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POSTMODERN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: BEYOND NATIONAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES

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New modes of communication gradually emerged at the end of the 20th century, shifting the focus of attention from national and ethnic criteria to the more complex and multifarious ones suggested by the intercultural paradigm. This shift parallels the global tendency to move away from univocal, modernist perspectives to the more complex, and ambiguous postmodern ones. Downplaying the role of fixed national or ethnic identities in the communication process, and refusing simplifications and generalizations to emphasize instead fluidity and complexity, this new paradigm has had consequences on the lives of sub-groups and minorities, and on the communication process as a whole.

Keywords: *modernism, postmodernism, communication, interculturality, multiculturalism, identity, ethnicity.*

Introduction

Charles Jencks, an architect, landscape designer, and architectural historian, and one of the promoters of postmodernism, claims that modernist architecture, posing as an avant-garde, focuses on univocal forms, such as right angles and rectangular shapes, and resorts to a limited set of cold materials, steel, glass, and concrete. He adds that, conversely, postmodern architecture favors forms derived from the mind, the body, and nature. Borrowing from history, it incorporates curves, and wood, and bricks. It uses color and décor to produce a complex hybrid of neo-classicism and modernism, a hybrid that is precisely the point of postmodernism: a critical reaction to modernism which comes from within modernism itself, and as such, refuses the “scorched earth” policy of modernism.

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Outside the realm of architecture, postmodernism also deconstructs the modernist trust in grand, metanarratives, from Marxism to Christianity, and displays an increasing skepticism toward their totalizing nature. What is required, it stresses, are smaller-scaled, multiple viewpoints and truths to interpret a complex, heterogeneous human existence marked by fragmentation, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

My claim in this paper, is that the emergence of the intercultural concept in communication theories and processes lies parallel to, and is an offshoot of, postmodernism. Rejecting pure, univocal conceptions that unequivocally assimilated culture to national or ethnic belonging, interculturality, as all postmodern endeavors, complexifies, and to a certain extent muddles, but also ultimately enriches the scope of communication. After highlighting the main differences between multiculturalism and interculturality, and tracing the progressive development of the intercultural paradigm in communication processes, I will focus on recent evolutions in the field and their parallel with postmodernism.

Multiculturalism vs interculturality

The term “intercultural” is currently being used with a variety of meanings. For some, it is a full-fledged concept, with an impact on research in various fields. For others, it is a mere method to improve negotiation or educational strategies. Some use it in linguistics or communication theory, others, much more pragmatically, to describe a set of policies designed to improve the wellbeing of expatriate employees or immigrant populations, and ultimately restore the social fabric.

Interculturality is often opposed to (but sometimes also confused with) multiculturalism. Multiculturalism describes a way for individuals of diverse origins of living together in a given space with a limited degree of influence and interaction between them. In a multicultural environment, co-existing groups remain distinct. Multiculturalism implies considering individuals on the basis of the communities they live in and belong to. Such communities can comprise disadvantaged groups, like LGBT, ethnic, or religious minorities, or even the disabled.

Proponents of multiculturalism insist on the need to preserve the “cultural” difference of these communities. But the asymmetry of power relations between the groups, and their conflicting practices make it difficult to maintain this position. Consequently, multiculturalism has been analyzed diversely.

Some consider it evolved into a form of withdrawal, each group or community closing in around practices and values they consider fundamental to their sustainability, often at the expense of their neighbors'. They accuse it of leading to communitarianism, a state described by its opponents, according to Pierre-André Taguieff, as "*a project aiming at subjecting the members of a defined group to the norms supposedly proper to this group, to this community, in short to control the opinions, the beliefs, the behaviors of those who belong in principle to this community*" (Halpern, 2004, p. 4). Communitarianism would have eroded the distinctive, single, national identities promoted by the emergence of Nation-States from the 18th century onward. In the French context, the term is used in a pejorative and generally ideological way to describe a threat to the unity of the nation, a threat to republicanism, secularism, nationalism, and human rights. Others, like C. James Trotman, argue on the contrary that "*by closing gaps, by raising consciousness about the past, multiculturalism tries to restore a sense of wholeness in the postmodern era that fragments human life and thought*" (Trotman, 2002, p. 9). As such, paradoxically, multiculturalism would indeed be the offspring of modernism's totalizing nature.

