

## A BRIDGE.

### ABOUT INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION FOR A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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**Intercultural  
communication,  
multicultural  
society, social  
interaction.**

.Abstract - This article tries to cover some of the principal basic problems of communication/relation with the "Other" (in particular "the Stranger-Other"), kind of relationship that today can either totally favour or invalidate the actual possibility of a multicultural society structure. Communication, in particular the interpersonal one, cannot be anything but a fundamental element for a real relationship with the "Other" without any pretension of exhaustiveness, we will try (it is hoped) to carry out in a congruous way basic thematic of intercultural communication at an interpersonal level.

#### **A ponte.**

#### **Sobre a comunicação intercultural para uma sociedade multicultural**

**Comunicação  
intercultural,  
sociedade  
multicultural,  
interação social**

Resumo - Este ensaio aborda alguns dos principais problemas básicos da comunicação / relação com o "Outro" (em particular "o Outro-Estrangeiro"), tipo de relacionamento que hoje pode favorecer ou invalidar a possibilidade real de uma estrutura de sociedade multicultural. Comunicação, em particular a interpessoal, não pode ser outra coisa senão um elemento fundamental para um relacionamento real com o Outro; sem qualquer pretensão de exaustividade, vamos tentar (espera-se) para levar a cabo de uma forma congruente temática básica de comunicação intercultural a nível interpessoal.



Envio: 11/03/2016 ◆ Aceite: 14/04/2016

## 1.Premise

The notes that follow come out from a series of thoughts tending to go along the path of some of the principal problems of the relationship with the Other (in particular, "the Stranger-Other"), the kind of relationship that today, in a territory of globalized European societies and actually always more multiethnic – multicultural but that only relatively they recognize themselves and act as such, it can totally favour or invalidate the same possibility of multiculturalism. Communication, in particular interpersonal communication, cannot be anything else that a fundamental element for a real relationship with the Other; it is certainly a matter that cannot be exhaustible in an essay of limited dimensions as the one that follows; therefore, without any pretension of exhaustiveness we will try (it is hoped) to develop, in a congruous way, basic topics of intercultural communication at an interpersonal level.

Starting from the assumption (probably shareable) that the intercultural communication problematic doesn't certainly reside in the "tongue" as such, but it resides in the "language/s", in a more complete sense of the term, that come to meet/collide, or in the culture structural connotations (semiotic, symbolic, valuable, etc.), the reasoning is based on some basic logics of communicative acting, in its aspects (besides absolutely inter co-related and interdependent) of "transmission" and "relation"; aspects that contain both some asperities of account in comparison to a desirable fluidity of the same communicative interaction and that, consequently, can negatively effect (at times absolutely) the "success" of intercultural communicative processes.

Therefore, we will deal with "technical" aspects (immediately tied with the transmittable aspect) as well as "relational" aspects (immediately tied to the social interaction based within the communication itself) trying, in this, way to offer, if not an exhaustive picture, one at least reasonably indicative of some among the most meaningful difficulties of the intercultural communication itself.

What we are trying here to underline, is that a communicative iter exists which characterizes the man social process for excellence: the communicative act. Communication is a process of information interchange among two or more physical subjects that takes place around an object and in a determined context. It is natural that there are a series of contents

and values that cross-breed within this process; it is therefore easy to affirm that among the concepts of transfer of resources, influence, exchange of social values, information transfer, sharing of the same meanings and social unity, we will have a particular attention toward social values exchange (Veraldi; Romano, 2007).

This exchange of *social* values depends, according to some authors, on the fact that by now we live more and more within a globalized world; according to Spybey (Spybey, 1997), in the late modernity both man and woman are socialized, within the cycle of their life, on the base of global knowledge, awareness and images. The traditional “institutions” are, citing Giddens (2000: 29), “*disaggregated* and ready to be replaced by those deriving from communication... [...] ...the same interpersonal communication and mass communications ... become bearers of global meanings. Therefore, referring to the structure duality, cultural flows cannot exist unless they can be reproduced, during the contact among individuals, in transitory moments.” In the active reproduction of culture, at a global level, that process that we could recognize as social change happens, to a large extent, in the form of interpretation of the universal and of the particular. In our case, we could talk of the different souls of intercultural communicative processes.

