Major Communicative Difficulties in Intercultural Encounters

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Introduction

It seems to exist a consensus between most scholars who work in the field of intercultural communication that:*"Communication is* a *process involving the exchange of messages and the creation of meaning"* (Gudykunst, 1998). And that it is created through an interaction process in which at least two participants are involved. As a consequence, meaning cannot be "transmitted" (as in transported from a place to another), since it is *created*, *built, negotiated*, during this process. In this sense, it cannot be controlled. Gudykunst suggests that only messages can be "transmitted".

It is also common sense between most interculturalists that it is not only possible, but actually desirable that a communicative interaction act leads to an agreement in the creation of meaning. If such happens, they consider this encounter as effective, successful, and if it doesn't lead to reaching the same meaning intended by the counterparts, it is considered as ineffective, unsuccessful, in other words, a failure in the process that should be overcame.

Thus, misunderstanding, miscommunication, ineffectiveness, unsuccessfulness became the most problematic issues to be taken into consideration where communication is concerned. And, in this aspect, it doesn't matter whether the communication process is held by participants from the same culture or not. This is due to the fact observed by scholars such as Gudykunst and Kim (1984, 1992 and 1997) that the basic aspects that underline the communication process, both intraculturally and interculturally, are very similar. In this essay, overviews of the research literature that try to account for these questions are going to be presented.

Literature Perspective

The process known as Globalization made the intercultural encounters a more common event to a greater number of people all over the world. People, ordinary and professional and, consequently researchers in the interpersonal and intercultural communication, began to experience the urge to find ways to avoid misunderstandings, miscommunications, failures as well as ways of being effective, successful, and competent in their now often interactions with foreigners. Thus, we can say that these are the major communicative difficulties in intercultural encounters: to understand and be understood by our peers in intercultural settings, be effective, successful, and competent in making ourselves clear and in reaching our communicative goals.

These mentioned difficulties are perceived as the major ones in intercultural communication encounters not only by the participants in the process but also by scholars. And in this regard, it doesn't matter to which school of thinking they are affiliated to, whether traditional, postmodern or critical. Scholars from all tendencies

seem to agree that understanding/misunderstanding, effective, successful, competent communication/ineffective, unsuccessful, incompetent communication are essential issues that have to be addressed in their researches. Nevertheless, this agreement doesn't mean that they see these issues from the same perspective or even defines the terms "understanding", "effectiveness", "successfulness" the same way.

I would say that it is precisely the way the scholars look at these issues that serves as ground for them to be accounted in the academic literature as Traditionalists (positivists, behaviorists, cognitivists, structuralists, etc.) or Critical (post-structuralists and post modernists, critical-postmodernists, constructivists, pragmatists, critical-pragmatists, etc.) Of course these categorizations don't mean to be absolute, pure dichotomic divisions. No one seems to deny that scholars from both groups share some points of views. However, there is no point in comparing what they have in common since it is not going to add anything to the discussion. The interesting and relevant point is to observe what the differences between them are, since it is precisely the difference that put them most of the times in different "groups".

Traditional Perspectives

Interculturalists such as Jandt, Gudykunst and Kim, Wiseman, Barna, Hofstede and Bennett seem to see meaning as something to be built in social interactions, and in this sense, there is no disagreement with critical scholars such as Habermas, Derrida, Bhabha, Young and others. The difference begins when the way this meaning is constructed leads to understanding between the speakers. The first group of scholars, more often considered as traditionalists, has as a basic premise that the main goal of a communication act - whether intercultural or intracultural - is to make the interactants converge the same meaning to an utterance. In consequence, the communication act will be considered effective and successful when this goal is reached. The speaker who gets to make the other speaker (receiver) converge the same meaning to the message (utterance) as it was intended by him/her is then, regarded as a competent speaker, competent communicator.

The premises that are in the basis of traditionalists' views are quite similar and could be resumed in: a) meaning is built in a social interaction and understanding each other depends on how competent the speakers are to be able to make the other to attach the same meaning he/she intended him/her to; b) the construction of the same (or similar) meanings by the interactants is a controllable process. Thus, if a communicator wants to be competent he/she has to learn how to have a better control of what is involved in this process in the communication act; c) The success or effectiveness of the communication process resides on the degree that similar meaning are attributed to the utterance by the speakers. Bottom line: attaching same (or similar) meaning to an utterance by different speakers (with same cultural background or not) is not only possible, reachable but desirable. And this is what constitutes the basis for "understanding" when communicating with others.

