

THEORETICAL STUDY ABOUT THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: The present paper presents the means to intercultural communication, a new area. Because the peoples have interacted with others from different cultures throughout our history in wars, religious journeys and exchange of goods, they have also been well aware of the difficulties these encounters may cause.

Keywords: intercultural communication, nonverbal communication, paralanguage.

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of intercultural issues is by no means a new area. Even though the history of intercultural contact is long, it has never before reached the magnitude of today's world. Earlier it was only people in certain professions or status that had the contact to the foreign cultures.

Nowadays even the most isolated and marginal groups of people have the opportunity to interact with people all over the world. Intercultural interaction has become a reality of everyday life for almost everyone. The growth of interdependence of people and cultures in the global society of the twenty-first century has forced us to pay even more attention to intercultural issues.

There are several reasons for the development of the world into a global village of today. The development of technology has enabled a constant flow of information and ideas across boundaries. Communication is faster and more available than ever. Also the development of transportation has increased face-to-face contact with people from different cultural backgrounds immensely.

These developments, in turn, have affected the world economy. The business world is becoming more international and interrelated and international economies face a true interdependence. Widespread population migrations have changed the demographics of several nations and new intercultural identities and communities have been born. Cultural diversity and multiculturalism are the realities of working and domestic life everywhere. In the process of migration and general internationalization the idea of a national identity has changed. International alliances and subcultures inside the nations have caused a de-emphasis on the nation-state.

In order to live and function in this multicultural environment as effectively and meaningfully as possible, people must be competent in intercultural communication. Intercultural education has been brought up in many countries since the 60s. Previously, however, these educational programs have mainly concentrated on acculturating immigrants and other minorities into the majority population of a nation. With the new technology in communication and education we can now go further than this. The goal is to make the intercultural learning interactive so that both parties teach and learn from each other. Located almost at the opposite sides of the world, Finland and South Africa are very interesting partners in intercultural terms.

2. COMMUNICATION

The term communication can be defined in many ways. Myron W. Lustig and Jolene Koester (1996, 29) defined communication as “a symbolic process in which people create shared meanings”.

A symbol in this definition refers to a word, action or object that represents a meaning. Meaning, then, is a perception, thought or feeling experienced and communicated by a person. Meaning can be a personal experience which cannot be shared with others as such but needs to be interpreted as a message.

A message, in turn, is a set of symbols used to create shared meanings. (Lustig and Koester 1996, 29.) For example, the words in this text are symbols that form the message that is communicated. Symbolical interpretations are often attached to certain behavior. For example, blushing can be interpreted as a feeling of embarrassment, at least in some cultures.

In communication, everything is based on an interpretive processing. Communication is not always intentional. In fact we send messages unconsciously all the time. Still people around us interpret and give meaning to these symbolic behaviors of ours. For example, we may not give the choice of clothes for a normal day much thought but people who meet us that particular day might interpret our outfit as a clear message of our personality. There are no guarantees that two people will interpret the same message in the same way. It is quite the opposite. This is especially true for intercultural encounters.

Communication is a dynamic process. It changes, moves and develops all the time. All the communication situations are unique in nature and the process can be seen as “a sequence of distinct but interrelated steps” (Lustig and Koester 1996:30). Finally, communication involves shared meanings. This means that as people experience the world and everyday activities, they create and share meanings with other people and groups. Communication is interpretive in nature and people actively attempt to understand and organize their experiences in the world.

According to Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter (8:1991) communication is “*a dynamic transactional behavior-affecting process in which people behave intentionally in order to induce or elicit a particular response from another person*”.

In addition to the previous definition, they add the proponents of *a channel*, through which the communication takes place; *a responder*, who observe the communicative behavior; *encoding* and *decoding*, i.e. the processes of producing and interpreting information; and *feedback*, which refers to the information available to a source that permits him or her to make qualitative judgments about communication effectiveness.

As Samovar and Porter put it “*communication is complete only when the intended behavior is observed by the intended receiver and that person responds to and is affected by the behavior*”. Thus their definition is largely based on intentional communication. This is only to show that there are several ways to define and understand communication.

3. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Intercultural communication refers to the communication between people from different cultures. According to Samovar and Porter (10:1991) intercultural communication occurs whenever a message is produced by a member of one culture for consumption by a member of another culture, a message must be understood. Because of cultural differences in these kinds of contacts, the potential for misunderstanding and disagreement is great. To reduce this risk, it is important to study intercultural communication.

The relationship between culture and language has been studied for many decades, but scholars from different disciplines still have not reached consensus on the degree to which culture and language are related to each other. The first argument is that language determines our culture. This approach comes from the “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis” which claims that language not only transmits but also shapes our thinking, beliefs, and attitudes. In other words, language is a guide to culture. Other scholars argue that language merely reflects, rather than

shapes, our thinking, beliefs, and attitudes. Despite these differences in approaches, all scholars still agree that a close relationship exists between language and culture.

4. VERBAL COMMUNICATION (VC)

Language is one of the most important differences between many cultures, and one of the greatest barriers. Differences in language make intercultural interactions difficult. Even if a person is fluent in a language, severe mistakes can still occur. Linguistic conventions may cause significant misunderstandings related, for instance, to speech acts, interaction management and lexicon and politeness forms.

As Argyle says (34:1991) visitors to another culture should be aware of the impression they are creating by the speech style which they use. A person can indicate a positive or negative attitude to another by shifting towards a more similar or less similar speech style as the respondent, using e.g. a different accent or dialect. This can happen unconsciously.

Argyle (34:1991) further explains how most cultures have a number of forms of polite usage of language, which can be misleading. For instance, Americans ask questions which are in fact orders or requests (Would you like to...?). In all the cultures there are special features of language, certain words or types of conversation, which are considered appropriate for certain situations, e.g. introducing people to one another or asking someone for a favor.

There are differences in the amount of directness/indirectness one chooses and in the structure of conversations. The usual question-answer speech sequence is not used in all cultures and, for example, negations (the word 'no') are not used in some Asian countries. In any case, language fluency is a necessary condition in order to make intercultural communication function.

5. NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION (NVC)

Nonverbal communication is hugely important in any interaction with others; its importance is multiplied across cultures. This is because we tend to look for nonverbal cues when verbal messages are unclear or ambiguous, as they are more likely to be across cultures (especially when different languages are being used). Since nonverbal behavior arises from our cultural common sense -- our ideas about what is appropriate, normal, and effective as communication in relationships -- we use different systems of understanding gestures, posture, silence, spacial relations, emotional expression, touch, physical appearance, and other nonverbal cues.

Cultures also attribute different degrees of importance to verbal and nonverbal behavior. In addition to verbal language there are great differences in cultural norms and practices of nonverbal behavior. Nonverbal communication refers to all intentional and unintentional stimuli between communicating parties, other than spoken word. These nonverbal processes are sometimes accounted for as much as 70% of the communication. Successful interaction in intercultural settings requires not only the understanding of verbal messages but of nonverbal messages as well. Characteristic to nonverbal communication is that it is less systematized than verbal communication; it is culture-bound and ambiguous.

Nonverbal communication can be divided to four categories: *kinesics*, *proxemics*, *paralanguage* and *chronemics*. Kinesics refers to the body movements in communication.

It has also been called body language. The four most common body activities are facial expressions, eye contact, hand gestures, and touch. Severe misunderstandings can occur if one does not know the rules of, for example, touching others or level of eye contact in another culture.

Proxemics refers to the study of how we use space in communication process. This space can mean anything from architecture and furniture to the distance between interactants in communication situations. Paralanguage comprises of all the sounds we produce with our voices that are not words. These include for instance laughter, tone and pace of voice and "empty" words such as *um*, *uh* or *You know*. Chronemics is the study of how we use

time in communication. Hall's time orientations (monochronic and polychronic; see eJournal on Culture for details) belong to this category, as well as our understanding of present, past and future.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Each of the variables discussed in this module – time, space, personal responsibility and fate, face and face-saving, and nonverbal communication -- are much more complex than it is possible to convey. Each of them influences the course of communications and can be responsible for conflict or the escalation of conflict when it leads to miscommunication or misinterpretation.

A culturally-fluent approach to conflict means working over time to understand these and other ways communication varies across cultures, and applying these understandings in order to enhance relationships across differences.

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