## **2. The “area”: culture and multiculturalism**

2.1 “Culture” is probably one of the most controversial concepts of habitual “use” in social sciences or, anyway, more subject at attributions with a meaning often strongly diversified and differentiated.

Already at end of the ‘60<sup>s</sup> an entire volume specifically dedicated to this purpose (Kluckhohn-Kroeber, 1972) was not enough, perhaps, to account for all the meanings and the values given to the same concept to that date; today, over fifty years later and (above all) with the great development of general sociology initially and of culture sociology later on, writing a new essay on the “concept of culture” would surely be an enormous task (even though it would surely be noble).

Therefore, we have thought opportune to only point out in this essay some “macro-classes” interpretation that, even though belonging to different moments of the sociological

consideration and to different theoretical references are, today, recurrent; we will finally arrive to a definition that will be assumed as the base for this work:

- a) culture as a set of “basic-dimensions”, is that conception of culture (substantially of functionalistic matrix) as a whole of “answers” to the fundamental topics of a society both for what pertains to its internal integration, and for what concerns its interaction with the environment
- b) culture as set of “symbolic forms” (Geertz,1998) or the whole of meanings socially produced and incorporated in symbols that allow knowledge and communication consenting, as well, a substantial “reduction of the complexity” of reality and consequently determining social acting (“the meaning precedes the action”).
- c) the “culture-structure” (Levy Strauss, 1975) that sees the culture itself as the product of an unconscious structure of thought, a sort of “universal human” substratum subject to every society and that orders the world conception: “in this context, culture and society both appear as an unique expression of a deep structure, that sets rules that preside the constitution of cultural forms as well as those of social order: the diachronic transformations appear, then, as epiphenomenon that can be brought back to some simple and constant categories of synchronic nature.
- e) Finally, the “interpretation” of culture that we can now assume for the sociological approach is the following: “everything that owes its creation to the conscious and potentially free action of man, in other words, the intellectual and material patrimony, relatively stable and shared, belonging to the members of a determined society and constituted by norms, values, definitions, languages, symbols, signs, behaviour models, material objects” (Cesareo, 2000: 24).

2.2 Multiculturalism (Malizia, 2009) can be define (and the term is in fact used with discreetly different meanings) according to different points if view:

at an initial level, sometimes this term identifies the phenomenon of mixture and the coexistence sometime difficult among different groups... at a second level, more concrete, multiculturalism directly refers to conflicts and claims that can be generated in a multicultural context... at a third level, the term multiculturalism has the tendency to become a synonym of the ideological

position and of the militant activity of those who welcome with favour, and fight for obtaining a multicultural society (Giusti, 1996: 75).

The relationship among cultures always oscillates (in a by-polar continuum) among “integration” and “assimilation”, whereas the first term points out a process that presupposes economic-social politics favouring the same as well as cultural non-ethnocentric relationship models as well as the “respect” and the “cohabitation” as cultural values, while the second term indicates the “totalizing” acquisition by a culture of “Other” cultural system and the consequent disintegration of its own fundamental. The so called “intermediate” phenomenology can be defined as “Creolization”, “a combination of differences, interconnections and innovations” (Hannertz, 2001: 208); a sort of contamination and/or syncretism but alive and always renewing and communicative differentiation; an integrative process based on exchanges and dialogue among different cultures and that presupposes at least a minimum common cultural base.

### **3. The “territory”: the intercultural communication**

Analysing the problem of how to communicate in the “best possible way” means, for example, to think over some key moments of the communication process in that sense:

#### a) coding/decoding”.

If the activity of coding/decoding constitutes a critical area even for a process of intra-cultural communication, let's imagine how this can re-propose itself with particular strength for the intercultural process. Going along, again, with S. Traini (*apud* Malizia, 2004) about the main possibilities of “aberrant decoding”, besides confirming that these are much more frequent than what it could be thought, the “aberration” can happen mainly for:

- refusal of the message to de-legitimate the sender. In this case there is complete understanding of the message according to the coding modality of the sender; nevertheless, when the beliefs system or the circumstantial pressures of the recipient are particularly strong and in contrast with those attributed to the sender, a voluntary contortion of the meaning is operated;

- incomprehension of the message for codes disparity. It occurs when the code of the sender is wrongly known by the receiver or when meanings that completely change the context in which they appear are attributed to the sender.