Based on these premises traditionalists scholars try to identify what are the sources of "failures" in the communication process, i.e., what factors can lead to misunderstandings between speakers, to unsuccess, to ineffectiveness, in other words, to "failure" in converging the same meaning to uttered messages. Once more a clarification is necessary. Although most of the factors raised by the scholars as pitfalls to communication could be applied to both intercultural and intercultural encounters, we are going to restrain this discussion to intercultural ones since this is the purpose of this essay.

Most scholars raise similar sources for the difficulties in reaching "successful understanding " in communication, most of them with roots in cognitive, affective,

behavioral aspects influenced and based by different cultural background. In order not to be repetitive I chose to expose Barn's (1994,) *Stumbling Blocks In Intercultural Communication* as an example of the most acknowledged sources of misunderstanding in intercultural encounters, since most of the scholars refer to similar sources, although sometimes with different emphasis or using different names.

Barn's (1996) six stumbling blocks in intercultural communication:

* Assumption of Similarities: There are similarities between cultures but assuming "people are people all over the world" can lead to an ethnocentric judgment toward possible behaviors of others. The source of misunderstanding in this case resides in the fact that one can assume too many similarities as if they were universal and not culturally determined.

* Language differences: The simple fact that people speak the same language doesn't mean that misunderstanding will not occur. And assuming the contrary is another source of unsuccessful communication in intercultural encounters.

* Nonverbal Misinterpretations: This source of misunderstanding is easy to observe but not always simple to avoid, since gestures are so much radicated in people's selves that they fail to notice that they are signaling messages.

* Preconception and Stereotypes: Gudykunst (op.cit.) defines stereotypes as " the pictures we have in our heads for the people we place in the various social categories we use". These pictures influence the communication we held with other people to the extent that we "judge" them, their way of being and living, their way of thinking and expressing theirselves based on what we expect them to.

* Tendency to Evaluate: Tendency to evaluate is commonly seen as a barrier to effective communication among traditionalists scholars. That's because when interactants attribute value judgments to each other's behaviors, utterances, and nonverbal attitudes they usually use their own values as reference.

* High Anxiety: Barna and other scholars see anxiety and its resulting tension or stress as sources of problems in intercultural encounters because a person's state of mind interferes directly in the way he/she perceives the situations and others' attitudes as well as in the way he/she expresses him/herself.

Proposals to overcome / circumvent communicative difficulties in intercultural encounters

- **traditional views:** Based on the traditionalists premises concerning communication we have already pointed out, we can see why their proposals are mostly based on learning and training. Since most of the problems they reckon as so in the communicative interaction are basically cognitive and behaviorist, they believe that people can learn and practice the skills to avoid misunderstandings. The more they learn about other cultures and how to behave in intercultural settings, the greater the chances they are not going to fail. The more aware they are of the source of the problems that leads to miscommunication, the more prepared they are to succeed in communicating with people from different cultures backgrounds.

Thus, the proposals are assertive sentences that counter attack the reckoned communicative difficulties, or, try to overcome them doing the opposite. Nevertheless, I couldn't find practical proposals in order to doing that besides the traditional "try to learn" or try to be mindful.

- **Critical Literature Perspective:** As it was said earlier in this paper, both traditionalists and critical scholars agree that the "understanding" issue in

intercultural encounters is a major difficulty to be addressed in their researches. What differentiate both groups is the way they conceive "meaning" and "understanding".

Critical scholars as well as most of the traditionalists agree that meaning is a construction which takes place in a social interaction between speakers (sender and receiver). The difference, though, resides on the fact that, for traditionalists, meaning can be "re-constructed" in the interaction and, for critical scholars, meaning is constantly being reassigned by the interactants through a "co-construction" process.

The basic premises that underline the critical literature are: a) Meaning is not something rigid, static, ready to be uncovered. It is not there, in the utterance, to be uncovered but passes through the utterance and is being constantly rehistoricized by the speakers. b) Since meaning is not something immanent, it cannot be completely controlled. Speakers much have an intention when producing a message. But they cannot be sure that their intended meaning is going to be reached by their peers. They can be cooperative with each other in trying to attribute similar meanings to the message they exchange, but they can never be sure that they have succeeded. c) Misunderstanding, ambiguity, mismatching in the construction of meaning through communicative interaction, rather than a "problem-to-be-solved" is constitutive to the human communication process itself, thus are unavoidable.

Critical theory acknowledges 'misunderstanding' in the communicative process as a difficulty, yes, but not necessarily a problem in itself. Neither have they seen 'misunderstanding' as the mere product of cognitive and/or behavioral inadequacies. They see the source of 'misunderstanding' in the very nature of human interactions.

