A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract
The present paper sets forth some ways of handling cultural complexity by approaching a multidisciplinary vision in order to explore cross-cultural communication and its framework. The main focus is on the conceptualization of intercultural competence and the way it occurs in applied linguistics, psychology or management studies. Intercultural communication has often been defined as an interaction between members belonging to various social groups, setting forth the similarities and differences related to language use and to the dynamic of behavior.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, social groups, competence, language, interaction.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS
Beliefs, attitudes, values, traditions – they all can be challenging elements in the process of intercultural communication between members belonging to different social groups. It is essential to behave efficiently with people coming from different social backgrounds, either we are discussing about verbal or non-verbal interaction. Scientists point out the fact that intercultural competence is rendered by the ability to identify the cultural conditions that contribute to the achievement of mutual adaptation. Other anthropologists claim that it represents a possibility of negotiating cultural meanings and respecting, at the same time, the cultural identities one interacts with. According to Cui and van den Berg, “Intercultural effectiveness [is] the general assessment of a sojourner’s ability for effective intercultural communication. He proposed an integrative approach to intercultural effectiveness by combining the existing perspectives – interpersonal skills, social interaction, cultural empathy, and personality traits…” (Cui and van den Berg, 1991, 228). The appropriateness criterion has often been debated by researchers who proved its lack of importance for competent communication, because assessment always entails subjective judgment. It has not been perceived as communicative appropriateness but as the creation of cultural appropriateness. The interactants of the communicative process do not represent simple persons possessing intercultural experience – they stand for the culture to which they have to adjust or adapt. In order to achieve an appropriate communication and so as to avoid misunderstandings, one must always take into account the problematical nature of the communicational situation. Therefore, effectiveness is the second criterion anthropologists have set forth. It has an utmost importance when interacting with people, when focusing on negotiation or when constructing meanings. The two famous scientists, Ting-Toomey and Chung have identified two other such criteria: creativity and adaptability, claiming that flexibility is also a
component of the four factors mentioned above. “The criteria of communication appropriateness, effectiveness, adaptability and creativity can serve as evaluative yardsticks of whether an intercultural communicator has been perceived as behaving flexibly or inflexibly […] in an interaction episode. A dynamic, competent intercultural communicator is one who manages multiple meanings in the communication exchange process – appropriately, effectively, adaptively, and creatively. […] Communication adaptability refers to our ability to change our interaction behaviors and goals to meet the specific needs of the situation. […] Communication creativity […] is to produce something inventive through an imaginative lens and flexible skills”. (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2005, 17-19). Therefore, a skilled communicator should manage multiple meanings in an appropriate, effective and creative manner. While carrying out several surveys on the nature of intercultural effectiveness, anthropologists discovered a close connection between cross-cultural adjustment and effective job performance.

Open-mindedness, flexibility in thinking, realistic expectations, empathy, self-confidence, bilingualism, resilience to stress, tolerance for ambiguity – these are all prerequisites for the individual’s cultural integration. Anthropologists consider that psychological adaptation, motivation, knowledge block or mindfulness represent key components for developing intercultural communication. The latter feature, promoted by Langer and Gudykunst entails openness to receiving new information: “Openness, not only to new information, but to different points of view is also an important feature of mindfulness. Once we become mindfully aware of views other than our own, we start to realize that there are as many different views as there are different observers. Imagine that someone has just told you that you are rude. You thought you were being frank. If there is only one perspective, you can’t both be right. But with an awareness of many perspectives, you could accept that you are both right and concentrate on whether your remarks had the effect that you actually wanted to produce.” (Langer, 1989, 62-69). Adopting a similar view, Gudykunst points out: “We must be cognitively aware of our communication if we are to overcome our tendency to interpret strangers’ behavior based on our own frames of reference. When we interact with strangers, we become mindful of our communication. Our focus, however, is usually on the outcome rather than the process of communication. For effective communication to occur, we must focus on the process of our communication with strangers. When we are mindful, we can make conscious choices as to what we need to do in the particular situation in order to communicate effectively”. (Gudykunst, 2004, 253-255).

The field of applied linguistics is also closely connected to intercultural interaction. Communicative language teaching has been under the influence of speech act theory causing the loss of any connection to the cultural area. Researchers mentioned above, claim that communicative competence had come to be interpreted as appropriate language use and not as a competence in the social life of a community. There has often been this tendency of considering the native
speaker as a model to be analyzed and judged. On the other hand, some people argue this idea because taking the native speaker as a model might undesirably influence the psychological vision of the learner and they could even cause an inaccurate representation of reality. However, there are situations when they are involved and therefore, they should have different social identities in order to achieve a different kind of interaction. According to Kramsch, a competent language user must, first of all, be able to adapt and to select accurate and appropriate forms that are necessary in a given social context. It is not a prerequisite to speak and write perfectly, in conformity with the rules.

