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Reframing Intercultural Communication Research: Theories and Approaches to Communicating in a Culturally Diverse World

Alex Frame¹

Abstract

This paper discusses a possible paradigm shift within the field of intercultural communication. Distinguishing cross-cultural and intercultural approaches from historical and epistemological standpoints, it echoes the need expressed by scholars to develop a new model for examining intercultural interactions. Arguing that nation-centric studies have difficulty accounting for the complexity of communication processes taking place between foreigners, the author suggests that communication science and a “semiopragmatics” approach to interpersonal interactions can be used to reconceptualise the relationship between cultures, identities and communication, taking into account the mediating role of the contextual factors specific to the encounter itself.

Résumé

Cet article envisage un changement de paradigme, à l'intérieur du champ de la communication interculturelle, qui rassemble, sur les plans historique et épistémologique, approches comparatives et approches centrées sur les interactions. Il fait écho au besoin, exprimé au sein du champ, d'un nouveau modèle, dédié aux interactions interculturelles. Mettant en avant la difficulté, pour des études centrées sur la culture nationale, de refléter toute la complexité qui caractérise les rencontres entre étrangers, l'auteur prône une approche communicationnelle « sémiopragmatique » des interactions interpersonnelles, qui permet de repenser la relation entre cultures, identités et communication, en prenant en compte la médiation des facteurs contextuels, propres à la rencontre.

Introduction

In a postmodern, globalised world, composed of various interconnected *scapes*, whether financial, technological, ideological or ethnic (Appadurai), and in a climate where the media seem to flit from “crisis” to “crisis”, a group of scholars came together, in December 2011, to discuss the ‘crisis’ facing their particular field of research. The field was that of intercultural communication, and the conference of the Nordic Network for Intercultural Communication (NIC) was looking into the “Theoretical Turbulence” of recent years. One of the major undercurrents of discussions during the conference was how to deal with the dominant representation of intercultural communication, notably in business circles and among other academics, which often reduces it to Hofstede-style cataloguing of national cultural differences. While cross-cultural approaches were very important historically in building up the field (*infra*), they had both come to appear overly reductive, constraining culture to the national level, and failed to reflect the complexity of the interactions going on at an interpersonal level, felt a majority of participants. At the same time, the scholars themselves, even those who generally had little time for such approaches, admitted the difficulty of presenting things in a more complex manner, in introductory courses aimed at students, rushed professionals, or to the outside world more generally. The basic problem, suggested the conference

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organisers, was that no model yet existed which appeared as seductively simple as those of Hofstede (1991), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1993), or Lewis (1999), whose commercial success had come to overshadow the more complex approaches developed by many scholars in the field.

In this volume dedicated to new models and paradigms in the social sciences, this chapter will present the current debate among interculturalists, starting from the way the field has developed in Europe and the United States, and how this has shaped dominant models, ideologies and methodological approaches. It will then go on to present some of the more complex questions raised by interactions within today's globalised societies, along with new models and approaches which are being introduced to deal with them.

1. Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Approaches to Communication

If the study of foreign cultures, as systems of communication, first began with the work of early anthropologists, the question of how to communicate *with* the (exotic) Other started to draw scientific interest from the mid-twentieth century. The origin of intercultural communication as a field came as part of a general movement which rejected culturalist beliefs couched in determinism, and the idea of a process of civilisation separating 'primitive' from 'civilised' cultures. In their place a relativist ideology appeared, which recognised cultural Otherness as a source of difference, but no longer (at least in academic circles) as a sign of inferiority to Western models. Edward T Hall, working for the American military after the Second World War, is generally hailed as the first "interculturalist" (cf. Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009: 5). However, his overtly intercultural ethnographic approach was preceded by work done in sociology (Parsons & Shils, 1951), looking into value differences between cultures, which announces the dominant trend in the field in the second half of the century.

