cultures in that context and have shown how this interculturality influences message interpretation in practice. In that, my study adds to those studies which show the complexity of the interaction between cultural context, communicative action and identities (Mori, 2003; Higgins, 2007) by showing that interculturality can be used to describe not only what happens when people from different cultural backgrounds interact with each other, but also when people from different cultural backgrounds construct and read message texts (Dutta-Bergman and Pal, 2005). In fact, I would also like to argue that studies of written texts in multinational organisations which show inconclusive national cultural influences and/or a strong organisational cultural impact are examples of precisely such *interculturality*. Thus Ortiz's (2005) conclusions that writers in a US/Mexico border organisation do not conform to expected cultural communication patterns, but adapt to each other, producing hybrid styles of writing could be seen very much as an example of *interculturality* in practice.

In summary, within the intercultural business communication arena my research adds strong support to calls for a non-essentialist approach to cultural context and provides a unique analytic framework combining cultural identities and shared frames, with which to study communication from such a perspective. Results point to the construct of *interculturality* (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004) as a useful way forward in our exploration of communication practice in the multinational business context.

6.6 The text as a mediating influence

I finally turn to some observations about differences in the two EuroCo values texts, their impact on meaning generation in my data and the conclusions that can be drawn in relation to the research question and the original research problem. As I discussed in chapter four, while the earlier values text was short, highly implicit, and presented each value more as an organisational attribute rather than as a directive for employees, the second statement was much more directive and explicit, telling employees exactly what they had to do to achieve each desired value. In some cases, these detailed explicit value statements compiled what appeared to be incompatible concepts in one statement, so that intended meanings were difficult to decipher. In other cases, the new explicit statement appeared to take on an implicit organisational 'problem' and open it up to discussion with largely positive responses as a result.

Another important aspect in my data was the fact that whereas employees were very familiar with the first statement, as it had been used in the company for a few years already (I could not ascertain the precise number of years from my informant), the second text had only just been published and for most of my respondents this was the first time they were reading it in detail. As the two texts were read in the course of the same interview, the second text was inevitably read with reference to the first. So the findings I presented here have to be seen in that context. In the data chapters I presented what I thought were the most interesting findings that emerged from the reading of

the second values statement in relation to the first. Below I summarise these points.

Although the two texts were very different in style and outlook, they both covered more or less the same core concepts. It was interesting that readers did not seem to notice the stylistic differences which captured my professional attention, but rather concentrated on the content of each value statement, perceiving the two texts to be rather similar. At the same time, although they did not consciously notice the explicitness and directness of the second text, employees were nevertheless influenced by it in their interpretations. Again here the presence of shared frames and discourses appeared significant to the outcome. For example, where a new frame, moderating the importance of technical innovation with profitability and usability was introduced in the second values text, this was not reflected in employee actualised meanings, arguably because it appeared to be in conflict with a very strong existing 'technical excellence' frame.

What the new frame did, however, was to suppress the 'importance of quality' meaning which was strongly shared in the first values readings, from emerging second time round. On the other hand, when a text about 'being transparent' was introduced which seemed to confront a negative shared frame about the organisation's 'green culture', this created largely positive actualised meanings in agreement with the text, shifting the largely negative

meanings the more implicit earlier text about 'honesty' and 'trust' had generated.

In short, although on the face of it the second text appeared to be unnecessarily wordy and with some contradictions - some of which confused interpretations- at its best it appeared to be able to both control implicit meanings and to appear to develop some different organisational discourses. This could be said to be partly down to its explicitness and directness (even though this was not acknowledged by respondents) but also, most significantly, to its focus on certain important frames and discourses (for example 'transnationality'), which it opened up to scrutiny and debate.