Critical scholars acknowledge that 'understanding' in communicative interactions - regardless the fact that it is intercultural or intracultural - can occur, however. It is common that misunderstanding is present in communication. But it doesn't mean that understanding cannot happen. If that was the case there wouldn't have no point in people interacting with each other. Nevertheless, the way critical scholars conceive "understanding" is different from the way traditionalists do. The latter conceive understanding as the process of attributing same meaning to an uttered message, whereas the first conceive "understanding" as a process of negotiation: the negotiation of meaning.

Scholars like Habermas seem to be more comfortable in believing that "reaching" an understanding is feasible, reachable and, if people feel the need to qualify and quantify communication with terms such as "effective", and "successful" as well as to regard someone as "competent" communicator the only way it would be done would be to analyze the process of meaning negotiation. In this since, Habermas would argue that the factors that should be in negotiation would go beyond the semantically meaning (the "meaning" that is written in dictionaries, for instance) of words. It would have to include other cultural, social and personal aspects that constitute the content in which these communicative encounters occur.

Critical theory of intercultural communication has been strongly influenced by the work of many scholars but especially by the work of Habermas with his Theory of Communication Act. (TCA) and Derrida with his "deconstructing" thinking that puts in question the dichotomic way of working at communication, the future of meaning and other premises of traditional theories. Besides, Habermas' work has a lot in common with the Derrida way of looking at the communication process.

In fact, both scholars, as well as others Iike H.K. Bhabha, Foucault and Donald Davidson think that in order to try to have a better grasp of communicative interactions, in our case intercultural communicative interactions, it is necessary to

focus the attention more on the "process" rather than on the structure of the communicative encounter as usually do the traditionalists thinkers. They see meaning as something that is not <u>located</u> in any of the interactants but as something that is in the communicative space created by them. Thus, each interaction is unique and can never be repeated.

For critical scholars the source of 'problems' in communicative (inter our intra-cultural) encounters are not so much the behavioral and/or cognitive aspects pointed by traditional theoretical school. Rather, they rely on <u>relational</u> aspects of the interactants in the space of the interaction.

The alternative presented by this critical school, especially by Habermas, in order to try to circumvent difficulties is "reaching understanding" in intercultural encounters. Thus, it doesn't fit the "ten-step-training-program" commonly presented in intercultural manuals. Rather, it is based on dialogue between interactants. It is a "reflexive" process, in which the speakers have active roles.

Critique of the theories

There is no doubt that the issue of understanding, success, effectiveness, can be considered as major difficulties in intercultural communicative encounters. Since they represent difficulties even in intracultural encounters, it just makes sense that they do the same in more complexes situations, where even more aspects are influencing the process the way cultural aspects do.

Surely, there is no simple way of addressing these difficulties and all serious attempts must be regarded as important contributions. Nevertheless, we usually feel more affiliated to one theoretical school rather than others, depending on our individual background. It doesn't mean that, in affiliating ourselves to one way of thinking, we should disregard or disqualify the others. Neither we have to (or should) take dichotomic positions, which would impoverish our perception of reality.

That said, I would like to position myself in affiliation with the critical school. I certainly acknowledge the relevance of traditionalists' researches and point of views. However, I disagree with many of the premises that are in the basis of their thinking. The first premise with which I disagree is the one that states the possibility of two or more interactants (always) attach the same meaning to one utterance, the exact meaning intended by the speaker. I don't think that interactants can control the meaning of their utterances in order to make their counterparts attach the same meaning as they intended them to, as suggests Gudykunst(1998) and so many others quoted in this work. In this regard, I agree with critical scholars when they say that we can never be sure whether the "receiver" of our utterance managed to attach the exact meaning we wanted him/her to.

This premise is also in the basis of their proposals to overcome the difficulties in intercultural communication. Since they believe that speakers can control the process of attaching meanings to their utterances and that speakers are responsible for how interactants "understand" their messages (c.f. Gudykunst (op. cit.), it makes sense that they need to find ways to overcome this "problem" within the interactants behavior and cognitive skills. This belief leads them to attribute to aspects such as the ones so called "Barna's stumbling blocks to intercultural communication" and the alike presented in this paper the sources to "misunderstanding", "ineffectiveness" and "unsuccess" in intercultural encounters.

I agree with them when they claim that these stumbling blocks are sources of communicative problems. I just don't believe that they are the REAL SOURCES of them. The way I see them, they contribute to misunderstanding between intercultural speakers and should be taken into serious consideration by people who are going to

take part in an intercultural interaction. However, I agree with critical scholars, such as Habermas, Derrida, Young and others referred earlier, when they identify the real sources of these communicative difficulties in other level, the level of the nature of language and human interactions.

