

**GRICE'S CONVERSATIONAL MAXIMS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION :  
FROM A DISCOURSE-BASED APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION ETHICS**

**Sorina Chiper, Assist. Prof., PhD, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași**

*Abstract: Textbooks of intercultural communication often start from the presumption that interlocutors share a peaceful, non-threatening context, whose influence can only impact the flow of the conversation as "noise". Yet our contemporary society has been witnessing a multiplication of war zones and of conflict areas, a situation which requires participants in intercultural interaction to develop new skills, among which the one of building trust. This article starts from my personal experience as a teacher of intercultural communication and as a foreigner in a country at war (Israel) and draws on Grice's model of conversational maxims, to suggest the need to include the teaching of ethical issues in the intercultural communication class.*

**Keywords:** *intercultural communication, intercultural competence, conversational maxims, trust, ethics.*

### **Introduction**

In a meeting with readers in Iasi, during the International Festival of Literature and Translation (FILIT) in Iasi, Catalin Dorian Florescu shared with the audience his recollections of the time when he had been commissioned to do a public reading from one of his novels in the airport, in Switzerland. The reading had been intended as a brief induction to the Romanian culture, for a group of tourists who were just about to fly to Romania. Literature, obviously, opens windows on the lives and values of other people and other peoples, on the different ways in which people make sense of their experience, on how they relate to their peers, to foreigners, to nature or to God – should they believe in His existence. In this sense literature and any other art form, for that matter, provide an informal setting for intercultural learning, when readers/art consumers from one cultural space come into contact with artefacts from another cultural milieu.

When it comes to formal education, notions of intercultural communication used to be taught as part of the foreign languages class, or as part of intercultural management courses. In time, however, due to the spread of globalization, the internationalization of education, the exponential increase of migration and of international travel, intercultural communication has gained momentum and it has been institutionalized as a discipline of its own in humanities departments, in business or medical schools. This article draws on my own experience as a teacher of seminars in intercultural communication and as an international student in Jerusalem, and it argues for a discourse-based approach in the formation of intercultural competence.

### **Intercultural communication competence: definition and current challenges**

Since the 1990s, both in Europe and in the United States, scholars of communication have been toiling over how to define and how to assess intercultural (communication) competence. In the United States, Chen and Starosta (1999) defined "intercultural communication competence" as "the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviors that negotiate each other's cultural identity or identities in a

culturally diverse environment” (p. 28) (quoted in Deardorff 35). The two authors identified three components of intercultural communication competence: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness, and intercultural adroitness. The first is a cognitive dimension that refers to a person’s ability to understand similarities and differences between cultures, and it branches into self-awareness and cultural awareness. The second is an affective dimension that mirrors one’s emotional desire to “acknowledge, appreciate, and accept cultural differences”, and its components are self-esteem, self-monitoring, empathy, open-mindedness, being non-judgmental and social relaxation. Intercultural adroitness, on the other hand, is a behavioural component that covers verbal and nonverbal skills that one needs in order to be an efficient interlocutor in intercultural interactions, and its components are message skills, appropriate self-disclosure, behavioural flexibility and interaction management (apud Friz, Mollenberg & Chen 2002: 167).

Wiseman’s model of intercultural communication competence comprises a new factor: motivation, “the set of feelings, intentions, needs and drives associated with the anticipation of or actual engagement in intercultural communication” (2001 p. 4) (quoted in Deardorff 36). Kim (1992), on the other hand, focuses on adaptability as the core of intercultural communication competence, which he defines as “the individual’s capacity to suspend or modify some of the old cultural ways, and learn and accommodate some of the new cultural ways, and creatively find ways to manage the dynamics of cultural difference/unfamiliarity, intergroup posture, and the accompanying stress” (p. 377) (apud Deardorff 37).

In Europe, starting from the model of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages ([http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Cadre1\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Cadre1_en.asp)), scholars have designed grids to define and assess intercultural competence and intercultural communication. Such a grid can be applied in various contexts: school administrators, for instance, can use it to assess the degree of adjustment of international students, as well as local students’ openness to cultural difference; it can also be used by international companies when selecting employees who will work abroad.

Byram’s pioneering research in the 1990’s led to the publication of his book entitled *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence* (1997), in which he stresses the importance of language mastery (linguistic competence) and argues that definitions of intercultural communicative competence should also take into account the social context and the non-verbal dimensions of communication. His model includes five components: knowledge of others and of the social processes of social groups; knowledge of self and critical cultural awareness, i.e. one’s ability to assess practices and products of one’s own and others’ cultures; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact, and attitudes towards one’s culture, which becomes relativized, and towards others’ culture, whose values, beliefs and behaviours are valued (apud Deardorff 2004: 37-38).

A more comprehensive model, designed by the organization WorldWork, lists ten major headings and their sub-divisions: 1. openness (new thinking, welcoming strangers, acceptance); 2. flexibility (flexible behaviour, flexible judgments, learning languages); 3. personal autonomy (inner purpose, focus on goals); 4. emotional strength (resilience, coping, spirit of adventure); 5. perceptiveness (attuned, reflected awareness); 6. listening orientation (active listening); 7. transparency (clarity of communication, exposing intentions); 8. cultural

knowledge (information gathering, valuing differences); 9. influencing (rapport, range of styles, sensitivity to context); 10. synergy (creating new alternatives) (Catteeuw 2012: 16).

