INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION – A PLEA FOR A DISCOURSE-BASED APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper is based on a real-life situation of intercultural communication via email between the author and a university employee from the Republic of Moldova. It outlines the context of the email conversation and the problems that occurred; it then proceeds to suggest possible explanations for the identified problems and to theorise on them from the perspective of the practice of teaching intercultural communication. Most times, in the institution where I work, the teaching of intercultural communication dwells on borrowed models and examples drawn from remote situations of communication, such as conflicts that could occur between the far East and the far West. I plead for a reliance on situations of intercultural communication in proximate contexts and for an emphasis on students' awareness of Grice's conversational maxims. In my opinion, intercultural communication needs to be re-grounded in discourse pragmatics.

Key words: intercultural communication, interdiscourse communication, discourse pragmatics, conversational maxims, teaching.

Introduction: Setting the Question

In the spring of 2013 I was notified that I had been selected to benefit from a teaching mobility in a state University in Chisinau, the Republic of Moldova. During the application stage, I had indicated October as my month of preference. However, for administrative reasons, in June 2013 it became clear to me that October would no longer be an option. This is when I started emailing the person in charge with the programme in the Moldovan

University. For a while, it seemed that we could barely understand each other, even though we were using the same language – Romanian. For instance, it took me ten days and an exchange of twelve emails to find out the answer to the question when the academic year starts in Moldova[1].

I initially contacted him to discuss practical details connected to my mobility and to express my desire to come from the very first day when the academic year starts, should that first day be prior to the 1st of October. I could not find any information about the structure of the academic year on the university website, so I asked him when it starts. His reply was that they were wishing to specify my desires related to the start and end date of the mobility, and that they were waiting for an answer from me that would mention the precise dates. I wrote back, asking for the date when the academic year starts. I then found out from a former student that the academic year starts on the 1st of September. Therefore, I emailed the person in charge with the project again, asking him to confirm whether this information is correct. His reply, three days later, was that he was confirming that the suggested period for my mobility was 01.10.2013-31.10.2013 – October – the very month that I wished to avoid. The email exchange went along similar lines: I was asking specific questions, while my correspondent's emails were not answers to my questions…

This frustrating experience prompted me to think of intercultural communication in practice, of the particular challenges of intercultural communication via email, of the linguistic dimensions of intercultural communication, and of how we could teach intercultural communication by focusing more on discourse pragmatics. In this paper I argue that when teaching intercultural communication, we should focus not only on intercultural aspects, but also on the general principles of effective communication, on discourse logic and the socio-linguistic aspects of professional communication.

1. Intercultural communication in business curricula

The teaching of intercultural communication in business schools aims to develop intercultural competences. In Romania, this is a recent tendency that, to my knowledge, has been emphasised at institutional level since 2008, once new professional master's programmes were created. The implications for the teaching of intercultural communication in the higher education are numerous: the format of the classes has been changing and it is now similar to training sessions; there is (or there should be) less focus on theory and more

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[1] My correspondent is no longer emoployed in the university in Moldova, and I could not contact him in order to obtain his approval to quote his emails in my analysis. This is why I had to restort to paraphrasing.

focus on practical exercises; the final grade should reflect the student's (or trainee's) skills and competence development, rather than the extent to which he or she has internalised theories or definitions of culture.

In my institution, the favourite authors among teachers of intercultural communication or intercultural management have been Geert Hofstede, Fons Trompenaars, Edward T. Hall and Harry C. Triandis. For instance, in 2011, these authors were all taught in classes on Effective Intercultural Communication in English, on Intercultural Management and on Business Communication in German, to the same group of students in the Master's programme in International Business and Intercultural Strategies.

A cursory survey of the curricula of MA or MBA programmes in English in some of the major European business schools showed that, on the one hand, there are hardly any courses dedicated exclusively to intercultural communication[2], or when there are, as it is the case with Copenhagen Business School (which offers a summer course in Cross-Cultural Competences in the academic year 2013-2014), the focus is on country stereotyping, cultural shock, the application of management tasks in a foreign context, the development of "problem solving and communication strategies in cross cultural settings" (http://kursuskatalog.cbs.dk/2013-2014/BA-HA_HU3E.aspx?lang=en-GB).