An evident case of “aberration” can be that of an ego-alter communication based on the modality “parent-child” of the transactional analysis of Berne (2004) where the “parent” denotes strong prejudice traits (racial, cultural, etc.) understood by the “other” with possible consequential reactions. And it is exactly in the prejudice, understood in the proper sense of a conceptual aprioristic evaluation based on stereotypes (rather than on a real knowledge) that produces, besides, antagonist relationships ego-alter presuppositions and actions of inequality/exclusion; in particular, to confine it to the communicative aspects, it takes tendentially to the “non semantic flexibility” and to a substantial refusal of “ putting oneself in other people shoes” due to being “unacceptable”. But we can also underline two specific situations of intercultural encounter/dispute that, perhaps, may better clarify the problematic of communicative “aberration”; let's see:

### **1<sup>st</sup> situation**

*An American is in Tokyo for working purpose, hoping to conclude a profitable contract for her company. When her Japanese counterpart hands her name card to her, she picks it up with a hand casually, gives it a glance, and puts it in her pocket. Subsequently, despite all of her efforts, the relationships with the Japanese colleague remains cold and her firm loses the contract. «Ah», an experienced friend tells her, «you have lost the business for cultural misunderstanding. In Japan, the name card is considered an extension of the person, to be treated with great respect, holding it with two hands and carefully placing it in a proper place. Americans don't have the same conception; for them the name card is simply a formality. You were unaware of having insulted exactly the person on whom you were trying to make good impression (Griswold,1997:13).*

### **2<sup>nd</sup> situation**

*I have verified, once, in a group of American students and other nationalities an example of different style. I asked them what their traditional forms of courting were and all the Americans answered with some concise enough sentences that had some explicit connections with the question. However,*

*when a Nigerian student intervened, he started to describe the path that crossed his village, the tree at the end of the path, the story-teller who, sitting under the tree, would tell a story and the beginning of a story that the story-teller had, once, narrated. When, in answer to the obvious uneasiness of the Americans in the group, I asked to the Nigerian student what was he doing, he said. "I am answering the question." The American students protested and so I asked. "in what way are you answering to the question?. He replied, "I am telling you what you need to know for understanding the point". "Well" one of the Americans said, "Then, if we will be patient, at the end you will tell us, here, what is the point." "Oh no", the Nigerian answered. "Once I tell you what you need to know for understanding the point then you will know exactly what the point is! (Bennett,2002: 44).*

These two situations seem to be particularly interesting to clarify some very meaningful and problematic factors in the intercultural communication:

- the first case underlines how the non-knowledge and/or the non-evaluation (or under-evaluation) of two key factors of cultural factors such as the symbolic component and the one that we could call the "formality" level in a determined culture (for instance the Japanese) could bring to a real relational "conflict" with consequence "closure" of the communication channels and not only these;
- the second case brings to our attention how in some cultures (the Nigerian one) the communication could necessarily be built on general and generalist formalities, most likely in a metaphoric-narrative way and that, therefore, the non-predisposition to be in syntony with such specific modalities takes, also in this case, to potentially negative consequences in the relational problems and in any case, to strong communicative difficulties.

#### b) more about the "communicative situation"

Other factors that can complicate the coding/decoding develop from the situation in which the communicative process unwinds".

Coming back to the S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G. model of Hymes (1964) in terms of intercultural communication, for instance the S(ituation) that consists of "place" as well as "cultural scene" is by itself a conditioning factor both as preconditions and as development, and also, as "encounter" or "clash", as "quiet" or "tension", as "confront" or "conflict" possibility, but it is also made of "time", or of a temporal approach (this also obviously culturally modelled), often

based on notably different, if not opposite, conceptions (western “linear time” versus oriental “circular time”; “northern world time” at fast paces, once “colonized” (Mongardini,1993) versus “southern world time” (Maffesoli, 2000) at “existential”/ritualistic paces; “time as money” versus “time as flow”; etc. ).

