Intercultural communication : context, field and practice

DISCUSSION FORUM

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: CONTEXT, FIELD AND PRACTICE

Intercultural Communication is a sort of communication which poses multiple problems. This paper aims to point out those changes of present modernity, which force us to analyse social reality from new perspectives. Being this new context perfect for intercultural communication studies, this paper also deals with the characteristics of the field of research and presents the subject of study, some aims of research and several features of its knowledge. The paper concludes with those elements which are necessary for successful intercultural communication.

Key Words: modernity, intercultural communication, research, communication process.

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To begin with, I will describe the context and name the factors that nowadays favour research on interculturality. As far as I am concerned, the most important factor is the changes produced in the modernity. Secondly, I will describe the characteristics of the field of research from a constructionist conception of social sciences. Finally, I will talk about the elements which can contribute to achieving successful intercultural communication, from the point of view of the Theory of Communication.

The context of our present modernity

Some years ago Foucault (1981:143) said that "every society has its own rules for the truth, its 'general politics'; namely, those types of discourses which that particular society adopts as true or as false; the punishment or the reward each discourse receives; the privileged techniques and methods to know the truth; the status of those who have to decide what is true and what is not"[1]. Each society builds up by means of different discourse genres (scientific, ludic, aesthetic, etc.) what that society takes for granted and is not questioned because it seems evident to everybody. That is the way the spirit of a certain time is shaped. The spirit of a time can never be defined easily. It results from the addition of all the different discourses and realities and becomes more or less definite in an articulated perception of social reality.

It is important to take this perception of social reality into account because it conditions not only daily life but also scientific research. We cannot forget that theories are never the result of a brilliant mind, but the reflection of the way of being and thinking in a given time. The spirit of a time does not have a definite profile; rather, it is a general feeling that changes with time. This feeling is created by the dominant scientific theories, the common sense of the majority, the collective image of a culture, the hegemonic ideologies and the communicative interaction. "Science, cultural processes and human subjectivity are socially built, recursively interconnected: they constitute an open system. Precisely, those complex cultural scientific configurations which constitute the spirit of a time emerge from these interfaces and their disarrangements and conflicts." (Fried Schnitman 1994:18). It can be appreciated that the spirit of a time is composed of a disparity of narratives which are more or less concentrated on different perceptions of social reality. The result comes in the

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[1] Quotations from languages other than English are presented in my own translation.

form of a hegemonic cosmovision. It is important to take this dominant perception of social reality into account because it is usually our main interpretative mechanism and the major producer of what is taken for granted. In order to understand the cosmovision of the Western world, it is necessary to find the roots of modern thinking.

Political and social contexts of modern thinking are disclosed in an interesting work of Toulmin (1992). Toulmin (1992:12) asks himself "firstly, what the events were that were so crucial to the creation of modern Europe; secondly, how these events influenced the ways in which Europeans lived and thought later in the century; and lastly how they shaped the development of Modernity right up to ourown time – not least, our horizons of expectations for the future". During the 17th century, the religious conflict that Europe was undergoing, contrasting with the first steps towards modernity given by the humanists of the 16th century, forced the emergence of a rationalist modernity, which subverted the previous tendency. "Humanists' readiness to live with uncertainty, ambiguity and differencess of opinions had not done nothing [...] to prevent religious conflict from getting out of hand; ergo [...] it had helped cause the worsening state of affairs. If skepticism let one down, certainty was more urgent." (Toulmin 1992: 55). That situation opened a path to a rationalism which ended with humanists' sceptical proposals, because a new unquestionable certainty was necessary to cope with the religious conflict, the 30 Years War, that was being suffered "(…) But, for the time being, that change of attitude - the devaluation of the oral, the particular, the local, the timely, and the concrete- appeared a small price to pay for a formally 'rational' theory grounded on abstract, universal, timeless, concepts" (Toulmin 1992: 75). The conceptual structure of modern social reality was being been built up from that basis.

Obviously, that modern cosmovision has had multiple consequences in our present interpretation of the world and I would like to highlight two of them. On the one hand, there is a tendency to take social realities out of their context. The context is not taken into consideration and is suposed to be universal. As Toulmin said (1992: 104), the three dreams of rationalists converge in the same tendency. "The dreams of a rational method, a unified science, and an exact language, unite into a single project. All of them one designed to 'purify' the operations of human reason, by decontextualizing them: i.e. by divorcing them from the details of particular historical and cultural situations." Human and cultural differences are ignored in favour of the scientific Truth.

