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Prolegomena to a Better Definition of Intercultural Communication: The Concept of Culture

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Abstract: The aim of our paper is to lay the foundations for an adequate definition of intercultural communication, a very important and highly used notion nowadays due to the present complex reality it refers to. Since the terminological phrase "intercultural communication" involves the previous knowledge of two other concepts, *communication* and *culture*, both equally "polysemantic", we will try to establish, first of all, the "common core" for each of them in turn. For the beginning, we will attempt to clarify here, by means of essential distinctions, the concept of *culture*, planning to discuss the concept of *communication* in another paper.

Keywords: intercultural communication; culture; communication; essential distinctions; unitary designation

1. Introduction

In a famous and influential American handbook of intercultural communication, *Communication between Cultures*, written by Larry A. Samovar and Richard E. Porter, it is stated, from the very beginning, the fact that "intercultural communication involves interaction between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event" (Samovar & Porter, 2004, p. 15). The two authors do not forget to add that their book "is about the role of culture in communication". However, when dealing with the notion of culture, Samovar and Porter deplore "the elusive nature of the term", observing that "culture is ubiquitous, multidimensional, complex, all-pervasive, and difficult to define" (Samovar & Porter, 2004, p. 32), also quoting the opinion of authorities such as L.E. Harrison and S.P. Huntington (the editors of the volume *Culture Matters. How Values Shape Human Progress*, published in 2000), according to whom "the term 'culture', of course, has had multiple meanings in different disciplines and different contexts" (*apud* Samovar & Porter, 2004, p. 32). What is more, they also mention A.L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn's book from 1952, *Culture. A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, in which are listed 164 definitions of culture found in the anthropology literature. The conclusion is the following: "Definitions of culture range from those that are all-encompassing ('it is everything') to those that are narrow ('it is opera, art, and ballet')." (Samovar & Porter, 2004, p. 32).

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2. Culture as a Multi-Discursive Term

Eventually, Samovar and Porter will choose only one recent definition of the many given to culture, justifying their choice. We will refer to the respective definition in the end of our paper. Until then, let us concentrate on other opinions, coming from different research directions. In any case, it is obvious that, in order to understand what intercultural communication is, one must clarify the term *culture* itself. Almost all the specialists who have been interested in the topic of culture have underlined the complexity of the concept and its various meanings. Some have come to the conclusion that the term *culture* is *multi-discursive*, meaning that it can be used in a great number of *discourses*: "This means you cannot import a fixed definition into any and every context and expect it to make sense. What you have to do is identify the discursive context itself. It may be the discourse of nationalism, fashion, anthropology, literary criticism, viti-culture, Marxism, feminism, cultural studies, or even common sense." (J. Hartley, in O'Sullivan et alii, 1994, pp. 68-69).

2.1. Obviously, the idea of "multiplicity" of meanings or of "multidimensionality" in the case of this concept has been frequently remarked (see supra, 1), with the mention that John Hartley's observation seems more pertinent to us, since it can be linked to the important notion of "universe of discourse" used in logic and philosophy. According to Eugenio Coseriu, the *universe of discourse* is: "the universal system of significations to which a discourse (or a phrase) belongs and which determines its validity and meaning" (Coseriu, 1967, p. 318).[1] Indeed, a term is correctly defined only by relating it to its universe of discourse and there are differences in meaning which result from using the same (often interdisciplinary) term in different contexts. One can wonder whether, once the necessary distinctions made, one can identify a certain semantic average, a certain "unitary signification" which can justify all its acceptations (as long as the levels are not confused).

2.2. First of all, we believe that, in the case of the term *culture*, one must first exclude from discussion its original meaning (i.e. lat. *colere* 'to plough'), still present in phrases such as *the culture of plants*, *the culture of vine*, etc. It is only of interest to us here from an etymological point of view, in order to establish the way in which, on the basis of a metaphor, the respective term has come to its current designation. Initially, the term was linked to agriculture (the cultivation of the soil, of plants, etc.); later, by extension, it has come to refer to the culture of some beings as well, such as oysters or bacteria. With this acceptation, as John Hartley observes, "cultivation such as this implies not just growth but also deliberate tending of 'natural' stock to transform it into a desired 'cultivar' – a strain with selected, refined or improved characteristics" (O'Sullivan et alii, 1994, p. 69). And it is only one step from here to the idea of "mind cultivation". The metaphorical transfer has been made quite naturally.

