

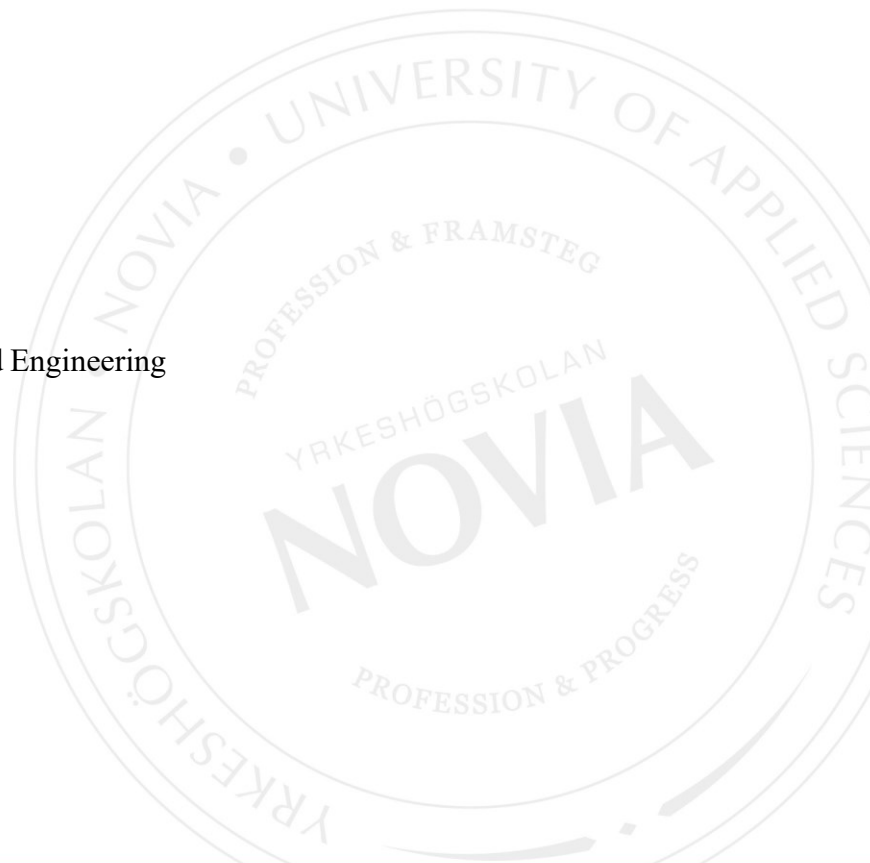
# **A study on Technical Communication in Business between Different Cultures**

Tobias Holmqvist

Master's Thesis

Industrial Management and Engineering

Vaasa 2022



## **MASTER'S THESIS**

Author: Tobias Holmqvist

Degree Programme and place of study: Industrial Management and Engineering, Vaasa

Supervisor: Roger Nylund

Title: A study on Technical Communication in Business between Different Cultures

---

Date: 25.5.2022 Number of pages: 30 Appendices: 0

---

### **Abstract**

This Thesis was done on the behalf of Mirka Ltd. but limited to the Power tools department that I was working for at the time of writing the thesis. Mirka Ltd is a global company with many suppliers in Asia, specifically China. The purpose of the thesis was to develop a technical communication model to improve the co-operation between Mirka Power Tools and its Chinese suppliers.

The theoretical background of the thesis was based on theories concerning language, communication, business culture and organizational culture. The research was made as qualitative research with semi-structured interviews regarding the same topics as for the theoretical background. The interviews were thematically analyzed and presented.

The results from the interviews were reported and based on both the theory and results from the interviews the thematical analysis was made. The thematical analysis shows the main challenges. In the conclusions chapter the basic solutions to the challenges were presented.

The thesis gives a basic understanding for both the challenges and possible solutions to improve the work between Mirka Power Tools and its Chinese suppliers.

---

Language: English

Key Words: communication, co-operation, China

## EXAMENSARBETE

Författare: Tobias Holmqvist

Utbildning och ort: Industrial Management and Engineering, Vasa

Handledare: Roger Nylund

Titel: A study on Technical Communication in Business between Different Cultures

---

Datum: 25.5.2022 Sidantal: 30

Bilagor: 0

---

### Abstrakt

Detta examensarbete är gjort på Mirka Ltd vägnar, begränsat till Power Tools avdelningen som jag arbetade för vid tidpunkten för skrivandet av detta examensarbete. Mirka Ltd är ett globalt företag med flera leverantörer i Asien, specifikt Kina. Examensarbetets ändamål var att utveckla en teknisk kommunikationsmodell för att förbättra samarbetet mellan Mirka Power Tools och dess Kinesiska leverantörer.

Examensarbetets teoretiska bakgrund baserades på teorier som behandlar språk, kommunikation, affärskultur och organisationskultur. För examensarbetet användes kvalitativ forskning med semistrukturerade intervjuer som behandlade samma ämnen som i den teoretiska bakgrunden. Intervjuerna analyserades tematisk och resultaten presenterades.

Intervjuernas resultat rapporterades och baserat på både teorin och resultaten från intervjuerna gjordes den tematiska analysen. Den tematiska analysen påvisar de största utmaningarna. I kapitlet för slutsatserna presenterades de grundläggande lösningarna till utmaningarna.

Examensarbetet ger en grundläggande förståelse för utmaningarna och dess lösningar för att förbättra samarbetet mellan Mirka Power Tools och dess Kinesiska leverantörer.

---

Språk: Engelska

Nyckelord: kommunikation, samarbete, Kina

# OPINNÄYTETYÖ

Tekijä: Tobias Holmqvist

Koulutus ja paikkakunta: Industrial Management and Engineering, Vaasa

Ohjaaja: Roger Nylund

Nimike: A study on Technical Communication in Business between Different Cultures

---

Päivämäärä: 25.5.2022 Sivumäärä: 30 Liitteet: 0

---

## Tiivistelmä

Tämä opinnäytetyö on tehty Mirka Ltd:n puolesta ja rajoitettu Power Tools osastoon, jossa työskentelin tämän opinnäytetyön kirjoitushetkellä. Mirka Ltd on globaali yritys jolla on useita toimittajia Aasiassa, erityisesti Kiinassa. Opinnäytetyön tarkoitus oli kehittää tuotekehitykseen kommunikaatiomalli joka parantaisi Mirka Power Toolsin ja sen kiinalaisten toimittajien yhteistyötä.

Opinnäytetyön teoreettinen tausta perustui teorioihin, jotka käsittelevät kieltä, viestintää, yrityskulttuuria ja organisaatiokulttuuria. Opinnäytetyössä käytettiin kvalitatiivista tutkimusta puolistrukturoiduilla haastatteluilla, jotka käsitelivät samoja aiheita kuin teoreettisessa taustassa. Haastattelut analysoitiin temaattisesti ja tulokset esiteltiin.

Haastattelujen tulokset raportoitiin ja sekä teorian, että haastattelujen tulosten perusteella tehtiin temaattinen analyysi. Temaattisessa analyysissä tunnistetaan suurimmat haasteet. Päätelmien luvussa esitettiin perusratkaisut haasteisiin.

Opinnäytetyö antaa perusymmärryksen haasteista ja niiden ratkaisuista Mirka Power Toolsin ja sen kiinalaisten toimittajien yhteistyön parantamiseksi.

---

Kieli: Englanti

Avainsanat: kommunikaatio, yhteistyö, Kiina

## Table of contents

1	Introduction .....	1
1.1	Background.....	1
1.2	Problem area.....	1
1.3	Purpose of the thesis.....	2
1.4	Limitations .....	2
1.5	Outline of thesis .....	2
2	Theoretical background.....	3
2.1	Language.....	3
2.1.1	Interpretations .....	3
2.1.2	English vs. Chinese .....	4
2.1.3	Communication gaps.....	5
2.2	Business Culture .....	6
2.2.1	Deal Focused Culture vs. Relationship Focused Culture .....	7
2.2.2	Differences in Cultural Behavior .....	9
2.3	Business Organization.....	10
2.3.1	The Chinese Organization .....	12
2.3.2	The Mirka Way.....	13
3	Methodology.....	14
3.1	Methods.....	14
3.1.1	Quantitative research.....	14
3.1.2	Qualitative research.....	14
3.1.3	Qualitative interviews.....	15
3.1.4	Analyzing the data.....	16
3.1.5	Interview guide .....	17
3.1.6	Research process .....	18
4	Results .....	19
4.1	Language.....	19
4.2	Communication .....	21
4.3	Business culture.....	22
4.4	Organizational culture.....	23
4.5	Summary of the Thematic Analysis.....	25
5	Conclusions.....	25
5.1	Technical communication model .....	26
5.1.1	Language .....	26
5.1.2	Communication .....	26
5.1.3	Business culture.....	27
5.1.4	Organizational culture .....	28

5.2	Research question.....	28
6	Discussion .....	28
	References .....	30

# **1 Introduction**

This Master's Thesis was written for and in co-operation with Mirka Ltd. Power Tools Research and Development department. The purpose of the thesis is to improve the technical communication between Mirka Ltd and its Asian suppliers focusing on the Chinese suppliers by developing a communication model. The model was developed in co-operation with one of Mirka's main Chinese suppliers, Supplier A.