Indeed, the two major methodological approaches used in intercultural communication are already present in the earliest work: ethnographic approaches based on participant observation, and sociological questionnaire techniques used to differentiate national cultures, on the basis of the representations deduced from the declarations of respondents. This second technique has been particularly influential in structuring the field of intercultural communication as it exists today, thanks to the work of Geert Hofstede (1980). While carrying out research for the multinational IBM, looking notably at its corporate culture, Hofstede administered a questionnaire survey concerned with work-related values among IBM employees. Contrary to IBM's expectations, he found evidence not of a common corporate culture, but of considerable differences between the 116 000 respondents, based on nationality. By operating factorial analysis on the questionnaire results, he came up with four dimensions which appeared significant, in that they allowed him to distinguish between differing representations among the populations studied². Subsequent replicative studies generally found evidence to support these results, at least partially. Another major study, entitled "the Chinese Values Survey" was conducted by Michael H Bond, using a questionnaire designed by academics from the Far East (The Chinese Culture Connection³, 1987). The survey again came up with four categories, three of which seemed to correspond to those of Hofstede, the fourth one being completely different to Hofstede's fourth category, of which no evidence was found in the survey

² 50 countries and 3 "regions" (Arab-speaking countries, West Africa and East Africa) made up this study.

³ This group is composed of 24 researchers, who signed the article together.

designed from an “oriental perspective”. Hofstede notably integrated the results of the “Chinese Values Survey” into the revised “five-dimensional” version of his model in 1991⁴.

This work has been particularly influential in the field of intercultural communication since many subsequent studies have taken the value dimensions as a starting point for analysing the behaviour of members of cultural groups. Yet, despite the claimed “universal” relevance of at least some of the dimensions involved, their use as a theoretical frame to structure observation of behaviours, notably involving different national groups, is problematic on several levels. Firstly, it appears dangerous to take for granted, as a basis for observation, categories which themselves result from a study whose methodology has been widely criticised⁵. The fact that, thanks to the popularity of Hofstede’s work, the field of intercultural communication has, to a certain extent, been structured around these categories appears equally problematic. Secondly, such studies appear to ignore Hofstede’s own warnings concerning the “ecological fallacy” which consists in confounding two very different levels of study. Hofstede clearly states that his work concerns the macro-social level of analysis, and cannot be applied directly to the micro-social level of interactions between members of different cultures. Whereas Hofstede was looking for truths in terms of statistical averages concerning cultures on a societal level, it is exceedingly reductive to seek to apply these averages to individuals who are very unlikely to be “typical” representatives of their particular national culture, and who are in a situation where their behaviour is influenced by a wide variety of factors, including their individual experience, the roles they are playing in a given situation, external pressures, their relationship with the people they are talking to and their ability to take into account their (foreign) identity, and adapt their behaviour accordingly.

Indeed, the confusion between macro-level and micro-level approaches to communication between cultures involves a difference of paradigm. On the one hand, scholars working in a “cross-cultural” perspective, such as those inspired by the work of Hofstede, or in the field of cross-cultural psychology, for example (Smith & Bond, 1998), aim to characterise cultures as systems of signs and meanings, and pinpoint the differences from one (national, societal) culture to another. Scholars who work in “intercultural communication”, on the other hand, are interested only circumstantially in such differences in societal norms of behaviour and representations. Their object of study is the interactions between individuals of different cultures, *i.e.* the way they go about making sense of one another’s behaviour in interpersonal interactions. This includes examining the misunderstandings which may arise, at least in part, from cultural differences, but also a whole range of processes linked to interpersonal communication, such as identification, negotiating meaning, uncertainty reduction, and longer-term processes such as “culture shock” and acculturation.

⁴ Hofstede notes in this version that the three dimensions found by both surveys seem to correspond to different answers to universal problems of how to behave: “*towards seniors or juniors, towards the group, and as a function of one’s gender*” (1991: 164). The fourth and fifth dimensions appear less universally relevant. According to Hofstede, they reflect a (Western) obsession with *truth*, which is replaced in the East by an obsession with *virtue*.

