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A semiotic models approach to the analysis of international/intercultural communication.

A broad review of the literature on intercultural communication theories (Trevisani 1990) revealed the lack of a semiotic approach to the field of intercultural/international communication, and highlighted the necessity to fill this theoretical gap.

This paper attempts to explore some potential contributions of semiotic theory to intercultural/international communication research. In this first exploratory approach we introduce a taxonomic approach based on semiotic theory, and develop some models for the analysis of the communication process.

The field of International/Intercultural communication is concerned, almost by definition, with the study of the communication process as it occurs under conditions of inter-communicator differences. In our approach, two main cultural differences, communication code and world view, will be combined to construct a matrix of hypothetical communication situations (COMSITS).

From the analysis of the matrix, some theoretical considerations will be drawn regarding the limits of communication, that is, the accuracy of information exchange and agreement between communicators. The bi-dimensional model will be further developed in the second section by the introduction of a four-variable model which includes the variables "subject" (or interpretant, the person involved in the communication process) and "referents" (the set of physical and psychological realities experienced).

Code and World View: A bi-dimensional model

Culture is considered in this approach as a set of both learned and inherited patterns for perception, cognition and behavior. Also, following

the theoretical perspective of Watzlawick et al. (1968), we conceptualize communication as a process which occurs both intentionally and unintentionally, any time behavior occurs in the presence of others. In a semiotic perspective, the most basic unit of analysis, and the first component of communication perceived during an interaction is the "sign", the broadest and all-inclusive category of meaning-conveying entity. Signs constitute the external communicative behavior perceived by a receiver or observer (verbal behaviors, non-verbal behaviors, written communication, symbols, etc.). Signs (used to communicate), and meaning of communication, are linked by a communication code, which is in turn composed of sub-codes.

A communication code is therefore intended as a system of rules employed to connect expressions (any sign used to communicate, both verbal and nonverbal) and content (meanings). A second component of culture which is taken into consideration in this first model is "world view". World view is considered to be a set of beliefs, values, and attitudes employed by social actors to interpret and categorize reality, attribute meaning to events, relate themselves to the world, and guide behavior.

By combining the two cultural variables, "code" and "world view", in a matrix, we can set four hypothetical communication situations (COMSITS).

	CODE	
	same	diff
same	comsit A	comsit B
WORLD VIEW		
diff.	comsit C	comsit D

COMSIT A is characterized as "Same code - same world view". In COMSIT A a communication process would be easy and smooth, since it is the case with the highest intra-culturalness. It represents the hypothetical ideal condition for communication when information exchange accuracy and agreement on communication objectives and goals are needed, as in an organizational communication context.

In the hypothetical COMSIT A, the lack of even the most subtle difference in communication code would lead to the highest accuracy of information exchange, with no erroneous decodings. At the same time, the completely equal world view between communicators would result in concordance of goals, orientations and objectives. This condition is, however, only hypothetical since communication code differences occur with various degrees in every human communication process. COMSIT B (completely different code - same world view) represents the hypothetical case in which the obstacle to the accuracy of information exchange is given by the lack of a common communication code.

If a common code could be provided, the situation would turn into the ideal COMSIT A. COMSIT C (same code - completely different world view) represents the hypothetical case in which communication difficulties arise from a lack of world view sharing. A common code enables the accurate exchange of information, but the result of communication is negative since completely different beliefs, values, attitudes, objectives and goals will result in a complete lack of agreement.