In contrast to the multicultural model, and in response to its critics, the intercultural approach, developing from postmodern perspectives, values individual exchanges, interactions, dialogue, and negotiations, both at the intra- and inter-group level. It calls for paying attention to others, integrating and accepting the risk of conflict. Besides, interculturality insists on multiple identifications rather than static, univocal identities, and rejects the claims of identity politics that you can understand the perspective of a given group only if you belong to it. The intercultural approach is particularly prevalent in the field of communication. Intercultural communication seeks to understand how people from different countries and cultures interact, and communicate on equal terms, respecting the identities of individuals from different religious, social, ethnic, and educational backgrounds. Intercultural communication promotes the development of cultural competency and empathic understanding across different cultures.

Classic intercultural communication

Interculturality rests on an array of interdisciplinary theoretical backgrounds, from the theory of evolution to that of the unconscious, through Marxist analysis. Sociology and anthropology also play an important role, in particular

Georg Simmel's research on the foreigner (Simmel, 1971) and Graham Sumner's critiques of ethnocentrism (Sumner, 1906).

The work of the leading American anthropologists of the 1930s and 1940s, Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, and Gregory Bateson, also played a major part in the early development of intercultural thinking, as well as what is known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (though not originally created by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf) that the different ways in which language encodes cultural and cognitive categories have an impact on the way people perceive and interpret the world.

On the basis of their research, the American government hired linguists, anthropologists, and sociologists to train embassy staff and expatriate businessmen so that they would interact and "function" better in their host countries. The aim was to give concrete advice to anyone in an "intercultural" situation, i.e., having to interact with individuals from other national culture. In this context, anthropologist Edward T. Hall developed his two main concepts, highlighting the importance of high and low contexts and non-verbal communication (Hall, 1959, 1966, 1976).

Regarding non-verbal communication, Hall defined several categories: Proxemics, the study of relationships to personal and territorial space; Haptics, the study of physical contact between individuals (including with oneself); Kinesics, the study of gestures and facial expressions; Chronemics, the study of the relationship to time, which he formalized into the monochronic/polychronic concept. Hall also paid attention to the importance of the "contexts", defined as "high" or "low" for communication processes. High and low contexts inform how information is communicated and disseminated, either by the context (i.e., indirect communication: oral traditions, custom, elders, experience, habits, the non-verbal) or by written documents, texts, regulations, what is explicitly and clearly expressed, readily available and understandable by all, without ambiguity and without the context playing a significant role (i.e., direct communication) (Hall, 1959).

The intercultural approach was still at this point a utilitarian one, with an essentialist perspective. The basic category was the national culture (or the ethnic group), which was applied to the whole population of a given territory. As said earlier, this approach aims at giving concrete advice to those who are in an "intercultural" situation, i.e., they have to interact with individuals from other national cultures. It is on this basis that the first courses on interculturality were created in American universities in the 1970s, usually in communication

departments. Japan was the second country where intercultural research developed, due to its numerous academic exchanges with the USA. In both countries, the foundations and the goals of these courses were identical. Unsurprisingly, the first researchers explored the relationship between Asia and the West, with a focus on the opposition between individualism and collectivism, categories erroneously supposed to constitute the respective essences of the West and the East.

Starting in the 1980s, American intercultural research abandoned anthropology and linguistics in favor of social psychology; the result was an even more functionalist conception of interculturality, nourished by the positivism of Auguste Comte and Emile Durkheim, especially the application of natural sciences to the study of human behavior.

In Europe, a significant number of researchers still favor this approach. Two consultants have become particularly famous, Geert Hofstede (Hofstede, 1997, 2003) and Fons Trompenaars (Trompenaars, 2004). They have in common a conception of interactions between individuals based on their national or ethnic origins, which are supposed to imply a common culture. They nevertheless underline their awareness of the risk of essentialism, which, they insist, has been taken into account and managed. This research has gained international recognition both in the socio-economic sector and in universities, in management, economics, communication, and linguistic departments, but also in history, anthropology and in training courses on international relations and diplomacy, to the extent that for many, the very concept of interculturality is limited to this approach.