Teaching intercultural communication by resorting to the dichotomies elaborated by Hofstede, Trompenaars, Halls and Triandis has obvious didactic advantages: one can better understand and remember when information is presented in a contrastive manner. This approach emphasises "interculturality" at the expense of communication. Yet intercultural communication does not occur only between persons who come from totally different cultures, situated thousands of miles away; we can use the label "intercultural" to describe interactions between persons from neighbouring countries, or from the same country, among whom differences are not radical but gradual, i.e. they could be from cultures with various degrees of individualism or collectivism, of high or low uncertainty avoidance, of high or low power distance, of more or less femininity or masculinity, etc.

2. Intercultural/ interdiscourse communication in practice

In the example that I invoked in the introductory paragraphs, the participants to the interaction are from two different countries. Yet until sixty eight years ago, these two

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[2] I have not found any among the courses listed on the webpage of London School of Economics, nor among those listed for MA programmes in EMLYON Business School, in CEU Business School or in Vienna University of Economics and Business

countries used to be one. Can we talk about a Moldovan culture, as different from the Romanian culture? The time span since 1945, as well as the relatively different contexts in which the now two countries have evolved would probably entitle one to presume that Moldovan culture is different from Romanian culture. The change of regime in both countries, the adoption of Moldovan as the official language in the Republic of Moldova (which, linguistically, is a dialect of Romanian, that was declared an independent language for political reasons) and the educational support that Romania has offered its eastern neighbour, cannot erase, at macro-level, the effects of massive "russification" which the Soviets had carried out via population displacement, the enforcement of Russian as the official language, the imposition of the old church calendar, and so on.

Yet I find it hard to talk about "Moldovan" culture because the Republic of Moldova is an example of multiculturalism, with Moldavians of Romanian origin, of Russian origin, of Bulgarian, Roma, Gagauz or Gruzin origin. Similarly, I find it problematic to use the label "Romanian" with reference to myself: I was born and raised in what used to be the historical province of Wallachia, but have already spent half of my life in the capital of the former historical province of Moldavia. In my professional life, I use English more than I use Romanian, and in my private time, I speak or I learn other foreign languages. Without necessarily subscribing to Sapir's ideas that "human beings … are at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium for expression of their society" and that "the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built on the language habits of the group"[3], nor to Whorf's own thesis that "thinking … follows a network of tracks laid down in the given language[4], I think that by expressing oneself in one or several foreign languages, one acquires patterns or habits of discourse that are different from the ones which are common in one's native language. In addition, I have educated myself, both formally and informally, in cultural environments that are not Romanian, I act and I think in ways that many times, make me feel as if I were a stranger in my own country. Rather than describing my cultural identity in terms of belonging to a national group, I would describe it in terms of belonging to a professional sub-culture, to a gender and age group.

Certainly, I am not an exceptional case. The internationalisation of education and of work, the intensification of international travel, the exposure that persons under 25 have had to other cultural spaces through their parents, relatives or friends who work or live abroad, make personal cultural identification via national belonging quite problematic. This is why I

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[3] Quoted in Whorf,1941, 75.
[4] Whorf 1959: 256

subscribe to Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon's argument that ultimately, intercultural communication in a professional context is first and foremost inter-discourse communication.[5]

In their highly-acclaimed book *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach,* Ron Scollon and Suzanne Wong Scollon started from the assumption that "virtually all professional communication is communication across some lines which divide us into different discourse groups or systems of discourse."[6] Mastery of one's discourse system and awareness of the specific features which characterise the discourse system of one's interlocutor cannot prevent misunderstandings or blockages in communication, as language is inherently ambiguous. Speakers deal with ambiguity by making inferences, which tend to be fixed and which are drawn very quickly.[7] The process of drawing inferences depends on one's ability to understand the context of the communicative situation in which speakers are engaged. The relevant elements of the context are the scene, the degree of formality, the participants, the message form and its sequence.[8] In terms of participants, what matters is not only their name, profession, age, and gender, but also their hierarchical position in relation to each other, and in the institutions in which they work.

In the example that has occasioned this paper, the participants belong to different gender discourses, as well as to different professional groups: faculty members and administrative staff. We both resorted to a formal register. One possible reason for my interlocutor's delay in providing me with the answer(s) that I was requesting was that he was probably writing back after consulting with his superiors. In addition, I was the first person who was coming to their institution to teach, and not all details had been established and standardised at institutional level. What is more, judging by the name, Romanian was probably not my interlocutor's first language, which could have given him troubles in both understanding my messages and in expressing himself in a way that would be easy for me to understand. Judged individually, we both probably had communicative competence in our own discourse system; yet in a situation of interdiscourse communication, we failed to communicate properly.