## **1.1 Background**

For every new power tool development project Mirka involves several Chinese suppliers for several components and development tasks. At the time of writing this thesis Mirka Power Tools work with 16 different suppliers from China, this means that a clear model for technical communication is needed. Mirka Ltd. also has a Chinese subsidiary company with 38 employees.

Between 2017 and 2021 Mirka Power Tools has had a very rapid growth going from 49,6 Million euro to 97,6 Million Euro in turnover in only four years. The growth is still increasing and the demand for new products is growing. For Mirka to be able to answer to this demand Mirka will need to increase the number of employees in Finland. New and unexperienced employees will also work together with our Chinese suppliers, the target is that the communication model will support inexperienced as well as experienced employees. During development projects several challenges has occurred such as cultural differences, organizational differences, and language.

According to Terence Gomez and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao a Chinese firm in Hong-Kong have several differences to the western organizations, the Chinese organizations are often small scale and focus on one product or market to enable growth by opportunistic diversification. Decision making often happens by one executive that often also is the owner. (Gomez & Hsiao, 2003)

## **1.2 Problem area**

The Power Tools department has had and continues to have a rapid growth resulting in a high demand of new tools. Mirka is very proud of having about 80 % of its power tools produced in Finland. The growing demand for increased project resources and production capacity for the power tools has led to increasing outsourcing for both human resources for

design and manufacturing. Supplier A has provided Mirka with both design and manufacturing, they have also proven their skill within the field, however, the communication between the two companies has proven to need improvement. The main challenges are misunderstandings that cause delays and quality issues due to the challenges related to communication, cultural differences, organizational differences, and language.

### **1.3 Purpose of the thesis**

The purpose of this thesis is to develop a technical communication model between Mirka Power Tools and our Chinese suppliers. The model will help with enhancing the project speed as well as product quality by finding a common understanding between Finnish and Chinese people and avoid the most critical differences.

The research question for this thesis is “How can we overcome the language, cultural and organizational differences between Mirka Power Tools R&D and its Chinese suppliers?”

### **1.4 Limitations**

The thesis focused on how to solve the technical communication for Mirka Power Tools R&D between Mirka and the Chinese sub-suppliers contracted for both product development tasks and product manufacturing.

### **1.5 Outline of thesis**

The theories for developing a model for technical communication considering the main differences between Westerners and Asians is presented and explained in the second chapter. The qualitative research is based on the theories, the methods for the interviews and workshops with both Mirka employees and employees from Supplier A will be reported and explained in the third chapter. In the fourth chapter the results from the research will be presented. The thesis will be concluded in the fifth chapter, the communication model will also be part of this chapter. The sixth and final chapter includes discussion about the work process for the thesis as well as the results. Suggestions for improvements and possible implementation results will be part of the fifth chapter.



## **2 Theoretical background**

The theoretical background chapter includes theories relevant to the research question for this thesis. The theories are the base for the case study of this thesis to identify challenges within a development project between Mirka Power Tools and its Chinese suppliers. The theories will also provide the key for the findings of this thesis presented in the results chapter. The first aspect to discuss is language.

### **2.1 Language**

During the development projects between Mirka Power Tools and the Chinese suppliers there is a lot of technical communication regarding electronics, mechanics, manufacturing and project management.

#### **2.1.1 Interpretations**

Truth, Contracts and Ethics, Common sense, Gossip and Silence are attributes that can heavily differ depending on how the language is constructed (Lewis 2006).

How does these words link to the language and not the culture? It is how we interpret the words and their meaning that decides how we will behave when talking about e.g., truth.

Truth, truth in the Nordic countries is absolute, and it is considered that it must be so to reach successful results. In China it is viewed in another way – there is no absolute truth. The risk with absolute truth is that one might lose face which in turn could lead to relationships being damaged. (Lewis 2006). Since the interpretation is so different between the languages it can often result in costly and time-consuming misunderstandings in business.

Contract and Ethics are as truth, interpreted differently in different languages and cultures. Westerners in majority, with exceptions of the southern Europeans such as Italians, see a contract as a binding document that should be followed. In the East however, the interpretation of the contract and ethics differ a lot from the westerner's view, easterners tend to interpret contracts as both a starting document that can evolve and change during the business phase if so is required. (Lewis 2006).

The interpretation of common sense is interpreted very differently among the most languages. Richard Lewis states that the British dictionary defines common sense as “judgment gained from experience rather than study” and the American dictionary defines

it as “judgement that is sound but unsophisticated”. This gives us an idea how much the interpretations may vary when two languages that are so close to each other differ this much. (Lewis 2006).

Interpretation of silence is also very different depending on country and language, in for example Germany and America silence is not very common in a discussion. Finns and East Asians are on the other hand very comfortable with silence during a discussion. The silence is polite and interpreted as friendly and appropriate. (Lewis 2006).

### **2.1.2 English vs. Chinese**

When communicating with our Chinese suppliers the preferred language is with no exception English. It may seem as the counterpart understands what we mean but in reality they may not have done so.

Since the word order between Swedish and English is relatively similar, people in Scandinavia both speak and understand English quite well. Chinese on the other hand is not very similar to the English word order and word to word translations can create very strange sentences in Mandarin. (Robson 2012). This sub-chapter presents some of the biggest differences that might impact the understanding of the communication when the Chinese translates the English into Mandarin.

Usually, to avoid misunderstandings we use yes and no questions when communicating with our suppliers. Yes and No questions can however be harder to use than we have thought and can be culturally problematic, since no is definitely not a preferred answer. The interrogative questions such as what, where and when also have some specific rules to them that the English language does not.

Yes and No questions have two basic forms in mandarin, either they add “ma” to the end of a statement without altering the statement, this gives for example: This part will be produced next week → Will this part be produced next week? This is a verb/verb phrase pattern. The other alternative is using a so called “A-not-A” structure, a verb/verb phrase/ descriptive adjective pattern. The A is either a verb or a descriptive adjective. When the A is a verb, the question would be e.g. Is there a problem with the part? With a descriptive adjective the same question would be, is the part problematic? (Robson 2012).

To answer a yes or no question in mandarin you repeat the question in a positive or negative way since there are no direct translation of yes and no in mandarin, giving:

Question: Is the part problematic?

Answer: The part is problematic.

The interrogative questions do not share the “ma” at the end of a statement as for the yes and no questions. The word order of an interrogative question and its answer is identical in mandarin. The question “why” needs an explanation when answering it, therefore it always begins with, “because”. (Robson 2012).

### 2.1.3 Communication gaps

Languages use different styles and techniques when spoken, the words and their use may differ, e.g. French is very precise and leaves little room for misunderstanding, English is more reserved and uses understatements to tone down a discussion to later on gain an advantage. Scandinavians are well prepared and are friendly, factual and succinct. The speed, volume and grammar of the speech are factors that impacts how we see and listen to the counter part, a faster language may be considered as unreliable to a slower language. A high volume can be interpreted as angry and the grammar can make it hard to understand a sentence. (Lewis 2006).

In Finland we are very short worded. Figure 1 displays a communication pattern for Finns.