⁵ *Cf.* for example, Ailon, 2008. The major criticisms of Hofstede’s work fall into three categories: the sample used, which was designed to test the homogeneity of IBM culture, and not representative of the national cultures in question; its partial nature (only some national cultures are taken into consideration in the original study, and the categories deduced are then applied to others); and the methodology itself (biases introduced through the reliance on respondents’ declarations, solicited in a particular professional context, translations and cluster analysis).

Helen Spencer-Oatey and Peter Franklin adopt a different terminology to characterise these two paradigms, naming the first the “*culture comparative approach*”, and the second the “*culture-interactive approach*”⁶. In their 2009 book, they remark that “*culture-interactive research is particularly important for our understanding of intercultural interaction, and relatively speaking, there has been much less culture-interactive than culture-comparative research. There is thus a great need for more research that explores the dynamics of intercultural interaction.*” (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009: 267)

Despite the predominance of culture-comparative or cross-cultural approaches, it should be noted that a certain number of scholars working in the field of intercultural communication have developed approaches to interpersonal interactions between foreigners, which generally place the accent on one or other aspect of these interactions. Among such models, William Gudykunst’s Anxiety and Uncertainty Management Theory (Gudykunst & Kim, 1992) highlights the influence of the intersubjective relationship on communication behaviour. Communication Accommodation Theory (Gallois *et al.*, 1992) underlines the importance of intergroup relations, notably in terms of ethnolinguistic vitality, as well as external factors likely to affect individual strategies of convergence and divergence regarding communicative behaviour. This can, in turn, be related to linguistic (pragmatics) approaches to questions of face and politeness (Spencer-Oatey, 2008) or “inter-discursive” communication (Scollon & Scollon, 2001). Work done by European scholars of intercultural psychology, around Carmel Camilleri (Camilleri *et al.*, 1990), addresses differing identity strategies adopted by migrant groups, thanks to which they seek to “manage” their Otherness in interpersonal interactions, by minimizing it, highlighting it, etc. for self-esteem purposes. Work done on culture shock, adaptation and acculturation processes (Kim, 2001) focuses on the way individuals manage difference, and has been applied notably to enabling expatriate workers or students to better cope with overseas living. In a similar vein, the numerous studies dealing with intercultural interaction competence (ICIC) aim to identify the various qualities which can make individuals more “effective” communicators on the international scene (Ting-Toomey, 1999), with a clear domain of application in the form of “intercultural awareness” training.

However, if all of these different and often complementary perspectives focus on interaction processes rather than on cultural differences in themselves, they do not constitute a paradigm within which intercultural communication might be framed, in opposition to cross-cultural communication. A desire to lay down the groundwork for such a paradigm was what brought together the Nordic Network of Intercultural Communication scholars in Helsinki, in December 2011, and it is also the major preoccupation of this chapter. Yet what makes the paradigm necessary is also what makes it so elusive to scholars: the need to take into account the complexity of a social reality in which interculturality is but one contributory factor.

2. From Culture to Cultures

Indeed, as Éric Dacheux (1999) points out, in the field of “intercultural communication”, scholars have generally tended to focus on the first term rather than the second. Communication processes, he suggests, have too often been reduced to the question of “getting the message across”: scholars implicitly assuming that if cultural differences can be overcome, communication of meaning will be

⁶ For a definition of culture-interactive and culture-comparative approaches to intercultural communication, see Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2009: 4.

more or less transparent. Such an attitude does not take into account an important paradigm shift within communication science, from the “telegraphic” or “cybernetic” model to the holistic “orchestra” model⁷. Communication is now often presented, in academic circles, as the process of social construction of meaning, where notions of sender and receiver give way to the idea of continuous multimodal production of symbolic acts from all parties to an interaction, acts whose meanings are interpreted in relation to other acts and to the context⁸.

