

## INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND INTERCULTURAL STRESS. NORMS OF A SANE COMMUNICATIONAL BEHAVIOR

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*Abstract: In today's world, in which all real challenges underwent a globalization process, we are growingly urged by the need of a new form of stress: the intercultural stress. This need is felt at all levels of human life – from day-to-day life to international life; from interpersonal relations, to interstate relations; from communication between generations to communication between different cultures.*

*In this respect, the paper is an analysis of these aspects, applied in a domain that is vital for world's peace: the management of intercultural differences.*

*Keywords: cultural referential; intercultural communication; acculturative stress; third culture; sound communicational behaviour.*

### **Introduction**

If we understand culture as Chombart de Lauwe defines it as ‘a series of models, of guiding images, and of representations the members of a society refer to in their actions, their work, and their social relations’ (Chombart de Lauwe, 1970, pp. 14-21), we understand that any individual appears as a carrier of a culture (subcultures, sub-subcultures, and so on) and the inter-individual communication – as an intercultural one. Therefore, the enhancement of the barriers encountered in the intercultural communication called in question the possibility of communication *in general*, the authenticity of *any* communication.

They focus on any act of communication, including the professional one: both the professional international communication (where the differences between *national* cultures come to the fore) and the *inter-professional* communication - between architects and engineers, between managers and accountants or between journalists and public relation experts (where the differences between the *professional* cultures and subcultures step into the picture). Moreover, the researches performed by Geert Hofstede led to the unprecedented valorisation of the *organizational* cultures and of the report between them and national cultures (Hofstede, 1996).

In my paper I am dealing exactly with the area where cognitive mechanisms intertwine with symbolic mechanisms – a crepuscular area, in which Knowledge and Semiotics are intermingled. For us, the *differences* emphasized by the cultural studies focus not only on the values and symbols, the behavioral models and the rituals, cultural differences target first and foremost the perception of the world and the meaning of life!

### **Cultural referential**

The postmodern criticism addressed to the illusion of a possible universal language is useful for us in order to construct the illusion of the “common language as given” – this time an illusion of the common sense. Our primary socialization, by means of language, is performed in contexts with “homogenous semiotics” (the so-called “local semiotics”); as a rule, these contexts are our own families, followed by school – a semiotic extension of the family (which is less valid in case of children that come from subcultures with semiotics too

far away from the school semiotics, such as Rom children in Romania or Arab children in France). Hence, in our primary socialization the illusion of a “common language” appears and settles and makes us perceive its existence as a “natural custom” and perceive its absence as an accident, as a state “against nature”. Or, as we already know, the “normal” state is rather the inexistence of a common language and its existence represents a happy situation which most of the times must be constructed. The absence of a common language generates reverse effects to *communication, tolerance and cooperation*. As a matter of fact, the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century teaches us a simple but fundamental thing for the human condition: “As much lack of communication, as much violence!”.

This communicational scepticism can be overcome by means of the concept of “referential”, elaborated by the Swiss philosopher Ferdinand Gonseth. This concept comprises new hints as regards the birth of cultural and cultural illusions as well as the directions in which the obstacles in the intercultural and inter-cultural communication could be surmounted.

In a double number from 1971 of *Revue universitaire de Science Morale*, Ferdinand Gonseth invokes a heuristic episode he personally experienced, and which soon became the subject-matter of the debates dedicated to the problem under the name of “the parable of bent fir-trees” (Tonoiu, 1978, pp. 33-34). Traveling once by train, it stopped before Zurich and the wagon in which Gonseth was sitting remained in front of a group of fir-trees. Looking into the window, Gonseth numbly sees how the fir-trees, with their parallel trunks “seemed to obliquely bar the entire surface of the window”. Getting closer to the window, the illusion went away: the trees were vertical! He goes back to his seat: the trees are again oblique! The illusion had a very simple explication but Gonseth had to move various times from his seat to the window to realize it: the field was horizontal, the wagon stopped on uphold portion. What inside the wagon seemed vertical was in fact oblique. The train’s wagon functioned, therefore, as a referential for the interpretation of the impression from the outside.

What really stroke the Swiss philosopher was the sudden way in which the illusory referential gave place to the referential more compliant to reality. Vasile Tonoiu, who relates the episode narrated by Gonseth, compares this experience to other analogue ones, as spontaneous as this, or to others, such as the one of the reversed vision glasses. Comparisons and analogies can be made with a great number of psychic phenomena, including phenomena of social psychology as well as with numerous cultural and cultural phenomena. It may occur to us, for instance, to judge completely differently from one day to another a series of problems, a behavior or a whole set of values, of ideas, etc. “In all these experiences there seems to exist something that suggests a change of referential” (*idem*). For a better understanding of the epistemological value that we convey to the “bent fir-trees parable” it is worth mentioning that: the train in which Gonseth had stopped in that place (where there was no station) *for the first time*; it was a premiere in the traveller experience of the Swiss philosopher who for many years had travelled from home to the Federal Polytechnic School in Zurich. This “fact of life” illustrates an “epistemic fact”: the existence of an *a priori* in the described experience: the conviction that the train was positioned on an horizontal portion of the route (whence the reference to the vertical of the train wagon as to an absolute vertical).