Hofstede has definitely become the most famous name in the field. He has defined a number of dimensions based on surveys of employees in multinational corporation, that have since become keywords in intercultural studies: Power distance, the degree of acceptance or questioning of hierarchy and difference; Individualism/collectivism, the respective importance of the group (family, clan, village, region, friends, congregation, etc.) in relation to the individual; Masculinity/femininity, the relative importance of the so-called “masculine” (ambition, materialism, self-assertion) or “feminine” qualities (modesty, concern for others, quality of life, etc.); Uncertainty avoidance, the taste or dislike for risk-taking, innovation, the unknown and ambiguity, and therefore a different relationship to Truth; Long term/short term orientation, the fact of giving more or less consideration to the past, traditions or on the contrary, to the future, innovation, adaptability; and Indulgence/restraint, the

tendency to enjoy life, to have fun, to seek happiness and gratification, or on the contrary to impose laws and rules of social control.

This approach has been very successful because it offers simple answers to complex questions, answers easy to implement even in the periods of intense tensions we are currently experiencing. Such conceptions have led some scholars to oppose countries, even civilizations, on the basis of their “cultures” (Huntington, 1996)¹.

These views have spread to the world of economics and business, and even politics. In a recent speech given in Denmark, for instance, French president Emmanuel Macron described the typical French person as “a [male] Gaul resisting change” (“le Gaulois réfractaire au changement”), thus at the expense of their plurality and diversity. Even if it was said in jest, it underlines the extent to which this type of simplification has pervaded contemporary thought at the highest level, even as the claim is to promote an inclusive, intercultural society.

A new paradigm in intercultural communication

However, recently, particularly in Europe, intercultural communication is developing on an utterly different base in large part, as Claire Kramersch argues, because the primary motivation is not, as in the United States, to facilitate diplomatic, political, and economic integration, but to welcome immigrant populations from former colonies (Kramersch, 1993). As a result, there is a growing emphasis on thinking about language and the learning and teaching of languages, which launched what could be called “the linguistic turn” of intercultural communication. More importantly, new European scholars are moving towards an interpretative paradigm, much less prescriptive and more cautious than the functionalist paradigm.

The idea is to move away from the analysis of a given group or individuals according to their national or ethnic origin, which leads to reductive and homogenizing presuppositions, but rather to take into consideration numerous other criteria and prioritize them according to the context or the situation, from professional status, to social class, political affiliation, geographic location (urban/rural, or regional²), family history, age, gender, sexual preferences, education, religion, life style (leisure, travels, personal interests), etc. In other words, moving away from a univocal, utilitarian, minimalist approach, similar to what modernist architecture advocated, and adopting a postmodern approach based on multiple, ambiguous, proliferating, and complex factors.

Thus, the writer of this article will not foreground the same components of what makes him a specific individual (French, male, White, elderly, dad, educated, professor, etc.) depending on whether is giving a paper at an international conference in Armenia, or if he is having breakfast the next morning with some of the young, local participants. Which is exactly what the poster below, photographed in New York, implies.



Of course, even paying consideration to other elements than the nationality or ethnic belonging will not protect from the risk of essentialism and simplification, but at least there is an admission, an awareness of the risk, and an obvious rejection of binary positions. Additionally, one should not underestimate the impact of education, be it in the classroom, in the media, or even in the street, with the same poster. And if politicians, from right to left, stopped turning their constituencies into “le Gaulois”, this more complex, but also more credible way of communicating could allow us to acknowledge all our big or minute differences, and negotiate the differences to establish more peaceful and harmonious communication processes.

The goal is indeed to understand and interpret the world as it is constructed, in its complexity and diversity, and with the tensions that ensue, to accept dissensus, and analyze cultural practices and processes of communication, interaction and exchange, without drawing prescriptive conclusions. This interpretative paradigm is based on the now familiar perspectives developed by decolonial studies (particularly the concepts of diaspora, hybridization, *métissage*, or creolization, implying that everything, and everyone, is “impure”, and that clear-cut, unambiguous origins, boundaries, and distinctions no longer hold) and recent developments in anthropology,

according to which culture is not an essence or a state, but an evolving, unstable and fluid construct, or even, as Zygmunt Bauman put it, a “liquid” entity (Bauman, 2000; 2004; 2006). As a result, the relationship between culture and communication is no longer seen as a univocal cause-to-effect relationship, with one type of national culture systematically leading to a specific form of communication, but rather, as a series of exchanges and interactions between the two.