When interculturality is approached from this standpoint, the result is to shift the focus of analysis to sense-making processes in encounters, in which cultural differences are but one (important) factor. Epistemologically, this can potentially enrich our analyses of intercultural interactions, by integrating advances in communication science but also by placing them within the symbolic interactionist framework. Symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969, Goffman, 1973, Stryker, 1980) helps us to understand intercultural encounters in terms of the different social roles played by participants (role identities), and also the multiple groups to which they belong (social identities). As Spencer-Oatey and Franklin comment (2009: 46):

“It is generally accepted that everyone is simultaneously a member of many different cultural groups and that if intercultural researchers focus on only one type of cultural group (such as country-level culture), they are ignoring the potential impact of other types of cultures (such as regional culture, ethnic culture, professional culture, organisational culture and/or religious culture). Nevertheless, in practice, there is little understanding of how these different ‘cultures’ impact on each other or how multi-group membership affects interaction. This is a major set of issues which the field of intercultural interaction has yet to deal with in depth.”

This change of paradigm would thus allow us to shift the emphasis away not only from cultural differences, but also, vitally, from national cultures as an exclusive focal point, re-casting intercultural interaction research as the study of the way people use various cultures and identities to communicate and make sense of encounters.

However, if research has insisted solely on national cultures until now, it is not without good reason. It is relatively often suggested that national culture is a different “type” of culture, which exercises a stronger influence over behaviour (e.g. Hofstede, 1991: 181). Indeed, depending on the context, national culture does appear to be a dominant influence, though not because of any structural or qualitative differences between it and other cultures. The reason is rather to do with the way national culture shapes the individual’s cognitive development at an early age, through the process of primary socialisation.

Primary socialisation generally takes place in what might be described as a dominant national context, despite exposure to multiple groups (family, class, regional, ethnic, etc.) within this national context. Since the cultures of these other groups are more-or-less strongly marked by the dominant national culture – the ‘common denominator’ which the majority of their members take for granted – most individuals interiorise the ‘deeper’ traits of national culture (values, basic

⁷ Cf. Birdwhistell, 1970: 67-69 ; Winkin, 1981: 13-26.

⁸ For Dacheux (1999), communication can never be a transparent transfer of meanings from A to B, since this would necessitate an almost telepathic connection between two individuals, which he terms “communion”. Communication, he argues, is precisely the mediating process which makes such “communion” impossible.

presuppositions, attitudes, beliefs, etc.). In this sense primary or '*tabula rasa*' socialisation is 'absolute', in that individuals have no pre-existing cultural norms, and the primary socialisation culture(s) are assimilated *absolutely*, coming to constitute the ethnocentric norm.

Secondary socialisation, generally taking place from adolescence onwards, consists in learning new cultural traits *comparatively*, *i.e.* by cataloguing their differences with regard to the internalised ethnocentric norms of primary socialisation. Depending on a variety of factors⁹, secondary socialisation generally involves assimilating more superficial levels of culture¹⁰, then reinterpreting them in the light of one's (culturally-deeper) pre-existing ethnocentric norms, values, and basic presuppositions. In this way, elements of secondary socialisation cultures which are seen to conflict with interiorised primary socialisation norms must be (a) suppressed, (b) modified or reinterpreted, or (c) accepted as 'foreign'. Outward observance of rituals or behaviours linked with secondary socialisation cultures can sometimes conceal deeper tensions between these and underlying (primary socialisation) beliefs and values, which may give rise to misunderstandings¹¹.

This 'privileged' role explains why national culture often appears to have a stronger influence on an individual's behaviour and sense-making processes, notably on an unconscious level (unquestioned practises and beliefs, etc.). Nevertheless, this is clearly insufficient justification for ignoring the influence of non-national cultures in intercultural interactions. On the contrary, it is simply one element to be taken into consideration when addressing the central question formulated by Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (*supra*) of "*how different 'cultures' impact on each other*" during communication. Indeed, this question is essential to our understanding of intercultural interactions in that it implicitly draws our attention once again to the central relationship between cultures and communication.