Under a critical perspective, language is not perfect, since it doesn't represent perfectly humans thoughts, intentions, feelings. Neither humans thoughts, intentions and feelings are perfect, exact, fixed. They are in constant mutation, in constant movement and they can change in the exact second an utterance is being made.

What traditionalists see as "problems" to communication, criticals see as constitutive elements of the process.Thus, they propose that interactants should be aware of the nature of human communication, its fallibility, its instability and dynamic characteristic in order to deal with them in a more "successful" way. Successful, then, would mean the ability of dealing with these constitutive variables.

And how are they expected to do so? How to deal successfully with these variables?

The scholar who has influenced this critical school the most is Habermas (op.cit.) and that's him who proposes a way to manage these communicative variables. He says that the only way of minimizing misunderstandings in communication is trough the very process of communication. If interactants are aware of all these constitutive characteristics of human communication they would be more opened to their active roles in the construction of meaning in their interactions. They are not going to assume that what they are saying is completely clear and unambiguous because they will have in mind that the meaning he intends(or intended at first) is not "attached" to the utterance ready to be uncovered by the other, but rather, that this meaning is going to be constructed together with the other interactant. Being aware of all this process they could be more cooperative with each other and, in doing so, they would try to avoid preconceptions, they would have in mind that the stereotypes, assumptions, expectations, etc they have towards their counterparts, especially in intercultural settings, should be in constant movement, should be constantly reexamined and adapted to each situation. They would use these so called stumbling blocks not as barriers but as bridges that take them closer to each other and that should be moved or removed accordingly to each new reality.

Critical scholars call this cooperative process "meaning negotiation" or "reaching understanding" process. They don't see understanding as the consequence of attributing same meaning to utterances as the traditionalists do, but as the consequence of negotiating and constructing; of assigning and reassigning meanings every time it's necessary; of checking with counterparts whether what they got from the utterances were what was meant to be got, and if don't, what was meant then. Of course this process is not perfect either. And it is not meant to be, otherwise it would incur in the same basic traditional premises of controllability of the meaning and of the process. It just means to be more realistic and more coherent with the nature of communication as seen in this perspective.

Success, effectiveness, competence would be based in different criteria than the ones used by traditionalist scholars. In a critical perspective, the degree of success and effectiveness, thus competence and understanding is proportional to how communicative the communication is.

The more interactants are able to enter the process of negotiating meaning, of reaching understanding, the more competent they are, the more successful and effective their communicative interaction would be and the greater their level of understanding each other.

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A question, though, could be raised here: are these abilities to become a competent communicator, to reach understanding in a successful and effective way learnable? If so, how?

Traditionalist scholars propose that these abilities are learnable and should be reached through a learning training process after which people will be able to avoid the stumbling blocks. However, I couldn't find any real model that is able to accomplish all this. They usually say: people should avoid this and that, but they don't say how. And the way I see it no one would ever be able to train people in avoiding things that are in the very nature of communication and human relations. I attribute this to a positivist illusion that we can control the meanings of our utterances; a Cartesian illusion that is very strong in western way of thinking and conceiving the world and human relations.

If we are going to answer the previous question under a critical perspective we would say: yes, these abilities are learnable and people should be trained on that. The difference is in what they would be trained. Critical scholars propose that they first need to be aware of the nature of their communication process and what constitute them. Then they should be trained in dealing with the process of negotiating meaning, in reaching understanding. However, they wouldn't receive a manual with a "ten-step-plan-to-be ...". Rather, they should be exposed to simulations of actual communicative situations in which they would have to contribute to creation of meanings, to "reaching understanding". This kind of training would help them to be mindful when communicating with others. And, the most important of all, they would have the opportunity to realize, over and over, that we cannot control completely the communication process, that we need each other to create and recreate meaning, that a communicative interaction is always unpredictable because people are unpredictable by nature. And, instead of trying to avoid the insecurity that comes from these situations, especially the intercultural ones, they could learn to accept the unavoidable and enjoy the excitement of the adventure of intercultural communicative encounters.

I know that these proposals sound shallow at first, mainly because we are used to positivist proposals that promises unreachable yet desirable things. Critical proposals seem unreachable because they are not assertive and are not presented in the form of "recipe". However, they are more realistic and coherent with the nature of communication. They don't promise miracles but they bring hope to the also human desire of mutual understanding.

In my opinion, the critical views are more coherent and present more chances to really contribute to better understanding in a wider scale, since it is meant to help interactants to understand their own nature, the nature of their own communicative process.

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