Intercultural communication. A linguistic approach

PhD Ştefan-Dominic GEORGESCU

ABSTRACT

The author debates upon the signification of intercultural communication, given the fact that cultures are nowadays defined in relation to one another, and not isolated. The main point is that all acts of communication develop following certain rules regarding message, meaning, channel of communication and ideological and cultural background and there fore respecting these rules ensures that there are no gaps in communication processes. Finally, advertising is considered the main contemporary instrument for contemporary intercultural communication and, therefore, all forms of it – including branding – must keep sight of cultural and ideological background. Therefore, the author's option is to consider branding and selling of products more like cultural acts and less as mere transactions.

KEYWORDS: *culture, communication, language, intercultural, linguistic*

Scientific concern for the concept of culture is of a recent date. Starting with the 19th century, some anthropologists – like Fustel de Coulanges and Leo Frobenius – have raised many of the questions cultural studies deal with nowadays. Debates upon these issues continued along the 20th century, and we can mention here Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mircea Eliade (especially concerning religion). One of the most important contributions of anthropologists regarding cultural matters was the fact that they did not only speculate upon some different cultures, but realized some empiric research. The most significant effect, at a worldwide level, was the abandonment of European ethnocentrism, usually based upon a reductive attitude: until 20th century Europeans took the structure of their culture for granted, and tried to interpret all other cultures by means of European criteria. Event today one meets this kind of approach, the social effect being acculturation, i. e. the loss of cultural specificity of less developed country due to and in favor of more developed societies.

According to this, whenever referring to cultural studies and cultures, one must firs define the concept and relate it with two other important concepts: intercultural communication and language. It is rather obvious that the last two are linked. But it is more important to explain the effects intercultural communication has over some levels of social life. In the following paper we would like to give some accounts regarding the specificity of intercultural communication in terms of linguistics and theory of communication and to shortly draw readers' attention towards some consequences on management marketing.

Defining a culture seems to be an endless attempt, due to numerous points of view concerning this issue. All definitions seem to be grounded on ideological options. Our assumption would be that a culture must be a system of ideas, values and attitudes that generate or determine the birth of a civilization. If a culture is a set of ideas, civilization is a set of real things created by a population that shares a certain culture (Georgiu, 2002, p. 30). Therefore, culture is a type of power of spirit over objective reality, the result of

their meeting being called civilization. Of course, culture is a power that acts upon objective reality and also other cultures (Huntington, 1998, p. 36), especially due to intercultural communication. Nowadays, the main concern for a culture is the preservation of its own specificity, but not by means of isolation; in order to be competitive, a culture must communicate with other cultures (Georgiu, *loc. cit.*).

Since biblical times, one of the most important barriers for intercultural communication was the existence of different languages. Of course, we do not make appeal to what happen at the Babel Tower, but one could never ignore the organic and structural connections that exist between a culture and its language. Some scientists expressly referred to the importance of language when dealing with problems like culture or ethnicity (Saussure, 1998, p. 27, *passim*). Due to this fact one must ask the following questions: how does communication between two groups happen? What is the structure of communication and how does it apply at a cultural level? And, especially, do cultural differences have any effect on social life, in our case on economic life?

Probably the best known schema of communication was that of Roman Jakobson. Of course, this is so because he also was one of the first scientists to have ever raised the question of a certain schema that we can find within all communication acts. Perhaps this is also the reason why this scheme was considered "canonic" (Baylon, Mignot, 2000, p. 81). The main features of this scheme and some changes it went through, and also the relevance for the present issue will be further exposed.

According to Jakobson, all communication acts imply the existence of a sender of the message, a receiver, a channel of communication, a code (the natural language, in the case of cultural communication) and a context. A rather simple schema which, as time went by and scientist were confronted with more and more situations of communication, needed to be changed. Now, a very important contribution regarding the general schema of communication was the concept of "context of communication" and that of "co-text" (additional elements of the message that influence the contents of the message) (*Ibidem*, p. 82). Whenever a sender and a receiver are linked by a communication channel and engage in a communication act, they previously find themselves in a certain context. They are in a specified place, at a specified time and, most important, in different cultures. Besides, whenever a text is transmitted and received, one must be aware of the fact that the message is not simple, but complex. This means that the message also has some other messages attached, either of the same nature or of different nature. To illustrate: two people communicating may as well transmit some other information besides the intended one. Either deliberately or not, the secondary meanings of a word (message of the same nature), the tone of the voice or the bodily movements (messages of different nature) contribute to the understanding of the main message.

But still the schema of communication does not keep track of all significant aspects, even if these elements are added. Especially for intercultural communication, the characteristics of the context of communication are not enough to explain the phenomenon. Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni tried to reconsider the canonic scheme and, starting from Jakobson's ideas, elaborated a new theory.

The main point of Orecchioni was that, whenever we deal with a situation of communication, there is a major difference between sender and receiver. While the sender creates a message using a certain model of production, the receiver decodes the message using a model of interpretation that is completely different from the model of production (*Ibidem*, p. 87). Now, this perspective over the phenomenon of communication sheds light onto some issues of intercultural communication. Usually, whenever two cultures are involved into an act of communication, they do not have a common code, and a translation

is needed. This happens if we refer to linguistic communication. One of the most important components of Orecchioni's schema of communication is represented by linguistic and para-linguistic competence. Therefore, in order to communicate, the sender and the receiver are supposed to find a common code. The problem that occurs inside a culture is that the sender has own interpretation of the language, and so does the receiver. But most of all, when we speak of two different cultures and two different languages, linguistic competences are extremely different. And we do not refer only to language, but to meanings. Usually, translation is about meanings. But meanings depend of a cultural context. And a specific culture has its own meanings and its own life situations to relate the meanings with. Therefore, one must accept the fact that intercultural communication is in continuous danger to fail since the references used might be different. Besides, the different para-linguistic competences, as gesture might be considered, further influence the act of communication and can seriously damage the intended meaning.