3. Cultures and communication

The concept of culture, whether applied to national and/or other groups, remains notoriously elusive. As Geertz (1973: 10-13) and Appadurai (2001 : 42) both warn, the use of the substantive can lead to a simplistic reification of the notion of culture, which is, in reality, an ongoing process. For the anthropologist, they argue, culture has no complete material existence (though it is often seen to be 'reflected' in certain artefacts); rather it is an abstraction present in the minds of individuals, and, as such, both intangible and (slightly) different for each person. If culture is to be defined as a substantive, it must be seen as the sum of the different traits (knowledge, behaviours, values,...), associated with a social group, at a given time, by members and non-members of that group. These different traits are unevenly spread among the population (of members and non-members), and some are more central than others. Moreover, culture as a process is undergoing constant incremental evolution through the interactions of its members.

Academics vary as to the degree of stability they associate with culture. In extreme positions, notably among linguistic pragmatians, everything is seen to be "at the surface": communication and culture

⁹ Relative cultural distance, length and intensity of exposure, social pressures and individual disposition are but a few of the factors which influence the 'depth' of cultural assimilation.

¹⁰ The notion of varying depths of cultural manifestations rests on the widespread multi-layer conception of the structuration of cultures, commonly known as the "onion model of culture" (Hofstede 1991, Trompenaars & Hampden Turner 1993, Spencer-Oatey 2000).

¹¹ Obviously, the degree to which secondary socialisation cultures are assimilated depends on a variety of factors, including: perceived 'cultural distance', degree of exposure, motivation to assimilate and centrality/salience of secondary socialisation group identity for the individual, etc.

are essentially one and the same. Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009: 37) adopt a more nuanced, intermediate position:

“So whilst we would agree that it is vital to study and analyse culture in specific situations, we would not agree with Blommaert (1998a) that culture, in all its meanings and with all its affiliated concepts is always situational. Even though behavioural and communicative conventions are typically situationally dependent, very fundamental assumptions and values can be pan-situational (despite being operationalized differently in different contexts)”.

The difference between these elements becomes clearer if we take into account macro-, meso- and micro- levels of analysis, distinguishing what is associated (by an individual) with a group, and what is associated with a particular interaction or encounter. If we consider the individual as a subject in the interaction, actively seeking (in general) to make sense for and of the people he/she is interacting with, then cultures appear as semiotic (and symbolic) resources that can be used to help interpret others' symbolic acts, anticipate shared meanings and representations, and establish them through communication. Individuals use one another's social and role identities (national groups, other groups, roles played in the encounter), (a) as a guide to interpret what they are saying and doing, and (b) to try to adapt their own behaviour, often to try to make it easier to understand and to show themselves as predictable subjects, based on their salient identities and the representations they think others have of them¹². Such attempts by the subject to optimise or facilitate sense-making and understanding, based on culturally-prefigured meanings, may be more or less effective. They obviously do not exclude a host of unconscious actions, reactions, and judgements, also rooted in culturally-prefigured representations or communication behaviours, and they certainly do not rule out misunderstandings, possibly motivated by cultural differences, but which might also be provoked by a host of other contextual factors.

If cultures can thus be seen as sets of pre-figured (and incompletely shared) references and patterns of behaviour, communication is the process by and in which these references and patterns of behaviour are actualised, made salient, redefined, or dismissed, rejected. Participants make explicit or negotiate meanings, establishing “*points of reference*” (Wenger 1998: 83), to which they are able to refer later in the conversation. The situational context also has an important role to play in configuring salient identities, behaviours and meanings, associated with particular situational frames (Goffman, 1991). And many other factors also go to make up the “*figurative context*” (Frame & Boutaud, 2010) in which the communication process takes place, such as external pressures to accomplish a task or to manage a relationship, for instance; the physiological or affective states of the participants (anxiety, tiredness, boredom, comfort levels, etc.); when and where the interaction is taking place, and so on.