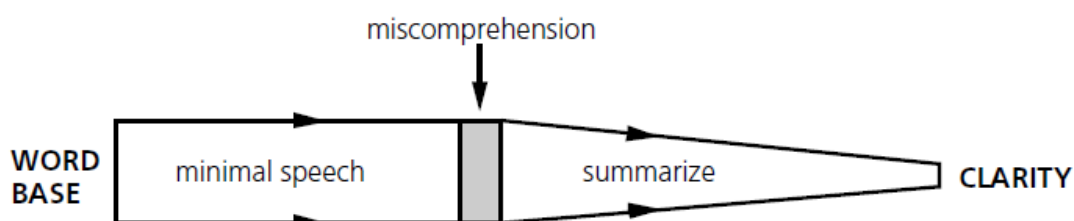


Figure 1. Finnish communication pattern (Lewis 2006)

Finns belong to the Deal-focused culture that also impacts the communication pattern. Deal-focused culture is more open to make contact with new business partners than the countries that belong to the relationship-focused culture. The relationship culture is more about networks among family and friends and not strangers. The Chinese belong to the relationship-focused group. (Gesteland 2012)

The relationship-focused are not short worded and like to have meetings with management groups to get to know each other before any business relations are started. (Gesteland 2012). The thesis writer has personal experience from this, there are a lot of dining and meetings before we get down to the actual business topic. In the Business Culture chapter this is described in more details.

## 2.2 Business Culture

The culture for a region or country is determined by a lot of different factors that form our way of thinking, Gayle Cottons list of main factors are displayed in the table 1.

Cultural layer	Explanation
Mother tongue and secondary languages	Basis of how we initially think, behave and communicate
Race	Racial prejudice
Ethnicity	Ethnic preferences from the environment and experiences
Gender	Gender equality
Local culture	Environment, neighborhood, city
Regional attire	Different dress codes
Ancestry	Different generations
Parents and family	Involvement in up-bringing or the lack of it
Teachers	Influence of teachers and education
Our nation or country	Patriotic connection or lack of it
Geographic regions, states, provinces, cantons	Different languages or dialect depending on region
Cities, towns and villages	Big city or small village
Neighborhoods	Wealth, poverty, ethnicity
Border countries, states and provinces	Border countries affect the culture of the people near the border
Religion	Cultural history
Social class	The wealthy and the less wealthy
Education	Level of education
Profession	Huge impact since this is where we learn and spend a lot of time
Workplace colleagues	Habits and attitudes
Experiences	Widen our cultural view
Events	Big events that impact positively or negatively, catastrophe aid vs. Bombings
Politics	Extreme views or ideas
Travel	Widens our cultural view
Physically challenged	How do we treat physically challenged individuals

Table 1. Cultural layers (Cotton 2013)

Gesteland (2012) defines business culture as “*a unique set of expectations and assumptions about how to do business*”. Gesteland also states that it is important to avoid stereotypes

because even if two persons belong to the same culture, there are differences such as e.g. regional and generational differences.

The culture heavily affect how we communicate with people. Stated by Susanne Niemeier, Charles P. Campbell and René Dirven “*We subconsciously assume values and norms to be common ones that are in fact peculiar to our own culture.*” (Niemeier et al. 1998).

Since the preferred language between Mirka and its Chinese suppliers is English both parties need to translate the communication into their respective mother tongue. Here the cultural differences e.g. non verbal behavior, cultural norms and attitudes easily can lead to misunderstandings.

The statements contradict with each other in that sense that Gesteland do not want to generalize and use the stereotypes as much as Niemeier, Campbell and Dirven.

By experience, stereotypes can be very useful in these situations, at least in the beginning of a new business relationship

### **2.2.1 Deal Focused Culture vs. Relationship Focused Culture**

The deal focused culture is more direct than what the relationship focused culture. While the deal focused cultures are more willing to deal with strangers in a short amount of time. The relationship focused rather deal with friends and family or at least within the network of friends and family. The majority of the world is relationship focused with the exception of North America, Australia, New Zealand and northern Europe. (Gesteland 2012).



Figure 2. Relationship Focused and Deal Focused Areas (Gesteland 2012)

The Chinese negotiation culture is heavily impacted by hierarchy and Confucian norms, “to perfect oneself, family, country and world” (Confucius). Due to this Chinese negotiators avoid conflicts during negotiations. However, with foreigners the Chinese can differ from these principles and use extreme tactics becoming more like the counterpart. This in turn creates a mix of both a manifest level with a lot of details and a latent level with emotions. (Niemeier et al. 1998).

According to Stephen E. Weiss and William Stripp the most common issue when negotiating with the Chinese is that the Chinese tend to create emotional ties and in that way become more friends than business partners with foreign business partners. This can be difficult to handle since the Chinese can expect good terms and conditions due to the friendship they have managed to create with the counterpart, Guanxi.

To be able to start a business relationship with relationship focused cultures such as China you often need Guanxi which is networks of relationships. These networks can then introduce you to new business partners that you otherwise could not be able to get in contact with. Before you actually can start to talk business with relationship focused cultures such as the Chinese it is critical to first get to know each other on a personal level. This is best done face to face since the Chinese can be uncomfortable when talking about business opportunities by e-mail or phone. (Gesteland 2012)

In relationship focused cultures contracts are not considered to be as important as we do in the more deal focused cultures. A long and detailed contract process can be counterproductive. (Gesteland 2012). Stephen E. Weiss and William Stripp also agrees on this theory and states that the Chinese believe that if a contract is needed to keep promises it is better not doing business at all together. Also the distrust of the legal system in the old China has left its marks in today's China.

### **2.2.2 Differences in Cultural Behavior**

When conducting cross-cultural business it is important to understand what differences there are to avoid offending the counterpart with inappropriate jokes, gestures or create misunderstandings and confusion. In this sub chapter the most common differences between westerners, with focus on the Germanic and Nordic cultures compared to Asian cultures such as Chinese and Japanese cultures are presented.

In the Western culture the people are more individualistic than what the people in Asia are. This can give faster decisions but also decisions that are not the best. Compared to the Asian culture where decision making is done in groups, the information may come from an executive but usually the decision has been discussed well in advance and is therefore well thought through, on the downside, the decision making requires a lot of time. (Cotton 2013).

Cotton states that the Asian culture has a more indirect communication and do not want to disappoint or disagree. This leads to not saying the word "no", they rather rephrase and disguise it in e.g. "maybe". He also says that using questions with who, what, when, where, why and how helps to avoid yes and no answers. This is also confirmed by Robson, Shin Yong in the book "Speed up Your Chinese : Strategies to Avoid Common Errors (2012)".

Loss of Face is a very important thing in Asia compared to what it is in the Western. One should avoid to cause the loss of face for an individual since this often is reflected on the entire group or organization represented by that individual. When loosing face it is often more important to prove that one was not wrong than actually solving an issue, this is called, saving face. To avoid getting into these situations one should not single out a person or embarrass them. Giving face is when someone recommends you publicly. Lending face can be important for foreigners when seeking new suppliers but do not have a reputation in Asia, then a third part is needed that is willing to lend its face on behalf of the foreigner. (Cotton 2013).

Body language is a big factor when dealing with Asians since posture and balance are important. One comes a long way with decent manners such as not having your feet on the table and sit still in a calm way. Pointing the sole of your feet or shoe is very insulting to most of the Asian cultures. (Cotton 2013). In the following chapter the business organization will be discussed.

### **2.3 Business Organization**

A business organization is needed when the work load needs to be divided between people to reach a good end result. Without a business organization a company risks to fail on cross-functional activities that can lead to time consuming and costly bottlenecks. Decision making can suffer from lack of information, lack of competence and lack of resources. (O'Shaughnessy 2013).

According to O'Shaughnessy there are three main approaches to organization; Classical, Human Relations and Systems, These are illustrated in figure 3.