Nevertheless, we can notice nowadays some changes in modernity. Since it is sometimes difficult to predict how modernity will to change, the future provokes two main attitudes, according to Toulmin (2001:203): "We may welcome a prospect that offers new possibilities, but demands novel ideas and more adaptive institutions; and we may see this transition as a reason of hope, seeking only to be clearer about the novel possibilities and demands in a world of practical philosophy, multi-disciplinary sciences, and transnational or subnational institutions. Or we may turn our backs on the promises of the new period, in trepidation, hoping that the models of life and thought typical of the age of stability and nationhood may survive at least for our own lifetime".

I think we agree our world is complex enough and intercultural relationships corroborate the uncertainty and risk. Different authors agree with this social diagnosis. Giddens (1997:23) said that the late modernity was a world full of risks and dangers where we used the word "crisis" in a special way, it was not a simple interruption but it was a more or less continuous condition. According to Luhmann (1996:39): "The world is wasting itself in an uncontrollable complexity; in each moment people can choose freely between very differents actions..." For Berger and Luckmann (1997:61): "in the more developed industrial countries -this is, the countries where modernization goes farther and modern pluralism is completely developed- the systems of values and the stocks of meaning are no longer a common heritage for every member of the society. People grow in a world where common values, which fix action in differents fields of life, do not existe and where only one identical reality for everybody does not exist." I want to point out that these authors do not reflect intercultural relationships. They just think about social relationships. Anyway, I want to remember as Luhmann says (1996:13): "in more complex conditions, man can and must develop the most effective ways to reduce complexity."

In this context, trust is an indispensable requirement. Trust is a mechanism to overcome lack of information and also uncertainty. Trusting makes sense, with an act of will, of a future situation about which we do not have enough information. Luhmann explains (1996:45): "the system substitutes the external certainty for the internal certainty, and by doing so the tolerance of uncertainty in the external relationship is increased."

Trust is a bet made in a present moment, established in the past and directed to the future. We must realise, as well, that trust can be weak and that it has some limits. When we trust we must accept some risks, but trust helps to reduce complexity.

When, in 1968, Luhmann (1996) posed the problem of complexity and the role of trust, of course, the situation was completely different from nowadays (only 9 years before, Edward T. Hall had introduced the term "intercultural communication"). However, I think Luhmann's ideas are still very useful, mutatis mutandis, today. Maybe more than ever, trust is an essential element of human life. "Where there is trust, there is an increase in the possibilities of experience and action" (Luhmann 1996:14).

In relation with intercultural communication, we can say that an intersubjective agreement or an act of confidence is needed. But trust does not grow spontaneously, it needs efficient communication. Luhmann says (1996: 97): "The pillars of trust must be built on solid ground (...) mainly, we find the supports of trust in efficient communication". Trust is very important for intercultural communication because it reduces uncertainty and, at the same time, intercultural comunication can be the foundation of trust.

Intercultural communication as a field of research

It seems obvious that intercultural communication is an emergent field of research. The other face of globalization is interculturality (García Canclini 1999). But it is also true that research in intercultural communication needs some consolidation. However, we could ask if this consolidation is necessary and how it must be consolidated.

In spite of some criticisms (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1998) that say multiculturalism is an example of intellectual agenda-setting by American imperialism, I think intercultural communication can be a very important field of research and we must trust that it can be developed in an interesting way.

As Duch explains (2000: 186-187), in the last century the Other has been studied in different ways. Sociology and political economics studied the internal other who had the same culture as the researcher. Psychology studied the others who were inside our self. Ethnology and anthropology studied the external other who was heterogeneous and different from the anthropologist. Moreover, this otherness constituted by anthropology was represented in different shapes: as a shape previous to us (evolutionism), like us (universalism) or different from us (racism). I wonder if interculturality does not provide us with another view. Maybe interculturality could be a different look at reality. Any-

way, I want to establish some attributes that intercultural research could have.

a) Aims of research

The first step is describing and understanding intercultural relationships and thus the improving intercultural competence of interacting people. Nowadays, intercultural communication is not only interpersonal communication, it is also mass media communication. We must rethink globalization from interculturality. García Canclini suggested (1999:184) that we rethought globalization with interculturality and criticism of inequalities. "Against the unique thought which understands globalization as unification, we must be aware of the differences that globalization does not eliminate and that are usually cultural. Then, no difference must play a decisive role but just recognize its variety (...) Finally, there is a high degree of integration in our world; particular cultures have some aspects in common with hegemonic cultures, differences between cultures are not always associated with inequality. Therefore, diversity can be shown sometimes by antagonism, but also by compromise and negotiation."