### **Intercultural communication in the classroom: a plea for a discourse-based approach and for communication ethics**

Irrespective of how many dimensions one wishes to include in the definition of intercultural competence, for intercultural trainers, the issue is how to design courses which would develop this complex competence within the time and resource limits that they have. My experience as a teacher/trainer of intercultural communication has shown that while knowledge can be acquired relatively easily and does not necessarily require the presence of a tutor or of a supervisor – at least in the case of autonomous learners who can find information in books and on the internet – and skills require time and practice in order to be developed, attitudes are harder to develop. Changing or developing attitudes involves learners' conscious self-persuasion that their own view of the world is one way among many ways of conceptualising one's place in the texture of existence and one's relations with other humans, with nature and with the super-natural. Such a change in perspective on one's own values and hierarchies and on the values and hierarchies of others, comes from one's encounters with "otherness" – be they mediated or immediate, from how one works through intercultural shock, from simulated situations, debates and dialogue.

What I find missing in textbooks of intercultural communication is analyses of actual chunks of conversation. Classic textbooks, such as Samovar, Porter and McDaniel's *Intercultural Communication: A Reader* (2012), provide students with situations of potential conflict or tension, but not with the actual terms in which the conflict was discursively expressed or solved. In many parts of the world, conflicts are not potential but painfully actual, and failure to solve them via dialogue leads to conflict exacerbation or resolution via the use of guns. But before one can even start negating, the parties need to build trust into one another, otherwise the terms of the negotiation cannot be observed. This is precisely what happened during the recent war in Israel, where cease-fire agreements, negotiated via the intercession of Egypt, the USA or UN were not always observed. The 72-hour cease fire announced to start at 8 am on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, for instance, broke down almost immediately after it started, with both parties blaming one other for it.

The purpose of this paper is not to explore and explain the roots of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, not to provide solutions to it. Yet I would like to highlight the fact that even in the months that preceded the July-August 2014 conflict, I noticed a tinge of mutual distrust and fear, which for me, as a foreigner, seemed hard to comprehend. For instance, I could not understand why I had been warned to stay away from Arab quarters, when I could not see any danger in walking around those areas, just as I could not understand why so many young men and women were dressed as soldiers and carrying heavy guns, even on campus. I was struck by how, from a distance, I could feel the eyes of locals observing and analysing me, as if trying to assess whether I am a friend or an enemy, or whether my way of dressing is an offense for religious persons. My Romanian-born Israeli friends assured me that as a foreigner, nothing bad could happen to me. But how could one tell, from a distance, or simply by looking at me, whether I am a local or a tourist? At first, in the eyes of local Jews, I must have passed for a Jewish young woman, since I was often approached in the street in Hebrew,

by people who needed directions. Arab vendors, however, almost invariably addressed me in English, with invitations to visit their shops, in Russian or directly in Romanian, as if something in the way I looked, something in the way I walked or in the way I dressed betrayed my nationality. I then strove to pass for a busy, global citizen, who can feel at home in a foreign country and enjoys the benefits of subtle cultural learning through observation and occasional discussions.

Just like in the case of learning a foreign language, learning how to manage in a foreign culture can best be learnt via total immersion, by actually living in the milieu of the culture one wishes to learn how to navigate. Yet such full emersion is not always possible, and when intercultural communication competence is to be built in the classroom rather than *in situ*, taking a discourse-based approach involves emphasising features of effective verbal communication in general and contextualising them via examples drawn from a corpus of actually occurring conversations.

Grice's work that positions itself at the nexus between logic and speech, and especially his discussion of conversational implicature, highlight the fact that effective communication can be achieved if interlocutors observe what he calls the cooperative principle, i.e. "make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice 1975: 45). In other words, one should speak to the point and in such a way that his or her contribution to the discussion facilitates it, and prevents or solves conflicts.

The often neglected elements that Grice identified as facilitators or discursive cooperation are: the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. These maxims translate into injunctions that can be taken as lessons for discourse, and also as lessons for life: 1 (maxim of Quantity): "make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange); "Do not make your contribution more informative than is required"; 2. (maxim of quality): "Do not say what you believe to be false" and "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence"; 3. (maxim of relation) "be relevant," and 4. (maxim of manner): "avoid obscurity of expression"; "avoid ambiguity"; "be brief" (avoid unnecessary prolixity); "be orderly" (Grice 1975: 45-46). Such injunctions, indirectly, give accurate advice on one's behaviour as an interlocutor in situations of intercultural encounter, teaching one how to be honest, verbally-tempered, and logical in the discourse that he or she is producing. Though Grice's conventions can be flouted without endangering the effectiveness of communication (compliments, as beautiful lies, flout the maxim of quality but they maintain human relations), they point to a certain ethics of discourse, by compelling interlocutors to stick to the truth or to what can be backed by evidence, to avoid ambiguity and to be concise.

### **By way of conclusion**

In teaching intercultural communication and in developing intercultural communication competence, teachers/trainers share a heavy task to prepare their students to be effective communicators in a world of multiplying conflicts and risks. It is not enough to teach them *about* cultural differences but to ensure that, once they have to interact with persons from other cultures, they know how to avoid conflict and to get results, through conversation and dialogue, which would please all parties involved. Thus, through Grice's

model of developing discourse competence in one's native language, applied to contexts of international communication, and through a consistent effort to change one's attitudes, increase one's knowledge and develop one's skills, intercultural communication competence can reveal its potential to contribute to the creation of a better world, that suffers less from conflicts and finds the (discursive and not only) means to heal wounds, to reconcile, to build mutual trust and to highlight our common humanity and desire for peace, prosperity, and happiness.

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