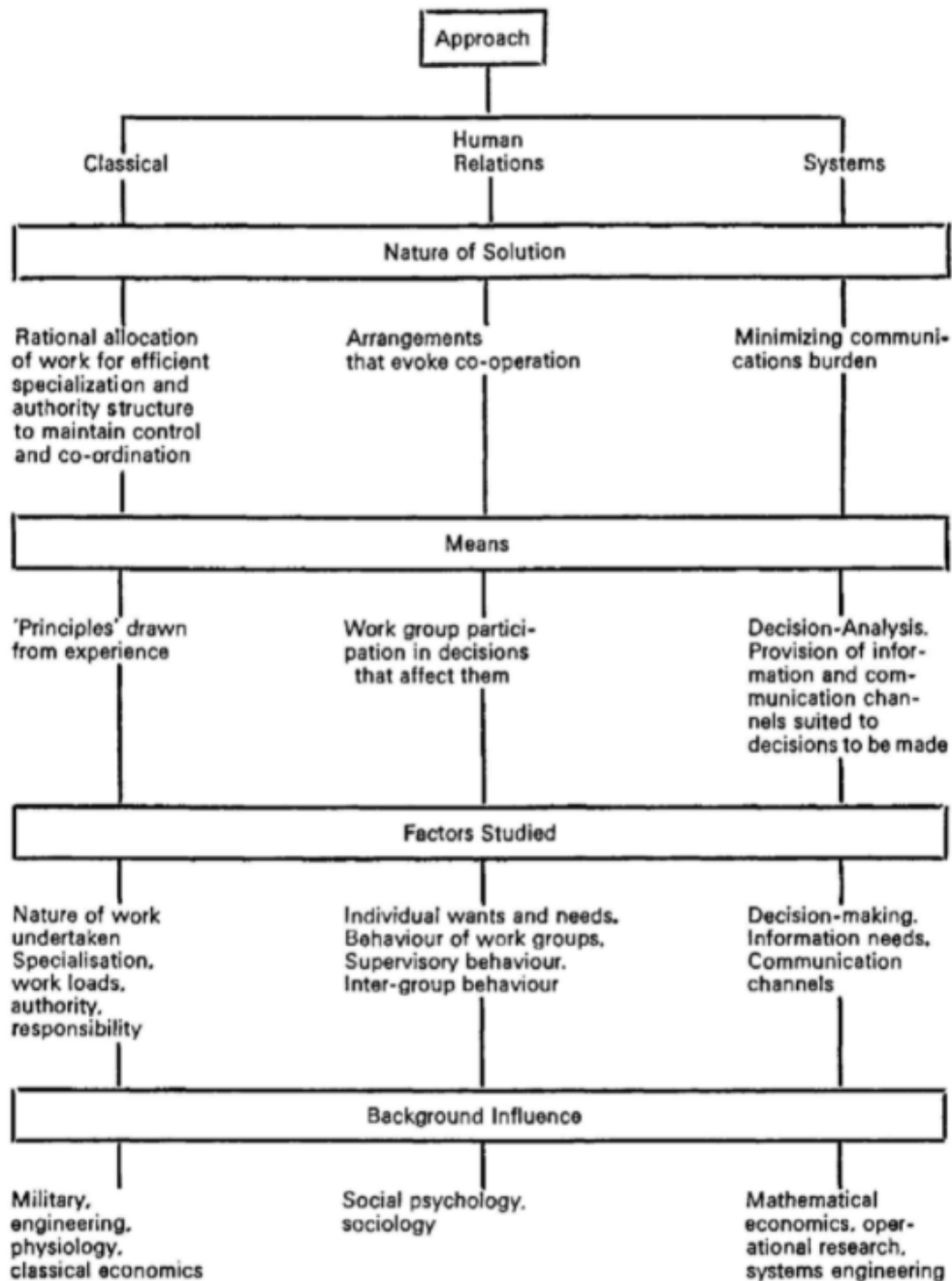


Figure 3. Organizations (O'Shaughnessy 2013)

The classical organization focuses on the activities. The activities are sorted and divided among the right persons so that the responsibilities are right in the chain of command. This type of organization often works best for engineering.

The human relations organization focus on motives and behavior so that the people can cooperate to achieve the goals of the company or business.

The systems approach focus on the decisions that are necessary for a successful business. For the decisions to be made the systems approach also study information and communication that is required to make good decisions. (O'Shaughnessy 2013).

### 2.3.1 The Chinese Organization

As mentioned in chapter 1.1, Chinese companies are often operating in small scale and focus on one product or market. The decision making is often done by one executive and/or owner. However, the previous chapters shows that even if the decision itself comes from the executive, the process to reach the decision involves a group within the company with expertise. This is however contradicting with what Gomez and Hsiao states, they state that the Chinese business organization is flat, and that the owner has a vertical control over the company and makes all major decisions without the consultation of other people in the company. (Gomez & Hsiao 2003)

The management system can be described as a nesting box displayed in the figure below which is based on the theory of Omohundro (1981) and Redding (1980) cited by Gomez and Hsiao (2003).

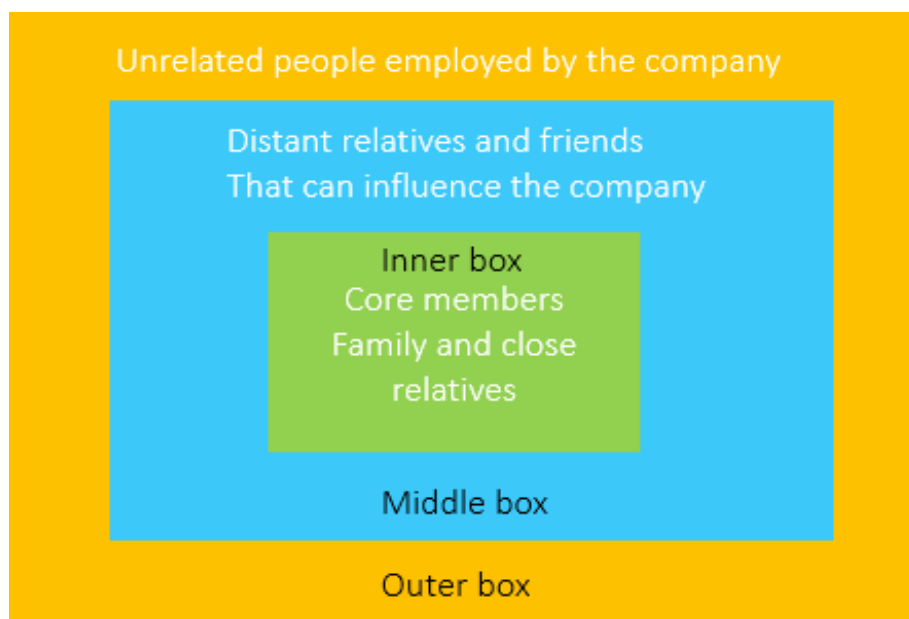


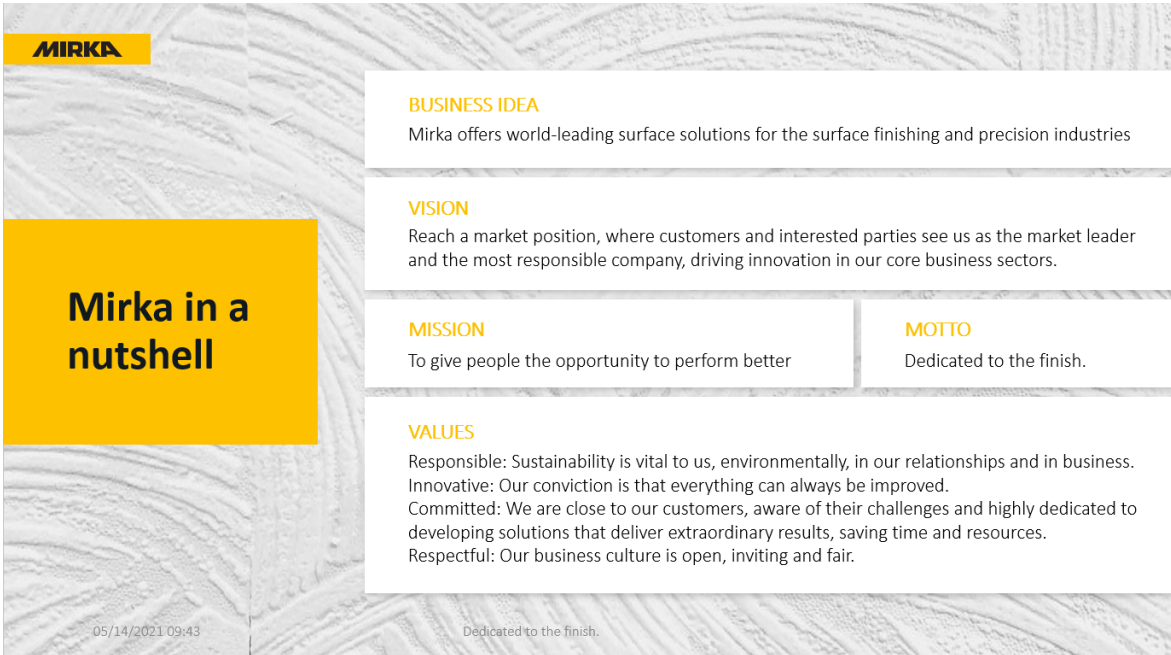
Figure 4. Chinese small business organization (Gomez & Hsiao 2003)

Depending on the company size the outer box can be for managers and engineers, this means that the so called low skilled wage laborers will be in the outermost box.