Also the A(ct sequences) brings to useful toughs for the intercultural communicative-relational implications such as those tied up to the concept of “footing” (Goffman,1987), a whole situational of linguistic actions that can now tend to “include” the other, to “exclude him” from the communication process and (consequently) from the relationship process or as the “silence management”, silence that “is” communication but, being a non spoken action, can multiply the decoding possibilities (“silence-assent”, “silence-consideration”, etc.).

Furthermore, the K(ey), in other words the psychological-cultural attitude that people have towards the interlocutor and that generally emerges more at a non-spoken level than at a spoken level (smiles, gestures, postures, proxemics) and that it also presents more than a few intercultural problems.

Finally, the N(orms of interaction): in every culture it is possible to encounter roles and status but it is evident that these will be lived, in a substantially different way at times, for example, more “rigid”, and at other times more “flexible”:

- in certain cultures (and therefore in the intercultural interaction) it is mandatory to make evident who holds an “authority” position because he will be the person we will have to refer to;
- often, within the interaction sphere, the one who occupies an “inferior” status will not be able to talk to the “other-superior” if not going first through the “other-intermediary one”;
- in terms of “gender”, there can still be a great difficulty to directly speak with people of the other sex, or, at least, immediately.

#### HYMES “S.P.E.A.K.I.N.G.” MODEL

S ( <i>situation</i> )	1. Situation ( <i>setting</i> )
P ( <i>participants</i> )	2. Scene ( <i>scene</i> )
	3. Speaker or sender ( <i>speaker, sender</i> )
	4. Addressor ( <i>addressor</i> )
	5. Listener, or receiver, or audience ( <i>hearer, receiver, audience</i> )
	6. Addressee ( <i>addressee</i> )



E ( <i>ends</i> )	7. Purposes-outcomes ( <i>purposes-outcomes</i> )
A ( <i>act sequences</i> )	8. Purpose-goals ( <i>purposes-goals</i> )
	9. Message form ( <i>message form</i> )
K ( <i>key</i> )	10. Message content ( <i>message content</i> )
	11. Key ( <i>key</i> )
	12. Channel ( <i>channel</i> )
I ( <i>instrumentalities</i> )	13. Forms of speech ( <i>forms of speech</i> )
	14. Norms of interaction ( <i>norms of interaction</i> )
N ( <i>noms</i> )	15. Norms of interpretation ( <i>norms of interpretation</i> )
G ( <i>genres</i> )	16. Kinds ( <i>genres</i> )

3.1 What mentioned above immediately introduces another discussion, the one regarding the consideration of the “Other-from-us” as *condition sine qua non* of the intercultural communication (real, retroactive, symmetrical) and not just that: the “residents” of the new multicultural world “will be able to be proxies, able to respect and to use their differences or they will be an agglomeration of foreigners living in ghettos only united by antipathies toward others?” (Bennett, 2002: 57).

3.2 Certainly the “symmetric” inter-culture is not simple: “what seems to be more critical is to find ways to penetrate in the hypothetical world of another culture, to identify the norms that regulate the relationships and to equip the people in order to be able to work within a social system that is stranger, but it is not incomprehensible anymore. Without this kind of intuition, people are condemned to remain stranger ones” (idem, p.59). But this “intuition”, even though absolutely essential, may not be enough in the measure in which the “product” of the intuition itself is elaborated and negotiated among the interacting parts, as well as developed in terms of social action.

We could say therefore that intercultural communication can be based on the negotiation among cultural identities.

Defining preliminarily the identity as a “system of meanings that, putting in communication «the individual with the cultural universe of social values and social shared symbols, allows him to give a sense to his own actions at his own eyes and allows other people to operate their choices and to give coherence to their own biography» (Sciolla, 1985; p.105), a system, then, of recognition and of auto-recognition: “the dentity of the identity” is

something continually submitted to the invariance/mutation dialectic, an “accommodating” concept (Bovone,1990) that wants to build a “safe home” and a “defended space” that originates and guards both the "right to be" and the right “to have” (Sartre, 1958).

Going back to what said by Remotti (1994), we could say that “ego is identified through alter” which however, according to what we could define a bipolar continuum, is now absolutely denied (or not-recognized pre-judged and tendentially it should be “annulled”, even in the most tragic sense of the word), now “invisible” (not being able to “deny” it, the other one becomes marginalized so much to lose a substantial visibility), some time “marginalized” (recognized but “ghettoized” in all possible dimension forms such as the one spatial-social, economical-political, cultural, etc.), and another time indeed “recognized” (or the alterity as factor entirely co-essential to his own identity).