COMSIT D (completely different code - completely different world view) is the hypothetical situation in which information cannot be effectively exchanged because of the lack of a common code, and even if a common code could be provided, a completely different world view would lead to the situation previously labeled COMSIT C, characterized by a complete lack of agreement. COMSIT D represents therefore the worst
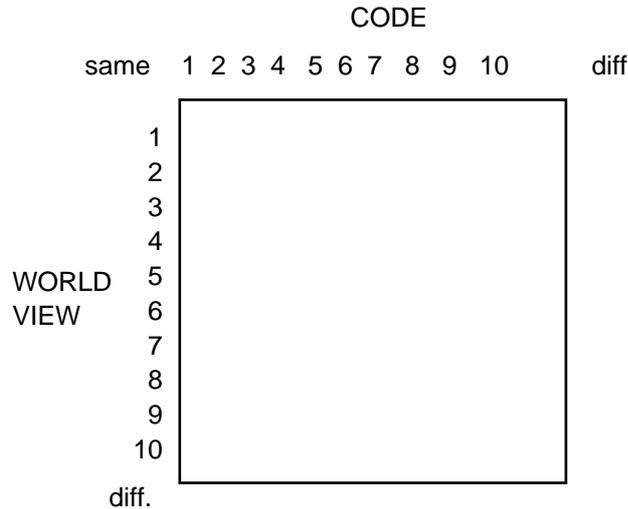
condition as far as accuracy of information exchange and agreement is concerned. Similar contexts of communication have been taken into account by Barnett and Kincaid (1983), who considered the combination of two variables: mutual understanding and agreement.

According to our model, the outcome of communication, intended as understanding and agreement, is negatively related both to differences in the code used and to differences in world view. The accuracy of information exchange can be improved by decreasing the distance along the communication code dimension (i.e., learning foreign languages, dialects or subdialects within a nation, non-verbal codes used in other cultures and subcultures as gestures, proxemics, etc.), while agreement can be improved by a decrease in the degree of the differences between communicators in values, myths, beliefs, attitudes and ideologies, differences which can negatively affect the outcome of the communication process. Also, being two closely interrelated elements, an increase in code comprehension will increase the ability of world view comprehension, and vice-versa. While a position favoring a decrease in cultural differences might rise ethical concerns, a better knowledge of other cultures' world views, even if in a relativistic perspective, can improve the ability to correctly decode signs and communicate effectively with other cultures.

Levels of interculturalness and limits of communication

The simplified model presented, especially if visualized in a bi-dimensional matrix, can be a useful tool for analyzing hypothetical types of communication. However, the code and world view dimensions should be considered as not either completely different or completely equal, but as varying along a continuum of differences/similarities. Levels of interculturalness exist depending on the amount of difference in the code and world view dimensions. In this continuum of differences in