Instead of growing one company the business strategy is often to start new companies or subsidiaries. This causes cross-holdings that can be hard to keep track on for outsiders. (Gomez & Hsiao 2003).

### 2.3.2 The Mirka Way

Mirka is a family owned business established in 1943. Globally Mirka has about 1500 employees with a turnover at around 300M€ at the time of writing. Mirka is part of the KWH Group. The company has the values of a family-owned company also called “The Mirka Way”.



The image shows a presentation slide titled "Mirka in a nutshell". The slide features a yellow box on the left with the title "Mirka in a nutshell". The main content is organized into several sections:

- BUSINESS IDEA:** Mirka offers world-leading surface solutions for the surface finishing and precision industries.
- VISION:** Reach a market position, where customers and interested parties see us as the market leader and the most responsible company, driving innovation in our core business sectors.
- MISSION:** To give people the opportunity to perform better.
- MOTTO:** Dedicated to the finish.
- VALUES:**
  - Responsible: Sustainability is vital to us, environmentally, in our relationships and in business.
  - Innovative: Our conviction is that everything can always be improved.
  - Committed: We are close to our customers, aware of their challenges and highly dedicated to developing solutions that deliver extraordinary results, saving time and resources.
  - Respectful: Our business culture is open, inviting and fair.

At the bottom left, there is a timestamp "05/14/2021 09:43". At the bottom right, the motto "Dedicated to the finish." is repeated.

Figure 5. Mirka in a nutshell (Mirka Company Presentation 2021)

The production is centralized in Finland with four factory sites and an office in Vaasa. The headquarter is located in in Jepua, Finland where the R&D department also is operating.

According to Ulla Kauppi, HR Manager, the R&D department follows the classical organization approach with some functions organized through a matrix (cross functional). The department also work through a project model where a team of experts can be put together to reach a certain goal.

To summarize, the Mirka R&D department follow the classical line organization, matrix organization and a project organization. (Ulla Kauppi, HR Manager 2021) .

The R&D department contain four sub-departments, Power Tools is one of these three.

## **3 Methodology**

The Methodology chapter summarizes the methods for how the interview questions were constructed, how the interview participants were selected and how the findings were analyzed.

### **3.1 Methods**

To find the best method for the interviews two different methods were considered, quantitative research and qualitative research, the preferred method was the qualitative research method. The methods are briefly summarized, and the qualitative research method is presented in more detail.

#### **3.1.1 Quantitative research**

Quantitative research is based on measurement of quantity or amount and is applicable to phenomena's that can be expressed in terms of quantity. Quantitative research can be divided into three sub-approaches, inferential, experimental and simulation. Using the inferential approach means that a sample of population is studied to determine its characteristics. Experimental approach is when the control of the research environment is high, and it is possible to manipulate variables to see how it impacts other variables. Simulation is observation of the dynamic behavior of a system under controlled conditions. (Kothari, 2004)

It is common to use statistics when performing a quantitative research such as average, median and mode, measures of dispersion, the range, the mean deviation and the standard deviation. To get reliable statistics one would need a large sample size. (Sachdeva, 2008)

The approaches mentioned for quantitative research are not suitable for this study due to lack of measurable data such as quantity, the sample size was also considered as too small.

#### **3.1.2 Qualitative research**

By qualitative research one can study quality or kind, an example for quality and kind is human behavior. Why do people do or think things in different situations.

One of the main reasons with qualitative research is to find the underlying motives for human behavior. E.g. What motivates people to behave in different ways in different situations or what makes people like or dislike things. To achieve this, interviews can be conducted, tests for word association, sentence completion and story completion can be conducted. (Kothari, 2004)

According to Carr and Kemmis in *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* by Sharan and Tisdell, Qualitative research has three forms of research, positivist, interpretive and critical. They state that positivist orientation assumes that the reality exists and that it is observable, stable and measurable. Interpretive research assumes that there is no single observable reality, there are many different realities that have different interpretations, it is socially constructed. Critical research challenges critical elements such as power, who has it and how can it be changed. (Sharan & Tisdell, 2015)

### **3.1.3 Qualitative interviews**

Interviews need to be conducted when behavior, feelings and interpretations can not be observed. For past events such as an work related success or mistake that can not be replicated interviews are a strong tool to find out the reasons and timeline.

The most commonly used interview is the person-to-person interview. The purpose is to find information about what is in or on someone else's mind.

There are three levels of interviews, highly structured/standardized, Semi-structured and Unstructured/Informal. In table 2 this are sorted and explained. (Sharan & Tisdell, 2015)

The semi-structured interview structure was selected and used in this thesis due to its flexibility when dealing with different cultures and languages.

<b>Highly structured/Standardized</b>	<b>Semi-structured</b>	<b>Unstructured/Informal</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wording of questions is predetermined</li> <li>• Order of questions is predetermined</li> <li>• Interview is oral form of a written survey</li> <li>• In qualitative studies, usually used to obtain demographic data (age, gender, ethnicity, education)</li> <li>• Examples: U.S. Census Bureau survey, marketing surveys</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interview guide includes a mix of a more or less structured interview questions</li> <li>• All questions used flexibly</li> <li>• Usually, specific data required from all respondents</li> <li>• Largest part of interview guided by list of questions or issues to be explored</li> <li>• No predetermined wording or order</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open-ended questions</li> <li>• Flexible, exploratory</li> <li>• More like a conversation</li> <li>• Used when researcher does not know enough about phenomenon to ask relevant questions</li> <li>• Goal is learning from this interview to formulate questions for later interviews</li> <li>• Used primarily in ethnography, participant observation and case study</li> </ul>

Table 2. Interview Structure Continuum. (Sharan & Tisdell, 2015)

During the interview it is important to make sure that the person being interviewed understands the subject and that the language is understood by the person being interviewed.

Questions or forms of questions to avoid during an interview are questions with several questions in one, leading questions and yes or no questions.

### 3.1.4 Analyzing the data

In this thesis a thematic approach was used for analyzing the data, thematic analysis is a common way to analyze empirical data in qualitative research. By sorting the empiric data

into different categories, the questions can be answered and presented in a clear form. The categories are not pre-determined, the categories can come from theories or clear themes that comes up from the people that have been studied.

To distinguish the different categories from each other, colors are very helpful. Once the categories are clearly defined it is important to understand each category and make sure that they answer the research question. The categories are described in text once the material has been processed in the specific category. (Blomqvist & Hallin)

### 3.1.5 Interview guide

The interview guide is a list of questions that the researcher use as a guide through the interview. Depending on which type of structure a researcher chooses the list may contain very detailed questions in a specific order or, only a couple of questions with no specific order. When starting an interview neutral questions are recommended so that the person being interviewed gets a commitment to the interview and also answers more difficult questions later in the interview. (Sharan & Tisdell, 2015)

As mentioned, a semi-structured approach was chosen for this thesis. The themes and questions that should answer the research question “How can we overcome the language, cultural and organizational differences between Mirka Power Tools R&D and its Chinese suppliers?” are presented in this sub-chapter.

1. *Language.* The main question for this theme was “*How would you describe the difference between the English language and the Chinese language?*”

Follow-up questions for this theme were “*what do you find as the most challenging difference?*” and “*In what way could we handle this challenge?*”

2. *Communication.* The main question for this theme was “*What would you change in the way of communicating with Mirka/Supplier X to understand the message better?*”

Follow-up questions for this theme were, “*What would you add or remove from the way of communicating with Mirka/Supplier X to achieve the wanted change?*” and “*Why would you do this change in the way of communicating?*”

3. *Business culture.* The main question for this theme was “*What is the most difficult to understand about Mirka/Supplier X from a business cultural point of view?*”

Follow-up questions for this theme were *“How could we together improve this in your opinion?”* and *“In what way can you help to improve the co-operation?”*

4. *Organizational culture.* The main question for this them was *“Please describe the roles and responsibilities at Mirka/Supplier X the way you think it is at the moment”*

Follow-up questions for this theme were *“What kind of decisions are most important to get fast?”* and *“Which roles should interact to achieve this?”*

### **3.1.6 Research process**

The research started with finding relevant themes for the interview that would answer the research question. The themes are presented in the previous chapter 3.1.5. After the themes and questions were determined the next step was to find interviewees for the interviews. Eight persons were willing to participate in the interviews, all of them were white-collar employees, mostly men and with varying positions and experience. The interviewees were internal employees, employees from our subsidiaries and our suppliers. All interviews were conducted during Q1/2022.