But the identity is also an individual-collective “life project” that perpetuates through socialization processes: the identity is a phenomenon that is born from the dialectics between individual and society. The types of identity, on the other hand, are social product tout court, relatively stable elements of the objective social reality” (Berger-Luckmann, 1996) and the socio-cultural identity “is possible only in the case of an accomplished socialization... The instauration of another degree of symmetry between objective reality and subjective reality” (Berger-Luckmann,1966:233); it is a model, then, that is learned, but not only this: “the identity in life remains largely constant. It is easier to mature an identity than change it and total changes of identity are nearly nonexistent” (DeVita, 1999: 137). The construction and the definition of an identity are never “neutral” operations: as Fabietti writes, “human ethnic groups have the tendency to elaborate positive definitions of themselves, while they produce negative definitions about the other” (DeVita, 1998: 16).

In other terms it is like saying that, in a lot of cultures, an automatism almost exists between “self affirmation - depreciation of the other”, as if there weren’t any other way out, for defining and keeping the self, if not the continuous hierarchization (“inside” one’s own culture” and in the relationship with other society-cultures) of the various existing selves whose maximum level is obviously represented of the own self; it is immediately understandable as this can implicitly assume the logic of “the one who-isn’t-like-me-is-against-me” and therefore the necessity to dispose of “power” for being able to guarantee

the “peak” of the aforesaid hierarchy or to be able to overturn the same in favour of the own self.

The root of this construction and the non neutral maintenance of the identity can perhaps be well explained with Bauman when he affirms that “in every epoch the ‘Other’ represents the vague non-programmed future, the place of perpetual uncertainty and, as such, an attractive and dreadful place” (DeVita,1998: 122).

“The identity is built to the detriment of alterity, drastically reducing the alternative potentialities, it is, therefore, the interest of the identity to squeeze, to make the ‘Other’ disappear from the horizon... identity is a fact of decisions. And if indeed it is a fact of decisions, it will be necessary to abandon the essentialist and fixed vision of the “identity”, to adopt instead one of conventional type... the “identity” doesn't exist on the contrary, different ways to organize the concept of identity exists. Said it in other terms, identity is always, somehow, “built” or “invented” (Remotti,1994:5).

In the two perspectives discussed here, “to decide the identity” assumes very different meanings and values. In the essentialist perspective, one can only decide whether to seek the identity of things... The decision doesn't notch the identity structure. In the second perspective, the conventionalist one, to decide the identity concerns not only the initial choice for the determination of identity, but it also concerns (independently from the awareness that one can have of it), the level and type of identity, the inside organization, the cohesion, the coherence for which we intend to preach the identity, as well as frontiers of the objects or of the bodies in comparison to which we race the matter of identity” (Remotti,1994:61).

#### **4. The intercultural communication as “competence”**

To transmit messages and to create relationship or the communication, is the fundamental process of creation and development of sociality, of sociability and more. As Pacelli reminds, “in the communication two aspects that found collective life face one another and therefore the dynamics of production, that represent all arrival points of individual and social behaviours, expressions of spontaneity instances, creativeness, change: as well as

reproduction dynamics, that force the emergence of the ties that the structure sets for channelling the social production with cultural indications and institutional answers, able to make order, fix and control subjective expressions. For this it is important the assumption of a binary perspective, looking both to the micro phenomenon as well as the macro ones, to gather and to interpret the communicative action in circumscribed circles and to follow general dynamics with which communicative activity acts in the society, contributing, according to each case, to extend, consolidate and transform the cultural patrimony or to place a new one " (Pacelli, 2002; p. 9).