Social and cultural policies must be established this way. For García Canclini (1999:223): "A clue to learning intercultural coexistence is in establishing models of democratic interaction, as objective and horizontal as possible, and at the same time realising the legitimate diversity of emotional positions and institutional cultures". Another aim of interculturality could be rethinking stored knowledge with an intercultural view. Maybe we could plan an intercultural semiotic, an intercultural theory of communication, an intercultural law, an intercultural philosophy, etc.

b) Subject of study

As we could see at the beginning, social reality is very complex, like intercultural reality. Faced with complexity we can be tempted by reductionism. One of the specialists' trends is building a metonymic construction of reality. Usually, they try to explain the whole of reality exclusively with the limited characteristics of their subject of study. We must observe that social reality is not only cultural. We must avoid cultural reductionism and become aware of the complex relationships between modes of production, social organization, expressions of imaginary and symbolic formulation. If other aspects of social reality are not consid-

ered, we could easily label many conflicts as intercultural. Maybe some intercultural ingredient can appear in a conflict, but it does not mean this would be the most significant element of the conflict (Rockwell 1999).

Finally I want to emphasize two aspects. First, values and emotions are very important subjects in intercultural studies. As García Canclini asserted (1999:223), the basic problem of interculturality is how the intellectual comprehension of differences and the necessarily flexible practices can be combined with the rigidity or one-dimensionality of education and emotional fidelities. The other important subject is cultural identity. I know cultural identity is a controversial topic (Hamelink 1989), but we must deal with it (Rodrigo 2000).

c) Characteristics of knowledge

I would not like to appear as a banal postmodernist, but I think we could accept that rationalism has given a simplistic view of reality. Rationality is not an unquestionable concept yet. Modern thought tries to beat dichotomical thought. Thus, a disjunctive conjunction has been replaced by a copulative one: reason and passion, universalism and relativism, innate and acquired, equality and difference, etc.

Schulz (2001:95) points out two kinds of relativity in rationality : "Rationality is relative, first of all, in relation to the respective cognitive state. Secondly, there is, at the same time, a relativity in relation to certain rules or standards of theoretical rationality". Schulz agrees with the first idea (2001:95), because it is not adequate "to explain the behaviour of natives according to Western European standards, declaring the natives to be irrational upon the failure of this attempt". But he critisizes the second one, because it defends that "the standards of rationality are completely arbitrary and cannot be justified by reasons which exceed the cultural context" (Schulz 2001:95).

His point of view is perfectly defensible from an ontological perpective of rationality, but rationality has to be differently pointed from a constructivist perspective.

Constructionism does not deny reality, but as Glasersfeld points out (1994:127): "it only sustains that nobody knows an independent reality. Constructionism does not formulate ontological statements. It does not tell us how the world is, it only suggests a way to think about it and gives us an analysis of the operations which generate a reality from experience.

Probably, the best way to characterize it is saying that it is the first serious attempt to separate epistemology from ontology."

Constructionist phenomenology does not look for universals but for a real understanding of the different representations of our daily world; that is the reason why it is so useful for intercultural communication.

Furthermore, intercultural communication helps us to open ourselves to new realities which propose different rationalities. Laplantine and Nouss say (1997:33): "Very 'rational' societies have difficulty with ambiguity and ambivalence in a mixed reality. These societies mistrust plurality and try to impose an exclusive dominant behaviour, just one vision of the world that gives a single direction to all aspects of social life". All in all, we must have a wider and more flexible vision of reality (Maffesoli 1993). In fact, I think complexity must be considered from complex thought. Morin explains (1994:440): "The complex thought is not the omniscient thought. On the contrary, it is a local thought, placed in a particular moment. The complex thought is not a completed thought." Morin's proposal seems to me very interesting because it does not try to find a complete knowledge or a unitary theory, but to lead us to find a different way to understand complex realities. In the same way, Semprini (1997:59-60) establishes some aspects of a multicultural epistemology:

1) Reality is a construction. Social reality has no existence without the actors, the theories that shape it and the language that conceptualizes and communicates it. All objectivity is only a version, more or less effective, of reality.

2) Interpretations are subjective. An interpretation is essentially an individual act, because, even if it is collective, it takes root in the competences of reception that guide interpretation.