3. Some Different Aspects of Culture

In order to more rigorously and objectively define the term *culture*, we have to take into account the fact that we deal with an "international" or "supraidiomatic" term, which cannot be lexicographically described only from the perspective of a certain historical language, as a mere word belonging to the common vocabulary. For instance, to refer to another famous example, the signification of the French word *parole* is defined by the structural semantics of French in relation with words such as: *mot*, *discours*, *propos*, *boniment*, *devise*, *sentence*, *expression*, *langage*, etc., while the term *parole* from Saussure's linguistics is defined by the respective linguistics through a delimitation drawn within the reality itself, omitting at the same time the oppositions in which this word functions in French (Coseriu, 1987, p. 181). Thus, after having established that we have to exclude from our discussion the initial, metaphorical signification and that we have to define *culture* both by relating it to reality and also relating it to the universe of discourse to which it belongs, we have to consider a series of distinctions which other researchers make (sometimes without the required precision). We have not aimed here to list all the definitions given to *culture* all over the world, but to focus on some of them

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[1] Mention must be made that the English translation of all the Romanian, Spanish and Italian quotations inserted here is mine.

(almost randomly chosen, although some provided by Romanian specialists), which (intuitively) reveal some interesting aspects of the cultural phenomenon.

3.1. A first distinction regards the opposition between (1) *culture* and (2) *civilization*. According to Ovidiu Drimba, (1) *culture* comprises "the attitudes, acts and works limited – in point of genesis, intention, motivation and purpose – to the domain of spirit and intellect. The work, the act and the man of culture follow the satisfaction of spiritual and intellectual needs; self-revelation, discovering the unknown, the explanation of mystery and the pleasure of beauty" (Drimba, 1997, p. 6). However, by (2) *civilization* one understands (or should understand[1]) "the totality of the means through which man adapts to the (physical and social) environment, managing to subdue and transform it, to organise it and to integrate into it. Everything that belongs to the horizon of satisfaction of material needs, comfort and security means 'civilization'." (Drimba, 1997, p. 6). Obviously, the differentiating aspect is important and justified and it corresponds, *grosso modo*, to the two essential dimensions of man identified by Hegel: *language* and *work*. Language transforms man into a *cultural* being, while, by working, man satisfies his (increasing) biological necessities, permanently modifying his natural environment.

3.2. Once culture has been delimitated, one can operate another distinction within it; in other words, culture is made to be (a) broadly speaking, *anthropological*, or (b) narrowly speaking, "*elitist*". Accordingly, Giovanni Sartori's opinion is worth mentioning.

Taking into consideration the first meaning, (a) the anthropological and sociological acceptation, one can say that every human being lives in the sphere of a specific culture: "If man is, as he is in fact, a symbolic animal, it results *eo ipso* that he lives in a cognitive context of values, beliefs, conceptions and, in one word, of symbolisations which constitute his culture" (Sartori, 1999, p. 16). From this generic point of view, even the primitives or the illiterate are the possessors of culture and, in fact, this is exactly the perspective from which one talks about the "culture of entertainment", "culture of imagery", about "juvenile culture", etc.

If one takes as a condition of culture "the knowledge", then one gets to (b) a narrow and appreciative acceptation, according to which "an educated person is a person *who knows*, with solid readings or at least one that is well-informed" (Sartori, 1999, p. 16). Thus, the true culture would belong only to the "educated", not to the ignorant ones. Observing the new tendencies, G. Sartori sounds the alarm: "The message with which the new culture gets recommended and eulogized is the following: the culture of the book belongs to the few (elitist) ones, while the audio-visual culture belongs to the many" (Sartori, 1999, p. 17).

3.3. Trying to provide another anthropological definition of culture, Andra Şerbănescu believes that there are two basic acceptations of the term *culture*: (i) "the totality of the works of art created by a human community (literature, music, sculpture, etc.) and, particularly, the knowledge of an individual about them" (Şerbănescu, 2007, p. 107); and (ii) "a sum of values, norms, institutions, artefacts specific to a community (lifestyles, human values, religious beliefs, customs, ways of thinking, aesthetic standards, linguistic expressions, communication styles etc.), namely a certain civilization [sic!] with all its forms of manifestation" (Şerbănescu, 2007, p. 107).

In other words, briefly speaking, culture would be "a structure of significations historically transmitted" (Şerbănescu, 2007, p. 107). According to the above quoted author, the latter meaning would include the former, corresponding to the anthropological definition of culture to which she refers when discussing about the Romanian culture, the Japanese culture, etc.

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[1] Due to its numerous definitions, the meaning of the respective terms has been inverted in some circles, with the risk of producing confusions: "for the facts of civilisation, the Germans use the term *Kultur*, while the French prefer to indicate the fact of culture by the word *civilisation*; phrases such as 'spiritual civilization' and 'material culture' are frequently used, which is a clear *contradictio in adjecto*; or, even more, the terms get to be overlapped […]." (Drimba, 1997, pp. 5-6). For the invention and history of the French term *civilisation*, see Benveniste, 1966, pp. 336-345. For the distinction between *culture* and *civilization*, also see (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, pp. 13-17).