So far my main concern was to show how culture influences the interpretation of message texts. While the readings of both texts in the EuroCo data were consistent with the finding that meanings are influenced by organisational frames and discourses and by identities as triggered by the reading of the texts, these final observations about the readings of the second text can also lead to some conclusions about the influence of texts on cultural frames and discourses, and therefore on cultures. My argument here is not that values statements by themselves can shape culture by producing different shared meanings, as for example much popular culture management literature argues (Collins and Porras, 1996). In fact, if anything my research and the research of others I have already discussed (DiSanza, 1993; Turnbull, 2001) show that where values communications are effectively exercises in empty

organisational rhetoric, that is, where the message texts are not supported by existing cultural frames or discourses (Fairhurst, 1993; DiSanza, 1993) these are almost certainly counterproductive. However, if seen as texts which provide connections with other texts in the organisation, texts to be discussed and debated, rather than followed as a rule book, then it is possible to see how these messages can contribute both to the reaffirmation and strengthening of existing frames and discourses and to the introduction of new frames and discourses in the organisation. The EuroCo data suggests that this could be the case also in a multinational company.

6.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have revisited my data findings and discussed them in relation to the research question and to different streams of literature. In summary, my findings suggest that interpretations of values messages are influenced primarily by shared organisational frames and discourses and secondarily, by cultural identities and identity themes and by the interaction between these and the text. More specifically, where frames and discourses support the meanings potentiated by the text, these are likely to be actualised and are likely to be shared across employee groups, whereas where frames and discourses do not support potentiated meanings these are likely to be rejected or negotiated.

The latter happens specifically where frames appear to contradict each other in relation to a specific meaning, or more often, when frames and identity

themes contrast. While identities seem significant to individual meanings in that they influence strong personal meanings of acceptance or rejection depending on whether the individual perceives the message to re-affirm or threaten their identity (affinity or conflict with identity themes), identity based themes create generally minority meanings, i.e. meanings which are shared among a few respondents. I have argued that this new, non-essentialist explanatory framework of the relationship between culture and interpretation fits with and could explain findings in a range of other reception studies and could also be used to support a rethinking of the conceptualisation of culture in much intercultural communication research.

Finally, having summarised findings relating to the reading of the two EuroCo values texts, I have argued that values messages could be influential as communication practices, if they are seen not as exercises in organisational rhetoric and/or tools of control, but as texts which bring to the fore and open up to discussion existing organisational frames and discourses.

CHAPTER SEVEN
CONCLUSIONS AND CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

7.1 Chapter purpose and structure

The purpose of this chapter is to summarise the research presented in this thesis, to draw conclusions about its findings, and to consider how these contribute to current academic debates and to professional and managerial communication practice in the multinational workplace. The structure of the chapter, therefore, begins with an overview of the research and its findings which leads to an outline of contribution to knowledge and practice and concludes with a discussion of limitations of this particular study and suggestions for future research.

7.2 Study overview

7.2.1 Research purpose

In this thesis I set out to investigate the practice of deploying values messages in multinational organisations in order to influence employee worldviews, the meanings created by these messages and the relationship between these meanings and the cultural context in which they are constructed. I argued that understanding, in detail, how such messages were received and interpreted in multinational business contexts would allow us to re-assess the effectiveness and implications of universal management communication practices– and values communication in particular - in international organisations, and to explore theoretical assumptions that cultural differences among employees would lead to diverse, rather than common interpretations. The results would contribute both to the ongoing debate about the influence of culture on communication in multinational

businesses (Lovitt and Goswami, 1999; Beamer and Varner, 2001; Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 2003; Jameson, 2007) and could be used to inform managerial practice, which currently appears to rely on 'best practice', ethnocentric, largely untested models of communication (Holtz, 2003; D'Aprix, 2008; Quirk, 2008).

7.2.2 Summary of findings

My study, based on a social semiotic/discourse approach to meaning generation and a conceptualisation of culture as a complex and dynamic web of meanings³⁰, revealed a rich picture of multiple interpretations for each message text and for each individual reader, but also unexpected high levels of commonality in meanings among respondents and in agreement between meanings actualised by respondents and meanings potentiated by the values texts.