Emiliani and Zani effectively delineate the set of communicative abilities that must pre-constitute and accompany the unwinding communicative action (1998: 194) that well baits in our discussion:

- *linguistic competence*, or the ability to produce and to interpret oral signs, that can be disassembled in phonological competence (ability to produce and to recognize sounds), syntactic (ability to form sentences), semantic (ability to produce and to recognize meanings), textual (ability to connect and to integrate sentences in the linguistic context);

- *paralinguistic competence*, or the ability of modulating some characteristics of the significant, such as emphasis, pronunciation intonation, intercalating laughing, exclamations, empty pauses (silences) or full pauses (muttering, etc.);

- *kinesics competence*, or the ability to realize the communication through gestural signs (signs, mimics, movements of the face, of the hands, of the body) and posture;

- *proxemics competence*, or the ability to vary the relationship with the space in which the interaction happens (the interpersonal distances, the contact, the touch);

- *performative competence*, or the ability to intentionally use a linguistic and non linguistic action to realize communication purposes.

- *pragmatic competence*, or the ability to use the linguistic and non linguistic signs in a way suitable to the situation and to one's own intentions.

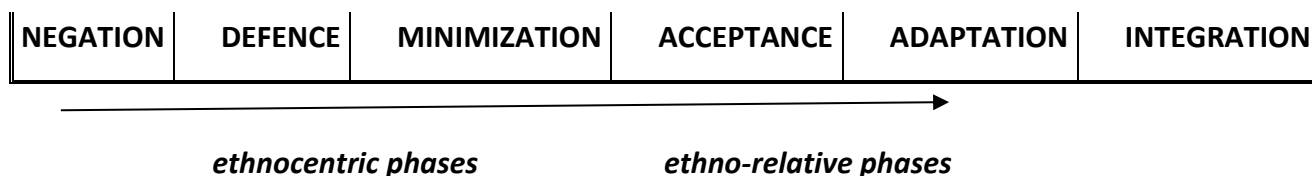
Castiglioni (2005:13-35) rightly points out in the "cultural sensibility" a basic competence for the one who must relate, for instance, in an intercultural manner.

A "dynamic" model for the construction of reality rather than "static" of sets of behaviours (Bennett,2002:48-56), develops in a complex way that goes from the

ethnocentrism to the ethno-relativism, from the “negation” of the “Other” to the “integration” in terms of “experience of the difference.”

“The dynamic model of the cultural sensibility links the changes in the cognitive structure to the evolution in the attitudes and in the behaviour toward cultural difference in general” (Bennett,2002: 50).

The MDSIs shaped as follows:



And its components can be described in the following ways:

1. “negation” - in which, prevailing the stereotypes and the real non-knowledge of the “Other”, the conditions for understanding the difference don't exist and the same “Other”, that appears therefore as “inferior”, is substantially “negated” and also, consequently, “oppressed”;
2. “defence” - in which, although with a vaster knowledge of the “Other”, and of his cultural difference, this is however lived as a menace, a risk;
3. “minimization” - in which starts to be defined a sort of “humanitarian paradigm” with the tendency to bring back the categories of “Other”, the cultural differences in “known” cognitive circles and consequently it prevails a certain acceptance of the same differences
4. “acceptance” - it is the phase in which it is developed a mutual interest to know/understand cultural differences, to reduce the ethnocentrism: “this is the first step in which people begin to think about
5. the notion of cultural relativity - or rather that their behaviour and their values are not the only correct way to be in the world” (Castiglioni,2005: 53);
6. “adaptation” - in this phase “open” behaviours are structured that, based on the preceding “acceptance”, develop a substantial empathy;

7. “integration” - “people in the stage of integration are already bicultural or multicultural, but through a reflexive image they give sense and coherence to the experience of a widened self.

## **Conclusions**

We can conclude this discussion attempts about intercultural communication with Hofstede (1980) when he properly affirms that the possibility of the same to be realized it is preliminarily tied up to a process replaced by three moments (Baraldi,2003), or the “awareness”, the “knowledge”, the “ability”; where the first one is constituted by the explicit recognition of the alterity, the second one by the learning of what is constituted by alterity itself, the third one is born as natural development of a personal experience matured on the base of the first two models. “Dialogue” and “appreciation” therefore, the first one that can allow to overcome the “we/other” and the conditions for meeting; the second that concretizing the first one in behaviours, makes the meeting itself possible and in development of the relationship, exactly, intercultural, a “co-built cultural contract” that “unites” rather than separating, “respects” rather than tolerating, “integrates” rather than assimilating, “maintains” the difference without hierarchy or annulling the difference.

And, the intercultural communication cannot be anything else but all this, something which is not easy but absolutely ineludible and certainly enriching.

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