Problematic communication often relates to pragmatics, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. Anthropologists Byram and Van Ek developed conceptual frameworks, focusing on communicative competence in foreign language education. The first one claims that discovery or interpretation is essential for intercultural speakers, underlining the fact that mindfulness eases the communication process: “The skill of interaction is above all, the ability to manage these constraints [of time and mutual perceptions and attitudes] in particular circumstances with specific interlocutors. The individual needs to draw upon their existing knowledge, have attitudes which sustain sensitivity to others with sometimes radically different origins and identities, and operate the skills of discovery and interpretation. In particular, the individual needs to manage dysfunctions which arise in the course of interaction, drawing upon knowledge and skills. They may also be called upon not only to establish a relationship between their own social identities and those of their interlocutor, but also to act as mediator between people of different origins and identities. It is this function of establishing relationships, managing dysfunctions and mediating which distinguishes an intercultural speaker and makes them different from a native speaker.” (Byram, 1997, 38).

Researching intercultural interaction, Byram identified several components. He defined linguistic competence as the ability to apply the rules of a language in order to produce written text and spoken language. Sociolinguistic competence represents the skill of creating meaningful language that is negotiated with the interlocutor. Discourse competence needs to search and discover strategies that are necessary for the production of intercultural texts. The fourth component, intercultural competence, consists of other five issues: knowledge, skills of interpreting, skills of discovering, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness. Byram’s focus and objectives aim at teaching and learning foreign languages in schools.

In the globalization context, when more and more people have to work and study abroad, the main challenge they have to cope with is how to interact successfully with people belonging to another nation, how to adapt successfully to a new cultural environment, to new rules and principles. Effectiveness in intercultural communication is closely related to the intercultural skills or competence a person possesses. Under such circumstances, the individual must
prove the ability to adjust properly in a multicultural environment and must establish interpersonal relations with people from different social groups.

PROBLEMS OF RAPPORT IN INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION

Problems of misunderstandings and rapport are often signaled in intercultural literature. There are several factors like disharmony or turbulences that affect the communication process. H. Spencer-Oatey and P. Franklin suggest six competencies associated with the management of rapport. First of all they point out contextual awareness – when the individual is sensitive to the main characteristics of interaction and to the nature of the communicative activity. Secondly, they emphasize interpersonal attentiveness – when the person pays attention to the people’s social status or identity. Social information gathering is closely related to careful observation of details, while social attuning occurs when the communicator uses paralanguage and non-verbal communication in order to convey the message. The fifth dimension underlined by the two anthropologists is emotion regulation or the individual’s capacity to accept the change, the difference. And last but not least, they mention stylistic flexibility. People’s behaviour and their use of language is often influenced by the relationship between individuals, by the interactional role and by the type of communicative activity, consider the same researches mentioned above. In what concerns the relationship between the individuals, it can be defined in terms of power and distance. As H. Spencer-Oatey and P. Franklin pointed out, “in applied linguistic research, power is typically operationalized in terms of unequal role relations, such as teacher-student, employer-employee. Distance-closeness is operationalized in more variable ways, but typically includes one or more of the following: length of acquaintance, degree of familiarity, sense of like-mindedness, frequency of contact, positive/negative affect and social similarity difference.[…] There is variability across countries in the importance attached to power and in the extent to which people regard power differences as usual and acceptable. Such differences also exist across organizations, across sections within organizations, and across individuals.” (H. Spencer-Oatey and P. Franklin, 2009, 106).

The second issue that anthropologists identified as having an impact upon people’s behaviour is the interactional role or the obligations. The elements of power and distance above-mentioned are often influenced by the roles individuals have in the communicative process (teacher, employer), roles that bestow upon them certain rights and obligations. If they fail to comply with them, offence occurs. Moreover, these rights and obligations may differ from one country to another, and therefore, the intercultural interaction process can become seriously damaged.

The type or the nature of the communicative activity is the third essential factor according to Spencer-Oatey and Franklin. During certain ceremonies or situations people are encouraged to boast themselves, other times they should give credit to others. The interpersonal attentiveness, in the opinion of anthropologists is
rendered by gestures, mimicry, by behavioural expectations and purposes. In the process of assessing our personal attributes, we identify positive and negative ones. As we all want to be liked and appreciated by others, face plays a major role in this process. The face may define the individual’s or the whole group’s sense of dignity and identity. Considering the behavioural expectations pointed out by Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, we all know that consciously or unconsciously people expect certain behaviours in given contexts, according to values, principles, laws. Such conventions reflect strategies and values. In the vision of the researchers above-mentioned, there is a third factor that affects the interpersonal rapport between individuals, and that is interactional goals. “People often have specific goals when they interact with others. These can be interpersonal as well as transactional in nature, or most commonly, both. These “wants” can significantly affect people’s perceptions of rapport because any failure to achieve them can cause frustration and annoyance.” (Spencer-Oatey and Franklin, 2009, 113). While some social groups focus on tasks, others are more interested in relationships. Mutual understanding of each other’s objectives is also very important in the communication process.

To sum up, interpersonal rapport are very difficult to manage, first of all because they involve a lot of factors such as contextual awareness, information gathering or emotional regulation. Cultural differences do not necessarily lead to divergent interpretations, claim the anthropologists. However, there are lots of challenges one must cope with in order to achieve effectiveness and efficiency in intercultural interaction rapport.

CONCLUSIONS
In conclusion, because of the multitude of political, ethnic and religious conflicts around the world, it is becoming extremely important for the individuals to prove competent intercultural interaction skills. Communicating and establishing relationships with people belonging to different nations and communities brings great benefits from an economic, commercial and social point of view. Intercultural interaction is everywhere while ethnic diversity, nowadays, is a fact of life.

BIBLIOGRAPHY