Overall, the analysis suggested that where the text triggered shared cultural frames which were congruent with meanings potentiated by the text, these meanings were likely to be actualised and to be shared by many respondents. On the other hand, where the frames triggered by the reading of the message texts were in contrast with potentiated meanings, the meanings actualised were more likely to reject or negotiate the potentiated text meanings. The message readings also triggered the construction of cultural identities which

³⁰ I have shown in this thesis that my conceptualisation of culture has developed in the course of my research, from a more essentialist clearly separable and stable 'systems of meanings' approach to a non essentialist 'dynamic, interacting, webs of meaning' perspective.

were constructed by respondents through identity related themes, deixis, metaphor, imagery and storytelling. These tended to create personal meanings or meanings which were shared among a minority of respondents who appeared to share similar identity themes. Cultural frames and identities also worked together or against each other to produce meanings. In the latter case, when an individual's identity or identity themes contradicted both the text and the triggered shared frame, this would give rise to a negotiated, compromise meaning.

In summary, my study has shown that it is the complex dynamic interaction between text frames, cultural frames and discourses, and cultural identities that influences message interpretation in a multinational business setting, rather than any kind of stable group cultural membership and its predetermined characteristics. It has also highlighted that it is indeed possible for values messages of the type tested here to be interpreted in pretty similar ways by employees of very diverse backgrounds, providing at least at the outset, some support for the assumption that the generation of 'shared meaning' in multinational organisations is possible and that values messages may have some role to play in the shaping and strengthening of such shared meanings.

7.3 Contribution to knowledge

The results of my study challenge the assumptions I made at the beginning of this research, namely that universal messages of values and behaviours are

unlikely to be received and interpreted in similar ways by employees of different cultural backgrounds and that differences in interpretations were likely to be down to the diverse cultural profiles and multiple cultural influences of these employees. While my study reveals that assumptions of universality of outcome behind universalist management communication practices in multinational businesses are too simplistic, academic criticisms of such universal practices based on theories of cultural relativism are equally misplaced.

This is because, in practice, cultural influences on message interpretation are shown to be both much more dynamic and fluid, and at the same time much more constrained by the organisational context, than most essentialist approaches to culture, particularly those privileging national cultural differences would assume. In other words, what actually happens in the workplace, when multinational employees read universal values messages does not support a somewhat naive expectation that a totally homogenised common meaning will emerge to drive homogenised action (Van Nimwegen et al, 2004), but neither does it support academic theories of cultural differences leading to diverse meanings consistent with these differences (Hofstede, 1991; Brownell, 1999; Beamer, 2003).

What emerges, rather, are new insights about the cultural space in multinational organisations and an alternative way of understanding and studying the relationship between communication practice and culture in such

contexts which supports a turn to a non-essentialist understanding of culture in intercultural business communication research (Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 2003; Holliday et al, 2004). At the same time, a better understanding of the impact of values messages in organisational contexts and the way these interact with cultural frames and discourses to shape shared employee meanings emerges from this study. This provides a new basis for theorising the use of such organisational texts to 'frame' organisational reality (Fairhurst, 1993; Swales and Rogers, 1995; Tietze et al, 2003) and a better explanatory framework for understanding the variability of employee responses to leader framing of such reality (DiSanza, 1993; Turnbull, 2001; Bean and Hamilton, 2006).

Finally, my study contributes to intercultural business discourse research (Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007), firstly by exploring in depth message interpretation, a rarely studied communicative practice in multinational contexts, and secondly, by bringing to this study a qualitative audience reception framework, combined with a non-essentialist cultural identity perspective. By importing these two frameworks from related disciplines into the intercultural business communication arena, I present a systematic way of approaching the study of message interpretation in relation to cultural context in organisations, and enhance the range of tools available to the business discourse researcher for this purpose. In the course of adopting and adapting them to the new setting of multinational business, my research has largely validated and in some cases extended these extant frameworks, thus making

a small contribution also to the broader qualitative audience/reception research arena (Jensen and Jankowski, 1991; Philo, 2008). Below, I discuss in more specific terms these three areas of contribution and the specific literatures each relates to, as well as the contribution of my research to practice.