3.4. According to Ştefan Bârsănescu – the author of an impressive work (published in 1937) about the policy of culture in Romania – the term *culture* has two acceptations as well: (1) "*the capital of knowledge*, which makes possible the state and the economy, the art and religion, the art and morals"; (2) "*education*, representing, according to pedagogy, the *dynamic* culture or the process of perfecting of individuals and of ennoblement of collective life" (Bârsănescu, 2003, p. 37).

The process regarding the transition from the static perspective (that of culture seen as a sum of knowledge) to the dynamic one (that of the incessant/continuous producing of culture) is also rendered: "The culture education is realized through the use of *culture as spiritual goods* which is offered to the individual in order to be assimilated, mastered, as a mental exercise, etc. and it constitutes the ferment of germination for new scientific, artistic, political creations" (Bârsănescu, 2003, p. 37).

Before drawing any conclusion from the analysis of the above mentioned distinctions and definitions, we should observe that culture, in its essence, is an *activity* that produces certain "objects". In order to continue our discussion, we must distinguish between *productive activities* and *unproductive activities*, trying to characterize mainly the former.

4. Culture as a Productive Activity

Both the ancient Greeks and the Romans intuited that activities can be of two types: *productive* and *unproductive*. And they would express this intuition by means of language as well, since old Greek had the verbs *poiein* for 'to make something productively' (hence *poiesis*) and *prattein* for 'to do something unproductively', while Latin recorded, for the same distinction, the verb *facere*, respectively the verb *agere*. Thus, if, for instance, someone would weave a basket, he was asked *Quid facis*? ("What are you making?"), but, on the contrary, if he was walking or breathing, he was asked *Quid agis*? ("What are you doing?") (Coşeriu, 1996, p. 64).

Aristotle brought his contribution to this matter as well, differentiating three aspects in the case of productive activities: the activity itself (*enérgeia*), competence or technique (*dýnamis*), that is to know "how to make it", and the product (*érgon*). *Enérgeia* is logically previous to all techniques (*dýnamis*), being creativity itself. To illustrate it, one can give the following example: the technique used by Leonardo da Vinci in painting represented a competence that the great humanist developed in time and which was his own. Based on it, he could create as many paintings he wanted, the paintings being the *érgon* which was bearing the mark of his genius, namely the product of his activity (as *enérgeia*). If one of his disciples would learn this technique, then the disciple himself could make, in his turn, works *à la* da Vinci. However, on the other hand, the disciple could bring his contribution, modifying or improving, through activity, the respective pictorial procedure. Provided an improvement was noticed in his new work, then the technique would take over the alteration, enriching itself (and thus surpassing what had already been known) (Coşeriu, 1996, p. 65).

It is true that, if we will now return to the previous distinctions and definitions, we will observe that most of them take into consideration, first of all, the status of *product* (*érgon*) of culture, and only secondly, the status of *competence* (*dýnamis* or *téchne*), as a "way of making". In this regard, the one who seems to take into account (at least intuitively), more than the others, the above mentioned aspects is Ştefan Bârsănescu, whose definitions of culture include both the idea of "competence" and the idea of "pure activity" (*enérgeia*), as a dynamic process.

5. Unitary Signification vs. Unitary Designation

It is time to opt for a satisfactory definition of culture, meant to grasp the essence of as many cultural manifestations as possible. As for the significations of ordinary words belonging to a certain historical language, the structural semantics has already provided a solution. It is the notion of *unitary signification*, according to which "for each distinct linguistic form, in grammar and in lexis, one must

first of all assume a unique signification, namely a unitary signification valid for all contexts in which the respective form appears and which can justify its values as motivated by means of contextual framing" (Coseriu, 1981, p. 204).[1] Unfortunately, such a notion cannot be applied in the case of this "international" terminology, since terminology is not idiomatically structured. Hence, we analogically suggest a similar concept, that of "unitary designation"[2], by which we envisage the "common core" of the various manifestations of the investigated reality.

Aristotle can still be of help in this regard as well (especially when referring to "things" rather than "words"). This is how the British philosopher R.G. Collingwood presents his method (when dealing with certain philosophical terms): "Aristotle has a characteristic method in philosophical lexicography. He recognizes that a single word has several different meanings, and never falls into the stupid mistake of supposing that one word means one thing: on the other hand, he recognizes that these various meanings are connected among themselves, and that the word is not equivocal because it has more than one meaning. He thinks that of its various meanings one is the deepest and truest meaning; the others are approximations to it arising from varying degrees of failure to grasp this deepest meaning. Consequently, he arranges his meanings in a series like shots on a target which gradually creep in and find the bull." (Collingwood, 1960, p. 80).