communication, we deem that the ends of the two continuums (the COMSITS presented) represent only hypothetical points, and that no real communication event can ever be situated in one of the four "pure" COMSITS. In a visual mode of presentation, this can be represented by erasing the separations between the 4 quadrants:

```
                              CODE
          same   1 2 3 4  5 6 7  8  9  10       diff
                 ┌──────────────────────────┐
              1  │                          │
              2  │                          │
              3  │                          │
              4  │                          │
   WORLD      5  │                          │
   VIEW       6  │                          │
              7  │                          │
              8  │                          │
              9  │                          │
             10  │                          │
                 └──────────────────────────┘
          diff.
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A further step, perhaps more important, is to evaluate whether all the points of such a matrix could be realistically representative of a possible communication event. We deem in fact that no one real communication event can be situated exactly on the borders (the perimeter of the matrix). The underlying hypothesis which can satisfy this general hypothesis needs to be reduced to 4 primary conditions of communication: COMCOND 1) impossibility of completely equal communication code; COMCOND 2) impossibility of completely equal world view; COMCOND 3) impossibility of completely different communication code, and COMCOND 4) impossibility of completely different world view.

Some research perspectives on communication support these hypotheses. As far as impossibility of complete code difference (COMCOMD 3) and complete world view difference (COMCOND 4) are concerned, the sociobiological approach to communication implies that human beings, as primates, always share a certain degree of similarity and can encode and decode similar meanings under some circumstances

regardless of culture. Exceptions might be found in cases involving highly abnormal physical or mental handicaps. However, qualitative researchers such as Goode (1979) demonstrated that a "role playing" approach where the researcher attempts to get closer to the internal condition from which the abnormal perceives the environment surrounding him, can enable the researcher to attach meanings and identify communication codes in signs and behaviors which were previously either not interpretable or which appeared to be unrelated to any intention to communicate.

Beyond the abnormal field, in general, the capacity of interpreting human communication codes independently of considerations of the actor's cultural origin increases in situations in which cultural codes are less relevant and biological codes are more relevant, such as those situations closely related to immediate survival (aggression) and other more instinctual behaviors (as feeding or sex). In the literature analyzed, the hypothesis that no two people can be found who are not able to use any gesture or facial expression suitable to elicit discernible meanings is considered also by Sarbaugh (1988).

Also, research findings by Eckman and Friesen (1987) revealed a high level of agreement across cultures in their interpretation of facial expressions of emotions. Saral (1972) stressed the cross-cultural nature of communication via facial-expressions, too. A decrease in the relevance of culturally learned codes and an increase in the relevance of instinctual codes is observable also in human-animal communication and in inter-species communication in general, especially under conditions of danger (in other words, even people from different cultures or creatures belonging to different species generally have the ability to discern an attack behavior by a member of another culture or species, while more culturally learned behaviors will be less interpretable).

The biological constraints also have an influence on the impossibility of

complete difference in world view (COMCOND 4). As we pointed out earlier, human behavior is influenced by ontogenetical (cultural) conditioning, and by phylogenetical (genetical and hereditary) forces. Genetic, hereditary, and biological forces influence world view to a certain extent, when, as in conditions of danger or attack, they become major guidelines for behavior. Regarding the condition of impossibility of completely equal communication code (COMCOND 1) a consideration grounded in semiotic theory leads us to believe that no two individuals exist who can ever share the same semantic depth and shades of meaning for any possible sign used in communication.