7.3.1 Contribution to theory

7.3.1.1 The influence of culture on communication: interculturality as context and as meaning

My first contribution is to the debate in intercultural business communication research about the relationship between communication and culture in the multicultural business context and the way we can conceptualise and study that relationship. While conducting my study, two mainstream approaches to culture continued to dominate intercultural business communication research. A narrow position which privileges national culture as the main cultural lens and seeks to determine and even predict communication differences in terms of differences in stable cultural dimensions (Gudykunst, 2000; Beamer, 2003; Hoeken et al, 2003) and a broader position taken by most business discourse researchers which sees culture as a combination of influences - national, professional, organisational - and seeks to understand how these work together to produce communicative action and meaning (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997; Nickerson, 1999; Ortiz, 2005).

Both of these approaches, however, with few exceptions (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997) maintain a conceptualisation of culture as a fairly stable external context, the influence of which on communication practice and meaning can be equally stable. More recently, a third, critical viewpoint has emerged which challenges this assumption of stability of the cultural context for a non-essentialist conceptualisation of culture as a dynamic web of meanings and identities (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004; Hunsinger, 2006). Although that debate addresses the limitations of both previous approaches, it largely lacks the empirical ammunition (from within the intercultural communication field) to support its claims. My study provides such empirical support.

Both in my exploratory study and in my main study, what has been clearly demonstrated is that individual cultural groups to which social actors belong do not determine a priori how these actors understand messages and construct meanings. Instead, meanings are shaped by a close interaction between the message texts and, on the one hand, shared cultural texts – frames or discourses - anchored in the organisational context, and, on the other, more fluid individual cultural identities which draw both from organisational and broader socio-cultural group memberships. These findings do not simply refute the idea of culture as a single, external stable deterministic context, but also demonstrate the fluidity and complexity of the relationship between culture and communication, to the extent that what is culture, what is text and what is context is not always easily isolatable, but is

instead part of the same intercultural social/linguistic space (Bargiela-Chiappini, 2004).

I build on Bargiela-Chiappini (2004) and Bargiela-Chiappini et al (2007), and draw from related work in other disciplines (Dutta-Bergman and Pal, 2005; Higgins, 2007; Nair-Venugopal, 2009), to argue that this space can be understood as 'interculturality' – namely the 'process and conditions of cultures in contact', but also the outcomes of that interaction, namely dynamic meanings and cultural identities in flux. This conceptualisation of culture builds on and extends the concept of culture as a multiple set of interacting (but largely stable and external) contextual influences, already discussed in much business discourse research (Lovitt and Goswami, 1999).

Such a shift, from conceptualising culture as a set of external –albeit interrelated contexts - to a new holistic *interculturality* has implications for the way we think about organisational cultures, texts and cultural identities in intercultural communication studies going forward. Organisational cultures, for example, cannot be conceptualised as separate and distinct phenomena to national cultures (Hofstede, 1991), but must be seen as the cultural space most immediate to the communicative action (Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson, 2003). Similarly, cultural identities cannot be conceptualised as aspects of an individual's profile to be used as alternatives to national culture 'labels' and as the basis for understanding differences and similarities between individuals in organisations, as Jameson for example suggests

(2007). Such an approach assumes an inherent stability to cultural identities and the possibility that individuals can be fully aware of the identities that influence them. Cultural identities in my data do not behave like that. They are rather fragmented and heavily reliant on the message text and the communication context. This would suggest that different interpretive situations and different texts will almost certainly construct partly different identities and identity themes and different meanings, as a result. It is also debatable whether social actors can be said to be fully aware of the cultural identities they construct; it is certainly unlikely that my respondents could describe to others the sort of identities that produced the specific meanings in my data.

While, therefore, I believe that in studying intercultural communication we can use cultural identities as a lens to understand specific intercultural communication situations, including the production and reading of specific texts, in theorising intercultural communication it is much more useful to conceive of identities as an element of the interculturality that both defines and explains intercultural communicative action (Nair-Venugopal, 2009). By that I mean that identities and their influence cannot be hypothesised apriori, but must be seen as both the product and the shaping influence of communicative action, and cannot simply be treated as a more dynamic alternative to stable, external, cultural contexts.