Using the intercultural paradigm in communication implies developing strategies (in the classroom, in the workplace, in the public space, in the media) that take into account the fluidity and liquidity of behaviors and practices, the fact that we have multiple identities, (what Fred Dervin calls “diverse diversities”), and taking extra care to avoid globalizing and simplifying interpretations. That is, the same emphasis on fluidity, and the same suspicion of straight lines, cold materials, and totalizing perspectives that is at the heart of postmodernism.

Reflection on the limits and dangers of the concept of “national culture” is at the core of this new approach to communication. Thus, in *De la guerre à la communauté universelle* (From war to a universal community) international law-maker Monique Chemillier-Gendreau criticizes the sovereignty of the State, which she accuses of being at the origin of violent forms of rejection of the Other, via a reification of the Nation. She states: “The reification of national identities created and endorsed by Nation-States is dangerous because it is done by identification around the figure of a leader” (Chemillier-Gendreau, 2013, p. 283). She proposes new forms of solidarity that would encompass the plurality and complexity of individual identities and replace dominant/controlled relations with a form of negotiated freedom, that would respect heterogeneity, otherness and dissensus, and which would not only accept conflictual communication, but would create favorable and controlled circumstances for its development.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to stress one more impact of postmodernism on the field of communication. Intercultural researchers are particularly concerned with the power relations that shape communication processes, relations that are established through ideological superstructures and material living conditions. They clearly affirm that cultural practices and products are places of struggle. By insisting on the constructed dimension of identity, rather than its automatic

connection to national and ethnic belonging, they try to give autonomy and freedom to individuals. As such, there is a strong interest in intercultural research in the interactions between large and “small” cultures, for example between a Nation-State, or a transnational corporation on the one hand, and a village, a classroom, or, say, the regular of a pub on the other. The same focus on power relations can be seen in the insistence of non-Western (Japanese, Chinese, or Indians) researchers in intercultural communication on the dangers of a US-centric or Euro-centric bias, which leads to question the very “Western” concepts, modernity, or progress, that postmodernism challenged. The emergence of the postmodern paradigm in communication studies has definitely given a new twist to the field and opened it to a fascinating, though demanding array of new possibilities.

Notes

1. The intercultural approach offers however a new interpretation of global history which undermines notions of “a clash of civilizations” by showing, for instance, that the concepts of tolerance should not be restricted to the West, but is rather a Eurasian achievement.

2. The regional dimension has taken an increased importance with the claims for autonomy or even independence in places such as Catalonia, in Spain, Scotland, in the United Kingdom, Corsica, and even more recently (April 2022) Britany, in France.

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**ՄԻՋՄՇԱԿՈՒԹԱՅԻՆ ՀԱՂՈՐԴԱԿՑՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ
ՊՈՍՏՄՈՂԵՌՆԻԶՄԻ ԴԱՐԱՇՐՋԱՆՈՒՄ. ԱԶԳԱՅԻՆ ԵՎ
ԷԹՆԻԿԱԿԱՆ ԻՆՔՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՍԱՀՄԱՆՆԵՐԻՑ ԱՅՆ ԿՈՂՄ**

Կլոդ Շաստանյե

20-րդ դարի վերջում ի հայտ եկան հաղորդակցության նոր միջոցներ, որոնք՝ միջմշակութային հարացույցով պայմանավորված, ուշադրության կենտրոնացումը ազգայինից ու էթնիկականից տեղափոխեցին ավելի բարդ ու բազմաբնույթ չափանիշների վրա: Այս տեղաշարժը միանգամայն համահունչ է միակողմանի, մոդեռնիստական մոտեցումները մերժելու և դեպի ավելի բարդ ու ոչ միանաշանակ պոստմոդեռնիստական հայացքներ որդեգրելու գլոբալ միտումներին: Հաղորդակցության գործընթացում նվազեցնելով արդեն ամրակայված ազգային կամ էթնիկական ինքնությունների դերը և հրաժարվելով պարզեցումներից ու ընդհանրացումներից՝ պոստմոդեռնիզմի ջատագովները

սկսեցին շեշտադրել անկայունությունն ու բարդությունը, որով էլ աստիճանաբար ապահովվեց նոր հարացույցի ազդեցությունը ինչպես ենթախմբերի ու փոքրամասնությունների կյանքի, այնպես էլ հաղորդակցման գործընթացի վրա:

***Բանալի բառեր՝** մոդեռնիզմ, պոստմոդեռնիզմ, միջմշակութայնություն, բազմամշակութայնություն, ինքնություն, էթնիկական պատկանելություն:*