Definitions of communicative competence highlight two dimensions: effectiveness and appropriateness. Effectiveness refers to "an individual's ability to produce intended

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[5] Scollon, Scollon, 2001, 4.
[6] *Idem*, 3.
[7] *Idem*, 11-13.
[8] *Idem*, 32-40.

effects through interaction with the environment," which can be determined to increase as one becomes more aware of the relevant factors that contribute to it.[9] According to M. R. Parks, effectiveness presupposes that competent communicators have the ability to control and use their environments so as to attain personal goals, by correctly identifying them, by obtaining relevant information, by accurately predicting others' responses to one's (discursive) acts, by select the best communication strategies and by carrying them out.[10] In addition, I should emphasise that effectiveness is a transactional attribute: one's effectiveness needs to be acknowledged and accepted by the persons with whom he or she interacts.

Appropriateness, on the other hand, refers to the use of a register that is in agreement with politeness rules and observes the social distance between speakers, their hierarchical relations and ensures that both speakers maintain face[11]. Chen and Starosta's analytic discussion of communicative appropriateness identify three abilities that are involved:

"*the ability to recognize how context constrains communication, so that one acts and speaks appropriately by combining capabilities and social knowledge to recognize that different situations give rise to different sets of rules (Lee, 1979; Trenholm & Rose, 1981); ...the ability to avoid inappropriate responses", i.e. "... 'abrasive, intense, or bizarre'", and "the ability to fulfill appropriately such communication functions as controlling, sharing feelings, informing, ritualizing, and imagining.*"[12]

Chen and Satrosta's recommendations concerning appropriateness are:

"1. Say just enough—not too little or too much.

2. Do not say something that is false—or speak about something for which you lack evidence.

3. Relate your contribution to the topic and situation.

4. Be clear about what you are saying, and say it with dispatch." [13]

These guidelines are simplified versions of what H. Paul Grice had formulated, as early as 1975, as the four conversational maxims that are subordinated to a general principle that is a condition of possibility for communication in natural languages: the Cooperative Principle. In an imperative mode, this principle is formulated as follows: "Make your

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[9] Chen, Starosta, 2007, 217.

[10] *Idem*, 217.

[11] The concept of "face" has a long trajectory in anthropology, sociology and sociolinguistics. According to Scollon, it was introduced in 1944 by the Chinese anthropologist Hu, in connection with the idea of honour in inter-human relations. In sociolinguistics it was canonized by Erving Goffman as a conceptual tool to explain the sources and expressions of status in interpersonal relations (*apud* Scollon, Scollon 2001: 44-45).

[12] Chen, Starosta, 2007, 218.

[13] *Idem, ibid.*

conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction, of the talk exchange in which you are engaged."[14] The four conversational maxims, named after Kantian categories, are the maxims of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner, and they require language users to:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange) (the maxim of quantity)

2. Try to make your contribution one that is true (the maxim of quality)

3. Be relevant (the maxim of relation)

4. Be perspicuous (i.e. "avoid obscurity of expression," "avoid ambiguity," "be brief," and "be orderly") (the maxim of manner).[15]

In the email exchange between myself and my interlocutor from Moldova, what made the situation frustrating, for me, was that my interlocutor was flouting the principles of quantity, of relation and of manner, by not responding my questions, by seeming to initiate the same conversational topic that I had initiated, and by writing messages that were obscure to me. On the other hand, what could have made it frustrating for my interlocutor could have been my flouting of Grice's maxims of quantity (I was quite exhaustive in explaining the institutional context which made it impossible for me to carry out my teaching mobility in October) and of manner (perhaps my way of sequencing information did not match his way of sequencing information and of understanding information). What is more, maybe the tone of my emails was too imperative, though formal, and maybe I did not express the appropriate degree of reverence that he was used to.

Undoubtedly, Grice's maxims have a few limitations: in an interdiscourse situation, what could be relevant in a certain discourse system could be irrelevant in another; how information is structured and ordered could also vary across discourse systems; in addition, when one communicates across discourses by resorting to a language which is not his or her native tongue, obscure expressions cannot always be avoided. Moreover, as Scollon and Scollon hypothesised, language is inherently ambiguous[16]. Irrespective of how hard one might try to avoid ambiguities, they will remain in language use.