In summary, my study contributes evidence to support the argument for a non-essentialist approach to the study of culture in intercultural business communication. I have argued (along with Bargiela-Chappini, 2004 and Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007) that the concept of *interculturality*, so far mainly used to describe the way cultures interact in intercultural encounters can be extended and used to both describe and explain the interaction between context, text and identity in communicative action. In intercultural research cultural identities, cultural frames, organisational texts and meanings can be conceptualised as elements of a bigger, complex *interculturality*, aspects of which we can aim to explore and understand in specific organisational contexts.

7.3.1.2 Values texts and shared meaning

My second contribution concerns a re-examination of the role of organisational message texts in creating shared meaning among employee audiences. My findings relate to three different literatures. Firstly, against my initial expectations, they appear to partially support the notion promoted by popular culture management and corporate communication management literatures (Collins and Porras, 1996; Deetz et al, 2000; Lencioni, 2002) that the articulation and dissemination of values messages can generate shared meanings among employees, irrespective of the diversity of their backgrounds. However, my findings do not support the general assumption that message texts themselves can control these shared meanings, in the sense that actualised meanings are not always shared and neither do they

always agree with meanings potentiated in the texts. Shared meanings resulting from the reading of such messages can reflect as much a rejection or renegotiation of a potentiated message meaning, as the acceptance of what Hall calls the 'dominant code' (Hall, 1993).

In that my findings agree with two other streams of research, qualitative reception studies which show that variability of meanings as a response to a given message is the only possible outcome (Jensen, 1991b; Mick and Buhl, 1992; Dworkin et al, 1999; Aitken et al, 2008) and change framing research, which shows that such messages frequently meet with rejection in organisational settings (DiSanza, 1993; Turnbull, 2001; Bean and Hamilton, 2006). Although these literatures assume the influence of contextual elements on this variability of meaning, neither stream pursues the relationship to the detail I have presented here.

My study, consequently, adds to both these literatures, by offering a convincing explanation of how the cultural context (in the shape of shared frames and discourses and cultural identities) interacts with the message text frames to generate various types of shared meaning (as well as individual and minority meanings) and why in some cases shared meanings revolve around rejection of the message texts, rather than acceptance. In the context of the change framing literature, in particular, this new explanatory framework enables us to make connections between seemingly contradictory studies of the same phenomenon (e.g. DiSanza, 1993 and Scroggins, 2005), providing

an understanding of why in some organisations leadership frames appear to be more successful in creating acceptance of potentiated management meanings.

In summary, one could argue that the reason that values statements are frequently ineffective – and in fact create cynicism and suspicion instead of ‘shared meaning’- is to be found in the misconceived intent of the values text as a tool of homogenisation (Van Nimwegen et al, 2004) and the fact that some texts either bear no relationship to existing organisational frames or discourses or indeed the relationship they bear is totally contradictory. However, my study also shows that under certain circumstances explicit values messages may have a place in management communication armoury, not as tools of control and homogenisation, but as texts which can reinforce existing shared cultural frames, or make explicit and open to discussion organisational shared frames and discourses, which may impede the implementation of change.

7.3.1.3 Deploying audience research and identity frameworks in a novel way

The third area of contribution is to intercultural business discourse scholarship (Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007). By focusing on message interpretation rather than text analysis or face to face interaction, my research contributes a much needed case study to the body of knowledge concerning intercultural communication practice in multinational settings. Because this aspect of

communication in relation to culture is so little explored in extant literature, it became clear when I was designing my study that I needed to look outside the immediate intercultural business communication inquiry tradition for specific approaches to meaning generation in relation to cultural context. As a result I introduced to the study of message reception in business communication, tools and terminology from audience reception studies and in particular the notion of 'cultural frame' (Tuchman, 1991; Tietze et al, 2003), the distinction between potentiated and actualised meanings (Larsen, 1991; Mick et al, 2004) and, most significantly the distinction between meanings which are in agreement with the dominant text meaning or are constructed as rejections or negotiations of that meaning (Hall, 1993; Philo, 2008).