The first interview was intended to be a test, but it worked out quite well, so it was accepted as an official interview. The questions seemed to be relevant but also invited to some discussion with the interviewee, suitable for the semi structured interview. The first person being interviewed was very open and talkative, this made it work well, it also opened up for the question if it will be equal with Asians.

The rest of the interviews followed the same pattern with both direct answers and discussion. The interviews conducted with the people from Asia were open and informative, giving a point of view that gave good insight what westerners take for granted.

As displayed in the table 3 the duration of the interviews vary from person to person. The persons with more experience tend to have more to say than the people with less. This might be self-evident, however, the people with less experience had different views of how the co-operation could be improved than the more experienced persons.



Date	Interview	Time [min]
19.01.2021	1	17
24.01.2021	2	20
25.01.2022	3	42
26.01.2022	4	26
26.01.2022	5	26
11.02.2022	6	35
14.02.2022	7	48
17.02.2022	8	36

Tabel 3. Interview information

## 4 Results

This chapter contains and presents the results from the interviews and the thematical analysis. The results are presented separately and lastly combined for a better overview. The interviews were conducted in both Swedish and English. The Interviews were all conducted via Microsoft Teams due to the Covid-19 situation, this had its pros and cons. It was difficult to really connect with the interviewees due to not being able to conduct the interviews face to face but on the other hand it made it possible to record the interviews for the analysis.

### 4.1 Language

The first question for this topic was *“How would you describe the difference between the English language and the Chinese language?”*. The question seemed to be quite hard for the interviewees to understand and the first comments were *“that was difficult to answer”*.

The main themes that came up during the interviews were speech, writing and translation. From a westerner’s perspective the speech is complicated to translate for the Asians and often cause confusion, this was also confirmed by the Asians. The background and mentality of Asians are key factors to understand for westerners. A good long-lasting relationship improves the communication through speech.

*“The mentality is very different in China, if a person says yes, it do not necessarily mean yes, it can mean that the person has heard what you said but is not answering you question, e.g. If one asks, are you coming to work tomorrow, the answer might be, yes, I’m not coming to work tomorrow”*

When writing with an Asian person the grammar can be very different since the order of words is very different when comparing Chinese with English. The lack of words in Chinese is also a major reason to misunderstandings in writing. Stay on topic to not increase the chance of misunderstanding.

Often Mirka have one contact person at its suppliers, these persons are usually quite good at English but lack the technical expertise, the non-technical background increase the risk of misunderstanding when translating both in speech and writing.

The follow-up questions to this them were *“what do you find as the most challenging difference?”* and *“In what way could we handle this challenge?”*

The most challenging things are as mentioned misunderstandings due to cultural and grammatical differences between Asians and Westerners. This could be handled by having more physical meetings, better technically trained translators and better culturally educated employees from both parties.

*“We should employ a technically competent translator and organize an internal course with Chinese experts to increase the knowledge about Asian culture and way of working”*

As mentioned, the main themes from the language category were speech, writing and grammar, these can be broken down into minor themes that will help understand how the language challenges can be improved. This is presented in figure 6.

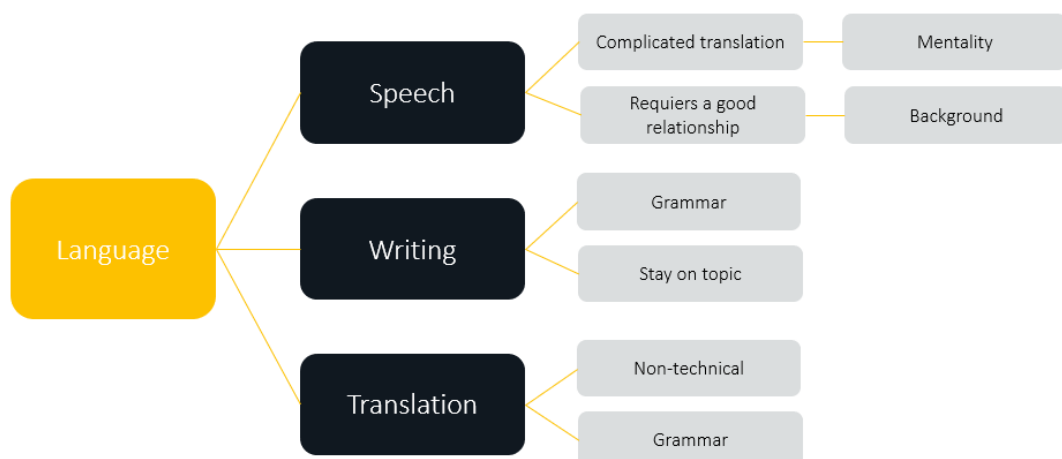


Figure 6. Thematic analysis of the language category

## 4.2 Communication

The main question for the second category was *“What would you change in the way of communicating with Mirka/Supplier X to understand the message better?”*. The themes that were recognized were, video meeting, drawings, and documentation. The most common answer was to have meetings in person but since this is not possible to arrange on a regular basis, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, video meetings through Microsoft teams or other platforms was the second-best option. The video meetings provide for a better understanding of the body language and the commitment increases when there is a personal touch to the meeting.

The follow-up questions in this category were *“What would you add or remove from the way of communicating with Mirka/Supplier X to achieve the wanted change?”* and *“Why would you do this change in the way of communicating?”*

The use of drawings was a common theme for both Asians and Mirka employees, the drawings will improve traceability, understanding of the quality requirements and minimize costly production misunderstandings.

Project communication should include a common project document to avoid excessive use of different cross company documents.

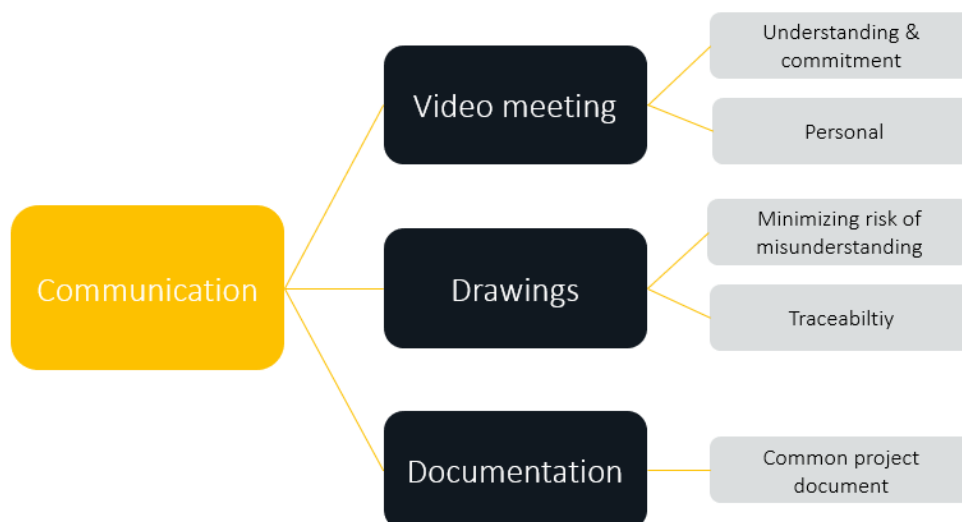


Figure 7. Thematic analysis of the communication category

### 4.3 Business culture

For this category the leading question was *“In what way do the different cultures impact the business and project work in your opinion?”*

The question was to many of the interviewees difficult to understand and needed some further guidance to understand what was meant with culture. The culture is expressed in different ways but focusing on the business culture I explained that I wanted to understand how Asians experiences the Western business culture and how Westerners experience the Asian business culture.

Three main themes that could be identified were, Projects and Business, Way of Work and Communication.

In project work, a kick-off meeting where project related aspects are defined was a common opinion from both the Asian suppliers and the Mirka employees. The most common aspects that people wanted to define were, the project team to understand the roles and responsibilities, the requirements e.g. level of quality, timeline and milestones. These aspects would increase the understanding and commitment to the project.

In business the most relevant thing to consider was the personal contact. Since the way of communicating is very different between the Asian and Western cultures the opinion was that it important to meet in person to increase the trust and allow for more open discussions.

The way of work, contracts in Asia has another meaning than it has in the Western part of the world. In Asia business relations are built upon trust and not losing face. In the West, business relations are heavily based upon contracts. This is something worth noticing and considering when doing business in Asia.

Mirka PT selects its partners with care and with intentions for a long-term business relationship, the mindset seem to be a bit different with new Asian suppliers. Short sighted business where there is easy and fast money can be an issue that need to be considered. When starting a business relationship with a new Asian supplier it is crucial to make clear that the intention is a long-term partnership based on trust and quality.