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[14] Grice, 1989, 26.
[15] *Apud* Grice, 1989, 26-27.
[16] Scollon, Scollon, 2001: 7.

3. A plea for a discourse-based approach to intercultural communication

Despite the limitations outlined above, I believe that Grice's maxims are instrumental in the training of professional communicators. They ground communication on ethical and alethic principles, on logical sequencing and relevance. Cultural studies, social, cultural and linguistic anthropology and other disciplines that have advocated particulars at the expense of universals, have celebrated diversity and highlighted the broad richness of relativism. The ideological stance of cultural relativism has its obvious gains and democratic advantages. I believe, however, that before we start celebrating diversity, we could remind our students certain principles that will make them effective and appropriate communicators in the first place, in their own discourse systems, and then across discourse systems.

In a context of professional communication in a business context, Grice's maxims would translate as requirements to report information fully and accurately, to the point and in an orderly manner. They emphasise the need to be ethical in what one communicates to business partners and stakeholders, as a secure means to ensure long-term business relations. In addition, they highlight the need for precise, timely and well calibrated information, that does not expand into verbosity, nor limits itself to incompleteness.

I argue that one way of re-thinking and re-focusing the teaching of intercultural communication could go in the direction of bringing more examples of real-life communicative situations to the classroom. Ideally, these examples should be recordings of conversations in multinational companies or in companies that are present on international markets, or email correspondence for which permission has been secured to be used as didactic materials. These examples could be all the more salient for our students if they involved Romanian participants and their business partners from neighbouring countries[17]. Such discourse samples could be approached deductively, in gradual analyses of context that invite students/trainees to make inferences and test them out as more information is revealed, and to assess communication appropriateness and effectiveness.

Apart from elaborating on cultural dimensions and ethnic differences, I propose that we also develop in our students a predisposition to remaining intellectually alert, to learning about other cultures/systems of discourse, to allowing themselves to be surprised by differences in inhabiting one's discourse. A discourse-based approach to the teaching of intercultural communication necessarily starts from the acceptance of the possibility that in

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[17] Books on intercultural communication abound in communicative or business situations that involve Germans, Americans, French, Scandinavian or Japanese persons. I believe that there is a need for Romanian students/ trainees to learn how to interact with (potential) business partners from neighbouring countries who, like us, do not figure in American texts books in intercultural marketing or management.

inter-discourse professional communication, as well as in any situation of inter/intra cultural communication, misunderstandings and problems are likely to arise, because "language is ambiguous by nature."[18] What is more, in a context of inter-discourse communication that is not carried out face to face, but that is mediated by technology, the ambiguity of the language can be further complicated by "noise" in the channel of communication.

This means that professional communicators need skills to deal with the incomprehensible and the unexpected; one can never be certain of having correctly interpreted the communicative intentions of another speaker, therefore one needs to learn how to ask in order to clarify what speakers mean. As Scollon and Scollon suggested, the most successful professional communicator is not "the one who believes he or she is an expert in crossing the boundaries of discourse systems, but, rather, the person who strives to learn as much as possible about other discourse systems while recognizing that except within his or her own discourse systems he or she is likely to always remain a novice. [19]

Conclusion

The particular case of intercultural communication which I invoked in the introductory paragraph cannot be explained by resorting to differences in cultural dimensions, understood mostly in national terms, a la Hofstede, nor by dwelling on theoretical distinctions between high context and low context, a la Hall. The participants' failure to communicate was due to the flouting of general principles of communication that, in my opinion, have the value of universals of communication.

The role of discourse is central in interethnic communication. Professional intercultural communication is both a matter of language use, and a matter of discourse differences. To quote Ron and Suzanne Scollon again,

> *"the cultural differences between people in professional communication are likely to be rather less significant than other differences which arise from being members of different gender or generational discourse systems, or from the conflicts which arise between corporate discourse and professional discourse systems.*" [20]

This is why, if we are to re-think the way in which we teach intercultural communication, I suggest that we start from grounding communication into discourse logic, from transmitting to our students the basic principles that make communication true, relevant,

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[18] *Idem* note 16.
[19] Scollon, Scollon, 2001, 25.
[20] *Idem,* 4.

ordered and ethical. While raising their awareness of differences and training them how to deal with potential situations of conflict issuing from them, we can also cultivate in them the wise humility of wanderers, who, though they know a lot, admit that there are limits to their knowledge and who, from this position of assumed ignorance, can learn and grow.

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