I believe that, despite terminology that has its roots in a more linear concept of communication, this framework proved robust and appropriate for this new research setting, allowing me to capture and show, on the one hand, the variability of meanings produced in a systematic way, and, on the other, the constraining effect of both text and organisational context on employee interpretations, resulting in a rather narrow range of meanings. In that Larsen's "text as indeterminate field of meaning" (Larsen, 1991:122) is not quite born out in the business setting.

Finally, the introduction of the concept of cultural identity as a lens of cultural influence on individual user meanings partly builds on Mick and Buhl's (1992) unique study of identities and advertising meaning and confirms their findings

of a clear relationship between cultural identity (together with shared cultural themes) and meaning generation. Unlike their study, my findings appear to show identities and identity themes as a less prominent influence on the reading of organisational values messages, but this can be explained by the focus and purpose of the specific messages tested – organisational values vs consumer advertising - and the differences in our respective approaches to deriving identity narratives – as identificatory meanings in the same discourse that produced the values readings in my case (Fairclough, 2003), life stories in separate interviews in theirs .

Overall, I believe, the use of the cultural identity lens here adds a significant new angle to our understanding of cultural influences. The data show that the use of cultural identity as an analytical concept allows us to understand not only rejected and compromised meanings more fully, but, significantly, how meanings are produced when shared cultural frames and personal identity themes collide. The particular way of approaching identity with the focus on the narrative and linguistic richness behind identity construction, also provides extra insights into how identities which appear diverse can produce common meanings, and why very similar identities may fail to produce shared interpretations. The answer, in both cases, appears to lie in common or similar identity themes and how these relate to the text frames.

In summary, as well as contributing a case study of message interpretation to the study of intercultural business communication practice, I have introduced

two new conceptual frameworks to this study – an audience ‘reception’ framework which allows us to produce a systematic typology of the meanings generated by employees when they read corporate messages, and a conceptualisation of culture in terms of cultural frames and cultural identities which has allowed much richer insights to emerge about the relationship between text, meaning and cultural context.

7.3.2 Contribution to practice

Contribution to practice relates both to the deployment and reception of values messages and to the use of universal management messages in general. Conclusions can be drawn for how leaders can frame their messages to their multicultural audiences more effectively, and for where communication development and support to such leaders can be focused going forward. The study, which begun by questioning universalism in organisational communication practice, in fact provides evidence that universalist practice, as long as it is sensitive to existing shared organisational cultural meanings, can certainly play a role in reinforcing and, in the long term, even in changing such meanings.

At the same time, findings show that meanings framed by leaders are not accepted on the basis of the persuasiveness, clarity or eloquence of the message frame alone, in other words it is not the message itself that determines meaning, but rather the relationship between explicit message texts and cultural texts or frames in the organisation, and the cultural identities

of message readers. Whereas leaders cannot be expected to address or anticipate the pluralistic, shifting identities of their audiences, they could certainly shape their messages to take account of the likely influence of existing organisational discourses and frames. Leaders in my main study seemed to be doing this with some success, particularly with the newer values message text, which addressed underlying organisational culture frames much more explicitly. In contrast, in my exploratory study the empty rhetoric of most values statements appeared to create a lot of resistance and rejection among employees.

Overall, whilst my findings suggest that universal messaging to address multicultural audiences could be an effective practice, they also show that the success of such practice depends not on 'best practice' prescriptions, but on practitioners becoming much more adept at the way they use language in their messaging and much more aware and sensitive of how the language in their explicit texts interacts with implicit cultural texts and meanings. This would suggest that communicative competence in multinational business environments does not so much depend on leaders and managers being trained on recognising intercultural communication differences, but rather on understanding how language (and managers' own communicative practice in particular) actually works, and how consistency or the lack of consistency between explicit messages and existing discourses creates certain types of actualised meaning. (Cohen et al, 2005).