The last theme that was identified was communication. In project work the communication of clear milestones and targets were very important since the “face-culture” can be problematic if there are unclear targets. Someone might risk losing face and to try to save face people can shy away from answering or in worst case, be so afraid of telling about failure that they turn to lying when trying to save face.

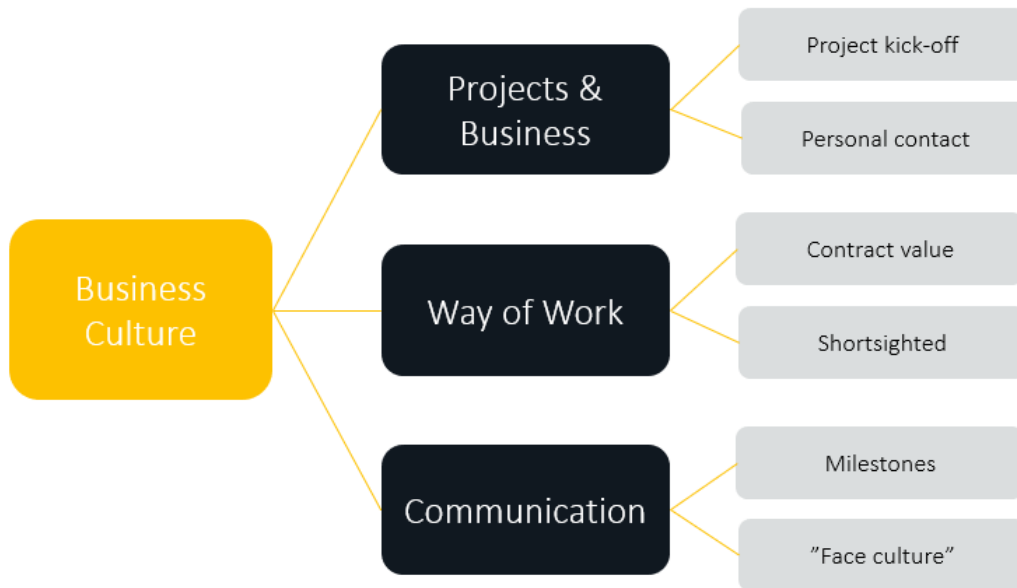


Figure 8. Thematic analysis of the business culture category

#### 4.4 Organizational culture

The leading question for this category was “*Please describe the roles and responsibilities at Mirka the way you think it is at the moment?*”.

The question was followed with what kind of decisions are most important and who should interact?

Based on the interviews two themes were identified, Roles & responsibilities and decisions.

Roles and responsibilities are impacted by both the difference in hierarchy and language limitations. Comparing Mirka company hierarchy to the hierarchy within our Asian suppliers’ organizations there is a clear difference. The hierarchy within Mirka is quite flat and employees are encouraged to take decisions to move projects forward, within reasonable limits and responsibilities. At our suppliers the organization is stricter and requires that executives are making the decisions, as described in chapter 2.3.1 and later verified in the interviews. The hierarchical differences can cause confusing discussions that

delay decision making and in turn delay projects and increase costs. To avoid this, a solution mentioned by several interviewees was to make a chart for the project describing the roles and responsibilities, linking the right persons to each other that is presented and described at the start of the project. The language limitations play a big part for the roles, especially for the Asians, since even if they are good engineers, the English language is often very limited. To solve this our suppliers, have translators. The role of the translators might become very big since they need to be part of every discussion and decision. If the same supplier is part of several projects at the same time the translator's workload might become overwhelming and confusing which in turn creates delays.

To solve this issue methods mentioned in chapter 4.2 are good to understand and use.

Important decisions that were common during the interviews were e.g. how Mirka select the suppliers, what are the targets. Project decisions were more related to mandate, who can make decisions within the project and how to communicate them. The suppliers also mentioned that it would make decision making easier if Mirka would provide with better background information so that the engineers would understand the issues and could provide better solutions that we together could decide on.

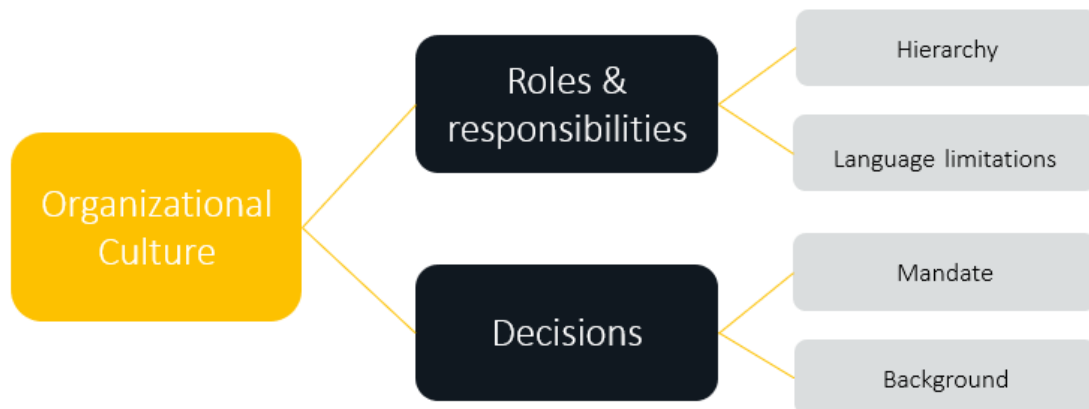


Figure 9. Thematical analysis of the organizational culture category

## 4.5 Summary of the Thematic Analysis

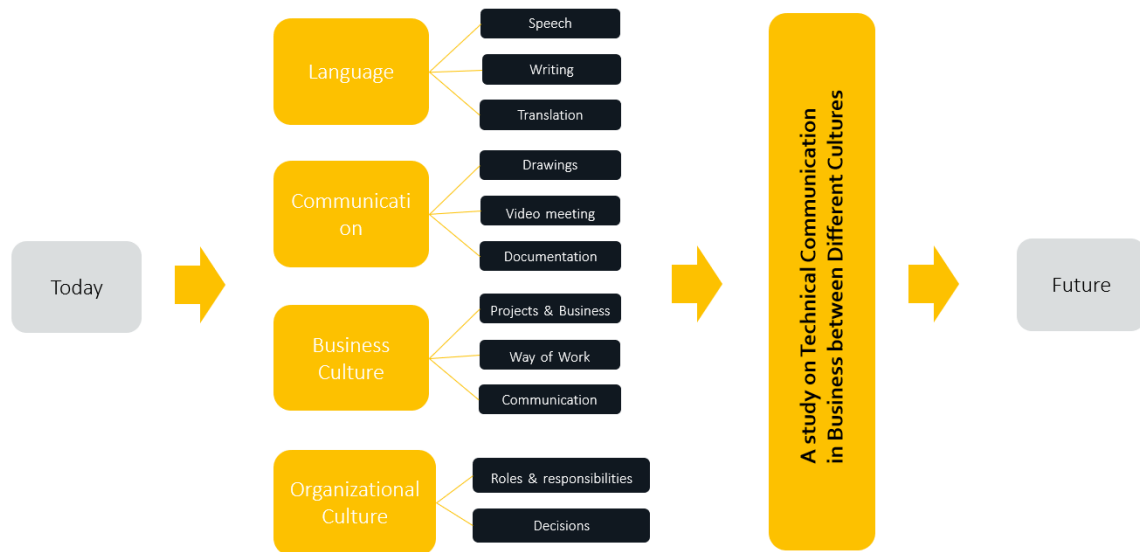


Figure 10. Summary of the thematic analysis

Figure 10, the summary of the thematic analysis showing the main themes that have an impact on the co-operation between Mirka Power Tools and its Asian suppliers and partners. The summary was based on the main challenges that were mentioned during the interviews within the different topics.

## 5 Conclusions

“How can we overcome the language, cultural and organizational differences between Mirka Power Tools R&D and its Chinese suppliers?”. That was the research question for this thesis. The purpose of this thesis was to develop a technical communication model between Mirka Power Tools R&D and our Chinese suppliers.

In this chapter the results from the interviews are compared against the theories presented in chapter two.

Conclusions on how the findings impact the co-operation between Mirka Power Tool and its Asian suppliers and how to use them are presented in the sub-chapter 5.1. In sub-chapter 5.2 conclusions regarding the research questions are presented.