The semantic depth of signs, the variety of different meanings in different contexts which can be attached to signs used to communicate, is a product of socialization and interpersonal agreement, and varies depending on individual histories, which cannot be completely equal. Also, as far as the condition of impossibility of completely equal world view is concerned (COMCOND 2), the assumption made is that no two individuals can ever exist who always share the same set of values, beliefs, attitudes and ideological positions on every topic or item which can be made an object of communication.

Under COMCOND 1 and 3, which regard the accuracy of information exchange (depending on code sharing), two general hypotheses can be drawn regarding the limits of communication: 1) human communication can not occur under conditions of complete understanding; 2) human communication can not occur under conditions of complete misunderstanding. Under COMCOND 2 and 4, which regard the agreement on communication objectives (depending on world view similarities), two further hypotheses can be stated: 1) human communication can not occur under condition of complete agreement; 2) human communication can not occur under conditions of complete

disagreement.

Empirical research is needed to investigate the validity of these predictions both in the overall human and inter-species communication process and in specific, short term communication acts. Also, further empirical research is needed to validate the assumptions on which these limits of communication are based. We deem it necessary also to investigate the conditions under which a complete communicability or incommunicability and agreement or disagreement are possible (if so) in limited and specific communication acts, and the meta-communicational activities which enable them.

<p align="center">A four - variable communication model</p>

In our literature review on intercultural communication theories (Trevisani 1990), we found, together with the lack of a semiotic approach, a certain degree of variability and sometimes a lack of agreement on the variables which determine what makes a certain communication event "intercultural". The debate covers mainly two subjects: one is the magnitude of differences which should be taken into account in intercultural communication research, such as micro-sociological cultural differences (i.e., dyadic subcultural differences) vs. more large scale cultural differences (i.e., dimensions of national and world regions cultural differences, such as the high- vs. low-context cultural dimension). A further aspect of the debate on the delimitations of the field of intercultural communication regards the nature of the variables which make a communication intercultural, in other words, the peculiarity of the differences taken into account in intercultural communication. While every author agrees on the cultural nature of the differences accounted for, some authors focus more on code differences (language differences, non-verbal differences), some others on values, beliefs, and myths, some others on group dimensions, such as ethnic or socio-demographic

concerns, and still others on background, sex, political preferences, historical differences, etc. A model for categorizing the vast number of differences between communicators, capable of including all of the possible elements or sub-categories, has not yet been presented. Taxonomic models which account for multiple variables and their possible combinations have been presented, but they did not cover the whole spectrum of possible categories of differences in communication.

A taxonomic approach to intercultural communication variables, leading to a determination of the levels of interculturalness in communication has been attempted by Sarbaugh (1988). The level of interculturalness is determined by the author depending on the differences in: 1) world views, 2) normative patterns of beliefs and overt behavior, 3) code system, and 4) perception of the relationship and intent. However, this approach does not account for historical differences, for example, or physical differences between communicators, and therefore does not cover the whole spectrum of interculturalness (or the whole spectrum of the differences between communicators, if one does not want to include physical differences in a taxonomy of interculturalness).

Our approach therefore attempts to establish the dimensions of similarity/differences which can exist between participants in a given communication event. In our perspective, such a model should be more holistic and account also for physical differences between communicators (such as sex, age, eventual handicaps) and historical differences (group's or individual's, depending on the unit of analysis).

The four-variables model accounts for the differences between subject (the person or actor which performs the communication process), referents (the physical or psychological reality perceived, which constitutes the personal history, and about which actors communicate), ideas, and signs used to communicate. The relationship between these