7.4 Research Limitations and Clarifications

Despite the interesting findings of this study, a number of limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the findings discussed here are based on a single organisational case. Although this focus on the single organisation allowed me to provide a rich, in depth, study of message readings and to explore two different message texts in the process, a comparison with other organisations, and other message texts would be necessary to further test and extend the conclusions presented here. The particular case I provided here illustrates employee interpretations in a highly integrated European organisation, where English is well embedded as a working language and as the language of management, shaping in the way it is used (formally and informally) a particular organisational reality, which in turn influences the way management messages are read. Although my exploratory study did show similar patterns and relationships emerging in a somewhat less integrated European multinational, to what extent my findings apply to organisations in different stages of integration, and to employees with different levels of experience of working with other cultures and in other geographies, must be tested further.

Many might argue that the practical constraints of the study – the problems with access which limited the number of interviewees and meant that interviews were conducted almost a year apart - are a limitation, as they must have influenced the outcome. In the first round of interviews I was only able to test the first values statement, in the second I tested two statements. Not all

interviewees who read the first statement were available to be interviewed again for the second. As I showed in my findings presentation it is certainly true that the immediate context and timing of interviewing had an influence on interpretations, but this would only be seen as a limitation, if I had assumed at the outset that it was possible to ‘uncover’ only unique, stable interpretations and if the purpose was to compare such interpretations, and not to understand them in relation to cultural influences. I accept that had I been able to conduct all interviews at the same time, some meanings would most likely be different, and, possibly, more similar to each other – in which case the similarity among some meanings, despite the different interview timeframes must be seen as an important finding. However, because I searched for cultural cues primarily in the transcripts themselves, the timing of the interviews was not as critical to my examining the relationship between interpretations and culture. On the other hand, the differences in timing provided other interesting insights.

Finally, although I do not necessarily, see this as a limitation, I have from the beginning of the study reflected on my influence as a researcher and interviewer on the results of the study and, furthermore, on the complexity presented by conducting research about language and meaning in a language which is not my native language and with interviewees who similarly speak English as a second language. Relating to the first point, although I took care in the conversations I held with my respondents not to lead them to specific answers, the position I take is that every interviewer will have an influence on the results, as the interview itself is an intercultural communicative act. Had I

not said a word, my purpose as a researcher, my obvious accent and southern European appearance, even my gender and age might have had an influence on what people decided to tell me and how. It is quite possible for example that some of the identities my respondents articulated, such as gender related identities were at least partly influenced by my presence or appearance and may not have been articulated had the interviewer been male. Similarly were I not perceived to be a 'sympathetic' listener as well as an impartial outsider, would stories about family problems and personal problems in the workplace have emerged which supported certain identities such as 'family man', key 'communicator without information', 'little guy doing his job'? Had I sounded British, would some respondents (albeit not many) have defined their identities in such polemic anti-British terms? Although I can argue that I did not intentionally influence the answers by posing leading questions, I cannot argue that my interviews were objective or neutral encounters.

Rather, I acknowledge that the specific findings I discuss here were inevitably shaped by the specific context of interpretation of which I, as a researcher, was a part. It is also worth considering that my own interpretation of the interview transcripts cannot be separated by the meaning making frameworks I deploy as a qualitative researcher, linguist, communication practitioner, interculturalist and non British manager living in Britain, among many other things. Although this should not be viewed as a limitation, as the study does not aim to provide objective descriptions of single 'true' meanings, which could

be replicated exactly by other researchers, I have to acknowledge that the particular focus on particular aspects of user meanings - in other words the way I chose to tell the story of my research and research findings - is inevitably unique to the complex interaction of my researcher/practitioner identities and the transcript texts and research context - I discuss this in some detail in the early chapters of this thesis. This could explain the hybridity in some of the research tools I deployed (for example the agree/reject/reinterpret framework) to understand and talk about my data. As I explained in the methodology section, although it is very important to reflect on such issues and to acknowledge them, accepting the researcher's impact on data gathering and data interpretation does not by itself invalidate the data, if qualitative research protocols have been carefully observed (see section 3.5.7 'Research quality and reliability' for a full discussion of this point).