We can at present state that what Aristotle was doing by searching for „the deepest and truest meaning" was to choose the signification which would correspond the best to the investigated reality. Indeed, in the case of scientific terms, for instance, it is said that signification and designation overlap.

6. Coseriu's Definition of Culture

We believe that the manner in which Eugenio Coseriu defines culture involves the "unitary designation" or "common core" we are looking for. Thus, Eugenio Coseriu, taking as a starting point Hegel's conception (based on an Aristotelian idea), defines *culture* as "*the historical objectification of spirit into forms which last, into forms which become traditions, historical forms which describe the world specific to humans, the human's specific universe*" (Coşeriu, 1994, p. 173). And the *spirit* historically objectified in the form of culture is *enérgeia* (Aristotle's concept), that is *the creative activity or the creativity itself*: "that specific activity which is logically previous to any dynamism, to any acquired or experimented technique" (Coşeriu, 1994, p. 173). In addition, Coseriu also states (following G. Vico) that the forms of activity which constitute culture are language, art, religion, myth, science and philosophy. At the same time, one should not ignore the fact that the respective creative activity is a *free activity* (in the philosophical sense of the word *free*), namely an activity whose object is infinite, i.e. it never ends.

7. Hartley's Different Perspective on the Definition of Culture

John Hartley seems to have a different opinion: "In each case, culture's meaning will be determined relationally, or negatively, by its differentiation from others in that discourse, and not positively, by reference to any intrinsic or self-evident properties that are eternally fixed as being quintessentially cultural. Further, the concept of culture cannot be 'verified' by referring its meaning to phenomena or actions or objects out there beyond discourse. What the term refers to (its referent as opposed to its

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[1] The concept of "unitary signification" was intuited by Aristotle and later adequately defined by Leibniz, following a criticism made to J. Locke. The importance of this concept for linguistics was shown by Eugenio Coseriu (see Munteanu, 2014). It was occasioned by the setting of the general principles of lexematics (which are, in fact, the fundamental principles of analytical structuralism). Coseriu mentions, among other things, the principle of functionality, to which he adds an important corollary which regards the signification − the one of the unitary signification − as well as a methodological or technical corollary, namely that of commutation.

[2] Within the general linguistic content (as opposed to its sound or graphic expression), Coseriu distinguishes: (1) *designation* (*denotation* or *reference*), which points to the extralinguistic reality; (2) *signification*, which is the content given exclusively through and by a certain historical language, and (3) *sense*, which represents the content of a concrete act of communication, of a text/discourse.

signified) is determined by the term itself in its discursive context, and not the other way around." (O'Sullivan et alii, 1994, p. 69).

However, we ought to agree with Coseriu, who, otherwise, has a greater ability to grasp the essence of culture than Hartley does it. It is a known fact that the notion of culture cannot be "verified" in the same way as natural objects are, but it can be deduced from human activities. In the same manner, although spirit itself cannot be seen or touched as any other concrete object, nevertheless, it can be conceived (just as mind is) as a concept deduced from certain activities, as a unique principle to which all these activities can be reduced in order to be understood as a unity (Coseriu, 1967, p. 136).

8. Samovar & Porter's Intuition Regarding a Better Definition of Culture

Let us return now to the definition Samovar and Porter have eventually chosen. This definition was given in 1994 by A.J. Marsella as follows: "Culture is shared learned behavior which is transmitted from one generation to another for purposes of promoting individual and social survival, adaptation, and growth and development. Culture has both external (e.g., artifacts, roles, institutions) and internal representations (e.g., values, attitudes, beliefs, cognitive/affective/sensory styles, consciousness patterns, and epistemologies)." (Marsella, 1994, *apud* Samovar & Porter, 2004, p. 32). The American authors explain why they chose this definition: "We like Marsella's definition because it includes what Harrison and Huntington call the 'subjective' elements of culture – the elements such as 'values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in a society'. These are the elements that shape and control perception and interaction." (Samovar & Porter, 2004, p. 33).

There is no doubt that – by referring to these internal or "subjective" elements of culture, but mainly by the observation that these elements "shape and control perception and interaction" – Samovar and Porter manage to grasp (more vaguely, of course) the essence of culture as revealed by Coseriu.

9. Communication as the Basis of Culture

The fact that the two realities, communication and culture, are interconnected, also results from Hall's statement: "Culture is communication and communication is culture." (*apud* Samovar & Porter, 2004, p. 28). The two American specialists seem to be hesitant when having to decide which phenomenon is the most important: "Put into slightly different terms – when looking at communication and culture, it is hard to decide which is the voice and which is the echo." (Samovar & Porter, 2004, p. 28). Nevertheless, we have learnt from Hegel that language/communication is not only a form of culture, among other cultural forms, but the basis of culture itself. So, the next thing to do is to adequately define *communication*.

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