3) Values are relative. So truth must be relative, taking root in a personal history or in collective conventions. We must lessen the importance of every value judgement. Geertz (1995) is a fierce defender of relativism. It seems a paradox, but well understood realitivism begins in oneself. A non dogmatic relativism should accept, for instance, the existence of transcultural needs (universals).

4) Knowledge is a political fact. If social categories and values are the result of a social activity, we must see how certain categories and values are defended and others are excluded in some concrete situations, depending on the relationships of strength and the interests of the groups.

In my opinion, intercultural communication as a field of research is very important and has a great future. However, I consider that research

must be done from interdisciplinarity and interculturality, and we must think about intercultural communication as a process.

Intercultural communication as a communicative process

What are the necessary elements for an effective intercultural communication? The following are some important elements (Rodrigo 1999):

a) A common language or a common system of communication. We need not only linguistic competence, but also communicative competence. On the one hand, non verbal communication is very important (Rodrigo 1999: 130-61); on the other hand, we cannot take for granted that all cultures have the same system of communication. In western countries the word has more importance than in other cultures, such as the Japanese, where silence is understood in a different way from in western cultures.

b) Knowledge of foreign cultures. It is difficult to separate language from culture. A good knowledge of culture is essential for the comprehension of different levels of messages.

c) Re-cognition of our own culture. Intercultural communication involves not only knowing other cultures better, but also rethinking our own culture. Often we are not aware of our cultural features and we consider our behaviour as the "normal" way to act.

d) Elimination of prejudices. We need to be interested in other cultures, in their cultural production and in their lives. But this interest cannot be founded in an ethnocentric curiosity that reaffirms our culture and sees the others as merely "exotic". Desire to understand others must grow free of prejudices.

e) Ability to empathize. Cultural shock implies incomprehension but also negative emotions. We need to feel what the others feel. In communication, emotions are very important (Rodrigo 1997). The Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes (El País Semanal, 20, november,1994) says "If there occur horrors in the world, it is because you are unable to imagine the other's feelings."

f) Knowing how to make use of metacommunication. Intercultural communication is more difficult because we often must explain what we want to say when we say something. Metacommunication implies making explicit the content of messages, our communicative intentions and even the expected effects of messages.

g) Achieving balanced interaction. Intercultural dialogue must be established in the most balanced situation possible. This does not mean hiding

situations where power is badly balanced, but neither victimization nor paternalism are adequate attitudes for effective intercultural communication.

There are also some obstacles that intercultural communication must deal with.

a) Stereotypes. G. K. Chesterton was asked once about his opinion on the French, and he answered that he did not know all of them. Overgeneralizations are very dangerous because it is a fallacy to think it is possible to qualify a cultural group that is always complex and heterogeneous. Stereotypes are a wrong simplification. "A stereotype is a stable set of beliefs or pre-conceived ideas which the members of a group share about the characteristics of other groups" (Guirdham 1999:1661).

b) Unawareness of our own ignorance. There co-exist in our world a lot of cultures and we know very few of them. Price (1990:10) notes 3.500 cultural groups in the world. How many of these groups do we know at all?

c) Stressing only the differences. When we analyze cultures, we might point out only differences and forget that there are a lot of common aspects among them. And when we stress only differences others can be excluded (Delgado 1998: 143). We have been talking a lot about the right to be different, but there is also the right to be similar (Hassanain 1995: 25).

d) Universalizing from a dominant culture. If we universalize, we must look for common aspects in humanity. I do not want to argue about relativism and universalism (Rodrigo 1999: 57-60), all I want to say is that ethnocentrism can produce a false universalism. We must remember that eurocentrism tries to be universal (Shohat and Stam 1994). All cultures are a part of the human heritage. As human beings, we must defend all our cultures.

Are we able to overcome all these obstacles and make use of the essential elements to achieve effective intercultural communication? The only answer we can give to that question has to be very general. In every circumstance we must analyze the interaction between its different elements. I am sure the process will not be linear. There will be conflict and agreement, progress and regression. But if we do not trust intercultural communication, maybe communication will never start. All intercultural communication deals with some uncertainty and anxiety that we must manage. As Luhmann says (1996:83): "we must learn to tolerate different ways of understanding the world." If we do not think we will be able to

understand others, we will lose the opportunity to achieve intercultural competence; and, anyway, intercultural communication is an inevitable social phenomenon of our world.

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