## **5.1 Technical communication model**

### **5.1.1 Language**

The difference between the English language and the Chinese language in the theory are how the two languages are interpreted, word order and yes and no questions. These correlates heavily with the themes that came up during the interviews for the language category. During the interviews, speech, writing and translation were the most common themes. For speech, complicated translations and that a good relationship is required are the biggest challenges to improve how the speech is interpreted. In writing, grammar and staying on topic are the main challenges since word-to-word translations can create very strange sentences in the Chinese language when translated from English. (Robson 2012). The lack of technical competence from the person acting as translator also lead to misunderstandings and that is why the importance of staying on topic is crucial. To avoid the biggest pit falls in language it is important to build a good relationship so that the level of trust is high, standardize the language used with a supplier or partner to avoid misunderstandings and sticking to the topic, especially in writing to avoid email chains that include several different topics under one main topic.

### **5.1.2 Communication**

In chapter 2.1.3 the communication gaps are described but, in this case the theory and reality seem to differ quite a lot. During the interviews the focus was on a more practical level than the actual reasons to the gaps. The main themes in this category were video meetings, importance of drawings and documentation. Some similarities can be found, e.g. Gesteland states that the Chinese belong to the relationship focused group where Finns belong to the deal focused group. (Gesteland 2012) The interviews showed that video meetings during a project improves the personal contact as well as it increases the level of commitment. The use of drawings to minimize the risk of misunderstanding and increase the level of traceability and ensuring quality were things that both internal employees at Mirka and its suppliers and partners agreed upon. The use of drawings within company intellectual property guidelines also lower the risk of miscommunication due to the factors mentioned in chapter 2.1.3 such as grammatical differences and amount of factual content. Documentation in a product development project was preferred to be handled by one common document to avoid the use of excessive amounts of different lists, emails, power points etc. To avoid the biggest challenges in communication with Asian suppliers according



to this research the use of drawings when discussing details is recommended, this also increase traceability and quality. Video meetings gives the whole team a better relationship and provides for more open discussions. Face to face meetings is the best option but that is very difficult and costly to arrange on a regular basis. The meetings shall be documented with a common project document that is updated during the video meetings.

### 5.1.3 Business culture

Susanne Niemeier, Charles P. Campbell and René Dirven state “*We subconsciously assume values and norms to be common ones that are in fact peculiar to our own culture.*” (Niemeier et al. 1998). This statement can be very useful to understand. Based on the answers from the interviews more unexperienced employees at Mirka Power Tools do not consider the cultures to be very different, however, the more experienced employees at Mirka Power Tools and the Asian suppliers and partners have a different understanding to this.

The deal focused culture is more direct than what the relationship focused culture. While the deal focused cultures are more willing to deal with strangers in a short amount of time. The relationship focused rather deal with friends and family or at least within the network of friends and family. (Gesteland 2012). This is clearer to the more experienced employees at Mirka Power Tools that the Asian suppliers and partners are more relationship focused than at Mirka. This is confirmed by the interviews as the Asian suppliers and partners see a big advantage with visits where the teams have a chance to get to know each other giving a face to the name, both for the individuals and for the companies.

Having these meetings face to face in the beginning provides for a better understanding of the targets of the projects and a deeper commitment to these targets. A better relationship also allows a more relaxed and open atmosphere within the projects which in turn decreases the risk of loosing face. To ensure a good momentum in the projects, regular video meetings should be conducted.

In business, a more personal and long term contact to the Asian suppliers and partners would decrease the shortsightedness that otherwise might be an issue in the beginning of a business relationship.

It seems that the theories mentioned in chapter 2 supports what the interviews suggested that would improve the co-operation between Mirka Power Tools and its Asian suppliers and partners.

#### **5.1.4 Organizational culture**

The organizational culture as described in chapter 2.3 Business organization, the Chinese business organization is very hierarchic when comparing it to e.g. the organization at Mirka Power Tools. This according to the interviews can make the roles and responsibilities unclear for employees at Mirka Power Tools as since earlier mentioned the Chinese suppliers and partners usually only have one non-technical translator acting as communicator in projects and sometimes also in business negotiations due to the language limitations of engineers and executives. Understanding that this person not always has the mandate to make decision even if it is the person communicating with Mirka Power Tools is important to not get frustrated due to long decision times. The interviews also showed that providing the background to a decision that needs to be taken by Mirka Power Tools suppliers or partners is important to avoid making the internal discussions at the suppliers and partners difficult and long before a decision can be made.

To help improve the understanding of the roles and responsibilities and shorten the decision making time, background to the issues and understanding who actually have the mandate to take decision will decrease confusion, frustration and lead times in a project.

#### **5.2 Research question**

“How can we overcome the language, cultural and organizational differences between Mirka Power Tools R&D and its Chinese suppliers?” Overcoming the differences totally I would say that is not possible and nor should it be the aim. Both the employees of Mirka Power Tools and its suppliers and partners are entitled to have their own language, culture and organization. However, there is a lot that can be done to improve the way we work together by understanding and accepting the differences and through that find new ways to constantly improve the co-operation. No, we can not overcome the differences but we can improve the way of working together as explained in chapters 5.1.1 to 5.1.4.

### **6 Discussion**

The research question for this thesis was “How can we overcome the language, cultural and organizational differences between Mirka Power Tools R&D and its Chinese suppliers?”. The subject is very broad and difficult to narrow down to the most relevant differences between Westerners and Asians with focus on China. The interviews might also have been a bit bias as the questions had to be send over in advance to the Chinese interviewees. The

interviews seemed very open and honest but as mentioned there might have been some pre-rehearsed answers.

This thesis has touched on the different challenges and differences on a basic level. There is huge potential to make a very deep dive into each of the differences mentioned in the research question but that would in my opinion not serve the purpose of the thesis that was to develop a communication model between Mirka Power Tools and its Asian suppliers to help avoid the most common and basic pit falls.

The theory supports and correlates heavily with the reality and can be seen as a very powerful tool for people that want to learn even more about the differences that we have between Westerners and Asians.

The conclusions will help especially new employees to handle projects with our Asian suppliers. For Mirka HR department this thesis should serve as an introduction on how to better educate Mirka employees to co-operate with customers, suppliers and Chinese employees at Mirka Shanghai.

The outcome of this thesis is not anything new and revolutionary in the research point of view. The thesis singles out the most common challenges in language, communication, business culture and organizational culture and provide the reader with helpful guidance on a basic level.

My personal target to better understand the way of thinking and acting in Asia and how to more efficient run projects together with Asian companies has been accomplished.

## References

- Chinese Enterprise, Transnationalism and Identity, edited by Terence Gomez, and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, Taylor & Francis Group, 2003. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.novia.fi/lib/novia-ebooks/detail.action?docID=182689>.
- Lewis, R.D. 2006. Different Languages, Different Worlds. *When Cultures Collide*
- Robson, Shin Yong. Speed up Your Chinese : Strategies to Avoid Common Errors, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.novia.fi/lib/novia-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1092733>.
- Cultural Context in Business Communication, edited by Susanne Niemeier, et al., John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1998. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.novia.fi/lib/novia-ebooks/detail.action?docID=861544>.
- Gesteland, Richard R.. Cross-Cultural Business Behavior: A Guide for Global Management (Fifth Edition), Samfundslitteratur, 2012. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.novia.fi/lib/novia-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4186656>.
- Cotton, Gayle. Say Anything to Anyone, Anywhere : 5 Keys to Successful Cross-Cultural Communication, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.novia.fi/lib/novia-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1137788>.
- O'Shaughnessy, John. Business Organization (RLE: Organizations), Taylor & Francis Group, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.novia.fi/lib/novia-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1244897>.
- Mirka Company Presentation, 2021
- Sachdeva, J.K.. Business Research Methodology, Global Media, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.novia.fi/lib/novia-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3011363>.
- Kothari, C.R.. Research Methodology : Methods and Techniques, New Age International Ltd, 2004. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.novia.fi/lib/novia-ebooks/detail.action?docID=431524>.
- Gillham, Bill. Research Interview, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2000. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.novia.fi/lib/novia-ebooks/detail.action?docID=436490>.
- Merriam, Sharan B., and Elizabeth J. Tisdell. Qualitative Research : A Guide to Design and Implementation, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2015. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.novia.fi/lib/novia-ebooks/detail.action?docID=2089475>.
- Blomqvist, P. & Hallin, A. 2014. Method for engineering students: Degree projects using the 4.phase Model. Studentlitteratur AB, Lund