Another element of Orecchioni's schema is represented by cultural and ideological competences. Extremely important when it comes to social communication, these aspects are most relevant for intercultural communication, since all decoding of a message depends of the fundamental traits of a culture. Our point is that, according to some authors (*Ibidem*, p. 83), one can never know which is the place a message releases its meaning. To be more precise, a specific sender must never consider that the meaning depends only on his model of production. It is very likely to deal often with a huge difference between the intended meaning of a message and the received meaning, due, first of all, to differences in translation – i. e. to different handling of the code used to realize the act or acts of communication – and second of all, due to a specific decoding undertaken by the receiver. Now, we dare say that whenever two people meet and communicate, they never do this by engaging only their individualities; there is always a social and cultural self involved, besides the inner self (Abric, 2002, p. 21). Whenever we speak of communication among a larger group of people, we must take into account the main traits of intercultural communication. Still, intercultural communication is based upon and must fit interpersonal communication. There is a relation of conditioning between the two: the former cannot occur without the latter. Now, there are, of course, more levels of discussion, depending on what we mean by "larger group". If we refer to a group in which individuals can effectively communicate among themselves, we must use the concept of "small groups" (Abric, 2002, p. 79). Here there are no relevant cultural or ideological differences, and linguistic and para-linguistic competences are pretty much the same. So, no intercultural communication is involved, unless we deal with an already formed identity of the group. In this case, the concept of identity encloses in itself attitudes, beliefs, habits, concepts, expectations, etc. But there are more and more cases in which even shorter groups face problems of intercultural communication, since they are formed of people coming from different cultures. To give an example from the economic life, we refer to companies that have a considerable number of foreign employees or employees that have management decisions but do not come from the same culture with other employees. A lack of understanding of cultural specificity of a country can lead to difficult managerial situations. Now, if we speak about larger groups, made up of individuals that have no direct connections, but only cultural and linguistic ones, the situation is completely changed. The probability of failure of communication is rather high. This happens often in the case of advertising. We will give only some famous examples.

There is a large producer of soft drinks that wanted to advertise in an Arabic country. As we know, the Arabic cultures have a significant number of different features that an advertiser must keep track of. The add they used was compound of three images.

The first showed a person lying on the sand in the middle of the desert. That person was, obviously, rather thirsty. The second image showed the exact person having some of that soft drink from a metal can. The third image showed again the same person running in the desert. The message was pretty clear for a European: having a can of soft drink saves you from thirst and provides enough energy to travel throughout the entire desert. What was wrong with it?

An elementary lack of knowledge of Arabic cultures. They read from right to left. So, what they saw was a man full of energy that had some of that soft drink and then fell down in the middle of the desert. This is because the advertised ignored the way in which meaning is constructed in a country or culture where people are used to notice something that bears a meaning starting from right to left. And this is just an example of what may happen if we ignore the spatial disposition of meaning.

Now, we will further draw the conclusion that cultural context strongly influences the situations of communication meaning that it offers the background on which all messages are to be decoded. We must also add that the most important aspect one has to take into account when speaking about intercultural communication in the field of economics is related to the influence culture has on the micro-culture of an organization, an institution or a social group (Abric, 2002, p. 31). The specific act of interaction and communication between two organizations coming from different culture is strongly determined by the main cultural and ideological traits, and ignoring them might generate either lack of communication or even conflict. Now, managing an act of communication might prove to be easier and more efficient than managing a conflict.

Another important factor that could influence the act of intercultural communication and might have negative consequences over institutional communication is that regarding stereotypes. It has to do also with ideological and cultural background of communication and it is still about the lack of communication. Still, there is also a positive aspect. Now, usually stereotypes are associated with a negative meaning, which is not entirely correct. Or, at least, the concept must be modified such that we make a difference between stereotypes that enable communication and stereotypes that destroy or negatively influence it (Abric, 2002, p. 24). We must therefore agree that there are some traits of certain populations and culture that enable somebody to gain some knowledge about that culture in order to be able to settle down a channel of communication and to avoid large differences between the model of production and the model of interpretation. This could not be placed under the same concept with stereotypes as such, which, as we have previously said, usually stop or render communication difficult. The function of stereotypes is "to anticipate behaviors and actions and to predetermine and orient communication." (Abric, 2002, p. 24). This statement of Abric must, for sure, refer to the first meaning of stereotypes. Anyway, generally speaking, stereotypes have the role of filling up a gap in information one possesses about somebody else's culture and habits. From the point of view of the theory of communication one must avoid stereotypes that might hinder communication. When do they hinder communication? Whenever they are negative and whenever there is a resistance from one communicator to change them, although the new acquired information proves them wrong.

Finally, we must refer to some consequences intercultural communication – or at least ignoring intercultural communication – has on economic life. And we would like to refer here to a certain definition of brand from the point of view of psychology. So, a brand image is a collective mental reflex (Brune, 2003, p. 21). Now, if so defined, a brand image has a lot in common with cultural aspects. Whenever building a brand one must keep sight of the characteristics of one culture. Why? Just because, in transmitting a message – and

this is what a brand does, from a communicational point of view, it transmits a message – cultural context influences the contents of the message. Messages must be adapted to the ideological and cultural context in order to be able to create a channel of communication and export a meaning. This is because, before being a simple symbol placed on products, a brand bears a signification. Probably none doubts that nowadays advertising is the most important form of intercultural communication. If so, one must keep sight of the fact that, whenever building a brand and selling a product, we also export culture and, foremost, communicate to other cultures.

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