Relating to the point of language, the meanings, frames and identity constructions I have presented here, are second level interpretations of my interviewees' interpretations and constructions and, are expressed in a language neither they nor I grew up speaking (with the exception of my British interviewees of course). To an external observer this may appear highly problematic. As for me, although English is my second language, I have come in the last 25 years to feel more comfortable in thinking and working in English than I am in Greek, my native language. After all, I was conducting research for a degree in an English business school; I articulated my research problem in English, thought through my research, talked about it and negotiated

access in that language. I used English through in the research and interpretation process. From that perspective the linguistic code of the research and thesis cannot be separated from the context in which the research and thesis was produced. Similarly, with my interviewees it was their understanding and use of English in the particular organisational context that I was after. As each of the non native speakers told me, their understanding of an English text did not involve their native language (there was no conscious process of interpretation involved).

It is possible that different meanings would have been generated were I to have native language conversations with each of my interviewees and perhaps this is something to be tested by someone else, but it is the use of English in multinational businesses, as a language of communication and of meaning that chiefly concerned me here. As I explained in the methodology chapter, following recent research around English as a 'lingua franca' in multinationals, I do not see the linguistic code, in this case English, as simply the instrument of research or, more importantly still, the instrument of message articulation and message interpretation. Rather it is both an inseparable part of the cultural context under exploration and the main means of shaping that cultural context through discourse.

7.5 Future Research

In this study I presented in rich detail a case of universal values message interpretations in a multinational organisation and drew some interesting conclusions from the data about the relationship between such interpretations and the cultural context as constructed in cultural frames and discourses on the one hand, and cultural identities, on the other. Because this was an in depth picture of one organisation and one type of message, it is now essential to collect similar reception data in other organisational settings and geographic locations, utilising both values statements and other types of message texts. It would be interesting to compare with the EuroCo study organisations at varying stages of integration, as well as organisations which operate in other European and global contexts.

Also, having so far tested messages which are 'heavy' with cultural concepts, it would be very interesting to test messages which are perceived to be about facts, for example messages which communicate organisational performance. Although such texts are no less cultural, both as linguistic constructions and as organisational artefacts, and although their intent is still to 'frame' reality for employees, it would be interesting to see to what extent their 'factual' content would trigger cultural identities and frames to the same extent that a values message appears to do and whether the same combination of accepted rejected and negotiated meanings would emerge from their reading. Reception studies of 'factual' mass media messages – e.g. Jensen (1991b), Dworkin et al (1999)- would certainly suggest so.

As well as exploring different organisational contexts and different message texts, it would also be interesting to test what happens when the research is conducted in languages other than English, with messages and meanings both expressed in different languages. As an extension of this point, although it was not possible to consider this approach in the context of a PhD study, a multi-researcher research design with a number of researchers investigating the reception of the same message with a number of different audiences in a number of different languages may also provide very interesting findings– the influence of different linguistic codes on the interpretation process and outcome may be significant.

Another question worth investigating is that arising from the differences between employees and other business audiences, namely to what extent employees of a given organisation are more constrained in their interpretation by the organisational cultural context than other audiences and therefore should be treated differently to external organisational publics (Grunig, 1992) both as targets for communication practice and as concepts to be theorised in research. Finally, it would be interesting to test if and how the non-essentialist concepts explored here in relation to message interpretation, namely cultural identity and cultural frames and their relationship to the concept of *interculturality*, could be used in the study of intercultural text construction, where other elements such as ‘genre’ conventions may also be influential.

7.6 Concluding remarks

In this thesis I have presented as much a personal as an academic journey of inquiry around the reception and interpretation of specific communication practices in multinational organisations. As a practitioner and researcher I emerge from this journey both with clarity and with new questions and the desire to go on exploring and developing the findings of this study, particularly the concepts of *interculturality* and *cultural identity* in relation to communication and meaning making in the multinational, multicultural workplace. More importantly, I hope that I will be able to transfer some of these insights back into the workplace, redirecting practitioner focus a lot more on language and organisational discourse practices and perhaps a little less on national cultural differences.

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