elements accounts for the concepts of perception, world view, and communication code.

The subject performing the communication process will also be referred to as "interpretant", using Peirce's terminology (1931-58), or simply "man", using Locke's terminology (1690). These variables can be linked in a model, whose foundations are grounded in the analysis of the British philosopher John Locke, as expressed in "An essay on human understanding" (1690). Synthetically, Locke' thoughts can be expressed by the following statement: men own ideas of things, and language is composed of sounds used as signs of ideas. A first sign-function in Locke's thoughts can be identified in the relationship "thing - idea" (where the interpretant or subject is the element which makes possible this relationship). The relationship between these three elements can be visualized as a triangle:

First sign function

man (interpretant, subject)

thing
(reality,
referent)
        idea
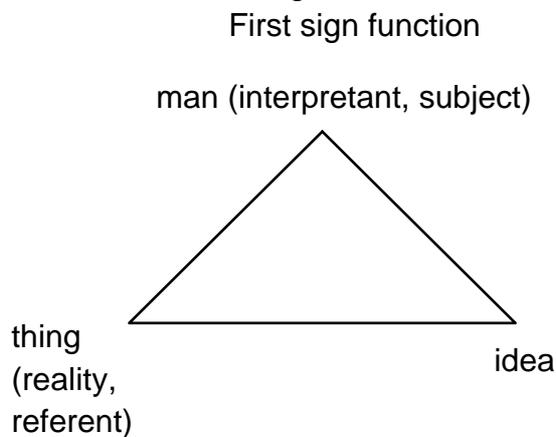
In this process, "idea" stand for (represent) the "thing" (realities, referents) from which it was formed (such as the idea or mental representation of a pencil stands for the real object 'pencil'). The second sign function can be found in the relationship idea - word, where the "word" (or gesture, or in general any sign used to communicate) "stands for" the idea which it represents in the mind of the interpretant (such as the word "pencil" in the English language stands for the idea formed from the physical object "pencil", or the word "bleistift" in German, or "matita"

in Italian). This sign function can be visualized by a further triangle:

Second   sign function

man (interpretant, subject)

idea

word
(sign used to communicate)
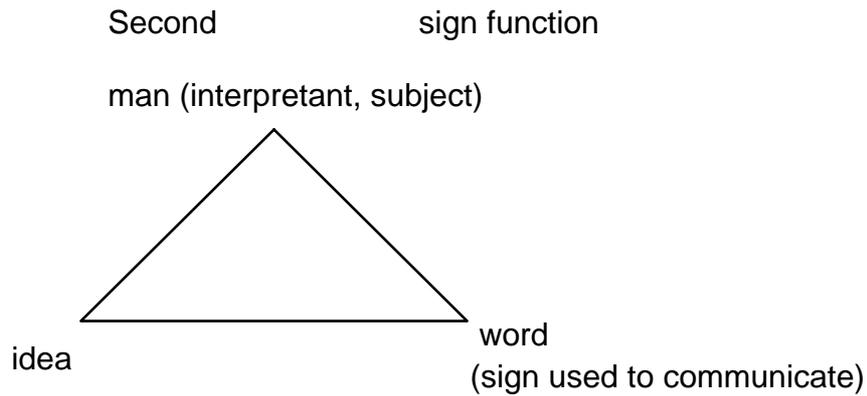
Although Locke used the term "word", we will subsequently refer to it as "signs used to communicate" - intending both verbal and nonverbal signs. The code which established the relationship idea - word is a communication code. Since the two triangles have a common axis (man-idea), the four elements of this model, subjects, referents, ideas, signs used to communicate, can be connected and visualized as a square:

men (interpretant)

perception

referents
(reality)

signs used to communicate

world view

communication
code
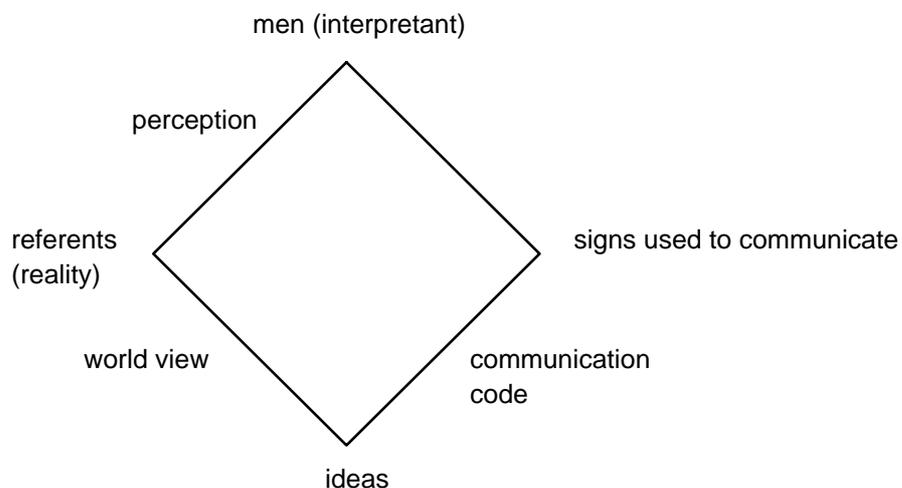
ideas

The relationship between the variables accounts for the process of perception, world view (which is here intended as code connecting ideas and referents experienced), and communication code (linking signs and ideas).

When two communicators interact, in fact, differences can be present along each of the variables and processes represented in the model.
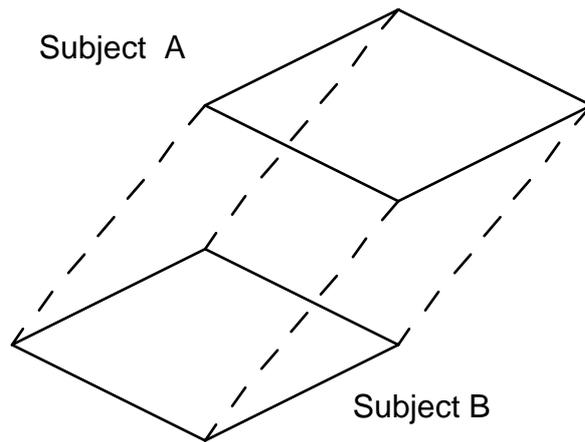
Subject A

Subject B

Differences between "interpretants" (or subjects) can be considered the physical differences between communicators, such as sex, age, physical differences, and cognitive development, which can potentially influence the process of communication.

Differences between referents are the difference in the (physical or psychological) realities perceived and experienced by each individual, which constitute objects of communication. We termed this concept "referential distance", to mean any difference in the referents experienced by the subjects (in other words, the differences in personal history).

Differences in "ideas" arise from differences in world view, as conceptualized in the two-variable model, and differences between signs used to communicate arise from the differences in communication code, also conceptualized in the two-dimensional model.

The general hypothesis implied in the model is that the outcome of communication depends on the distance along these parameters: the closer the distance, the higher the possibility of understanding and agreement.

Several aspects of the model are currently subject of investigation by the author. These regard the model's theoretical and educational possibilities and limits; research methods for testing assumptions and

hypotheses presented, the analysis and visualization of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and the relationship with other communication models, the educational context and applied fields such as organizational communication and international advertising. The model is also under scrutiny for other purposes: the possible visualization and consequent better understanding of the phenomena of the plurality of membership systems of communicators, the interpersonal/intergroup dimensions in communication; strategic interactions and transactional analysis. The same kind of exploration into possibilities offered, limitations, and possible improvements, are currently attempted also in the two-dimensional model.

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