In the light of the debate surrounding the possible “situational” character of culture, this conception allows us to clearly distinguish between communication, which takes place in an interaction, and the cultures which pre-figure the interaction and shape (but don't determine) communication choices and behaviours, through the mediating influence of the situation and figurative context. By placing cultures on the pre-figurative level, the “*semi-pragmatics*” approach¹³ presented here underlines

¹² At least from what Communication Accommodation Theorists call a “convergence” perspective (*cf. supra*).

¹³ For a full description of this approach, *cf.* Frame & Boutaud, 2010; Frame, 2012.

their influence on interpretation and their symbolic potential, which is exploited or “operationalized” differently across interactions. Communication and cultures are thus in a dialectical relationship, where cultures influence communication practises, and are themselves expressed, actualised and transmitted through communication (Hall, 1959). Seen from this angle, we can agree with Eric Dacheux (1999) that “all communication is intercultural”, since it necessarily brings together multiple cultures, whether in a context traditionally seen as “multicultural”, or in a situation where participants share the same nationality¹⁴.

Conclusion

The paradigm shift with which this paper is concerned, however, does not consist in abandoning interculturality as a concept and a field of study, in favour of communication. What it does advocate, though, is the need to deconstruct the limits which have traditionally been used to structure the field of study, but which now appear as artificial constraints which prevent scholars from getting to grips with the complexity of the social activity on which they work. Culture can no longer legitimately be considered as a purely national phenomenon. Whereas cross-cultural studies may choose to focus on the national level, notably for the reasons evoked above, culture-interactive studies clearly cannot. If the exclusive focus on national cultures is called into question, so are the limits of the field. Interculturality should be seen in a wider sense, as a dimension present in all situations of communication. On the epistemological level, this brings intercultural communication closer to communication science, reinforcing the importance of the study of communication processes in the former, while providing the latter with key insights into the influence of culture(s) on these processes, through theoretical models such as semiopragmatics. Scholars working in management and organisational communication, on questions linking corporate, professional and national cultures in multinational organisations, for example, already deal with interculturality on this level (Frame, 2009).

In terms of methodology, qualitative research in the symbolic interactionist tradition should dominate questionnaire or survey-based methods for the study of interactions. The recent resurgence of grounded ethnographic or ethnomethodological work in intercultural communication (Carayol, 2012; Hodges, 2012), as well as in communication science (Lardellier, 2002) appears to reflect these concerns. A key difference with the ethnological approaches of early anthropologists, such as Hall, however, is that such ethnographic accounts focus on the dialectical relationship between cultures and communication in interactions, rather than on communication as a key to understanding a particular national culture.

This shift of focus is not the only major evolution to have taken place since pioneering studies in the field. On the ideological level, cultural relativism and the “contact hypothesis”¹⁵ have resolutely replaced evolutionary models of cultural progress. However, they bring with them the threat of a

¹⁴ Of course, this is not to say that the “intercultural dimension” of communication is equally important or influential in all interactions, only that it constitutes a possible angle from which to analyse them. From an epistemological point of view, models like the Communication Accommodation Theory (Gallois *et al.*, 1992) have been applied equally successfully to encounters involving different nationalities, and inter-generational communication, for example.

¹⁵ The contact hypothesis holds that contact and exchanges between cultural groups lead to increased understanding and tolerance between the groups involved. For a convincing counter-argument, *cf.* Wolton (2003).

politically-correct vision of diversity and multiculturalism, in line with the EU motto of “unity in diversity” which does not always reveal the more ‘sinister’ side to the globalised world, concerning majority-minority relations and cultural hegemony. To echo once again Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (*supra*, page 5), one of the key issues for future work is to foreground the processes through which cultures influence one another in interactions, in light of the figurative context, power relations, etc. Such studies will lead not only to a better and more complex understanding of what goes on in a host of ‘multicultural’ situations, but will also provide important insights into relationships between cultures in the context of globalisation.

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