Processing this troubling experience, Gonthier defines referential as follows: “a figuration that a subject makes regarding his surrounding environment. Based on this figuration, the subject shall interpret his perceptions which thus have a value of figuration referred to a setting – he himself being a figuration of the situation. In general, this setting is not experienced as figuration. On the contrary, it comes over as reality” (Tonoiu, 1978, p. 32). Gonthier’s concept targets an *individual* rather than collective, a *perceptive* rather than cultural referential. Its importance resides in its capacity of accounting for the way in which observations are pre-determined, contributing thus to the collapse of the positivist myth of a “purely objective observation”. We shall further use the notion of referential in a *collective* and a *cultural* meaning. Therefore, *cultural referential* means *a system of fundamental representations and attitudes whose undertaking we are aware of. Such representations and attitudes “silently” govern any culture.*

How is communication between cultures possible? In order to capture the real seriousness of the above-mentioned question we must take into account the fact that the difference between the two differentials does not amount to the re-interpretation of the same facts. By shifting from a referential to another (when it occurs) new facts shall be observed; a new “horizon of reality” opens (Gonthier). Things occur as if they passed from one world to another. The concept of *cultural referential* helps us discover a new fact which, from the perspective of other theoretical paradigms, cannot be seen: even if people live in the same physical universe, they live, at the same time, in *different worlds*. We are dealing here with an “ontological differential” specific to the human world, maybe the real particular note of this world in comparison to the non-human world. It’s not a revolutionary idea, but a *consequence* (maybe the last logical consequence) of an ancient assertion: *man defines himself by thought and language*. We have seen that the production of ideas is pre-determined by techniques of problematization that differ from a life horizon to another, and the language is producer, carrier and transmitter of contextual experiences.

In order to understand the functioning mechanism of the referential as source of cultural illusions and see if communication between subjects (individuals or groups) that undertake different referentials is possible, we shall have in view the following:

- i) The implementation of an cultural referential is *spontaneous*; it does not depend on the subject’s option, being determined by the *subject’s position in his life horizon and the subject’s relation to the overall situation* (to the position of his life horizon both toward other life horizons and within a more general framework of the human universe);
- ii) The change of the cultural referential is possible but only *provided that such position and relation also undergo modifications*;
- iii) In shifting from one cultural referential to another certain *unalienable requirements are maintained, necessary to any culture*;
- iv) The successive replacement of referentials may be equal to a *progress in objectivity of the knowledge and evaluations or to a progress in the adequacy of behaviours* (although this progress is neither linear nor fatal).

The change of the cultural referential is possible only if a change occurs in the subject’s relation to the overall situation. In its turn, the change of this relation may be performed only

through *the change of the subject's position in the group structure of society*: the position within the group – for the individual subject and the position in the social structure – for the collective subject. In the case of migration, we shall further exemplify the notions of “position” and “subject's relation to the overall situation”.

### **Study of intercultural communication**

According to some authors (Jacque Demorogon, 2007, p. 65), intercultural communication is structured on several levels, such as: *microsociologic* (implying persons and small groups), *mezociologic* (implying large groups and organisations), *marcosociologic* (large segments of activity and forms of society). This is how Grigore Georgiu (Georgiu, 2010, pp. 115-119) accounts for the diversity of the analysis levels of this phenomenon: intercultural communication (at microsocial level), *communication between cultures* (transversal analysis of some themes tackled in different cultures) and *international communication* (communication between public institutions and political structures from different countries, between governments, between states or between all these and international organisms), with the indication that they all should be approached from an integrating theoretical perspective (*cf.* Gudykunst and Mody, 2002, pp. 1-5).

Other authors lay stress on the fact that interculturality is approached from various disciplinary perspectives, several sciences contributing to its knowledge (Cucoş, 2000, pp. 5-6): *Social psychology*, which offers the elements necessary for the study of attitudes, values and stereotypes, as well as that of social representations, as organisers of evaluations, judgements, behaviours or relations between groups (including groups embracing different cultures); *Intercultural psychology (cross-cultural psychology)*, which studies directly the interactions between individuals and groups with different cultural origins; *Anthropology* which plunged, before intercultural psychology, in the phenomena of social change and Acculturation, but which is more anchored in events, dealing with minorities or emigrants and, through its branch called Communication Ethnography<sup>1</sup>, with the heterogeneity of linguistic communication, the diversity of the codes that shape the identity of the partners in intercultural interactions, while preserving the predilection for the qualitative methodology from which it descends as science; *Sociology* which offers, apart from the overall vision on a given society, relevant information regarding the social origin of xenophobia and racism or for the avatars of migration (the migrating condition of the parents, economic conditions, specific elements of the origin culture and the conflicts between them and the residence society, relational avatars, etc.); *Inter-cultural communication* which often studies short-term intercultural interactions that extend from tourism and academic visits abroad to diplomatic or commercial negotiation or to the cooperation in matters of development and from the study of the colours' symbolism, of non-verbal communication or the proximity relation to the study of the epistemological differences between cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> The ethnographical analysis focuses on the study of the diversity of social interactions and aims at releasing the regularity elements. The conversation becomes privileged object of study as essential social interaction. The ethnographical study pinpoints the organisation of the communication activity: the access to the word, the introduction of a theme, the opening and closing of an interaction, etc. Gumperz and Hymes, 1964).

This extension of the scope would not be possible without the tremendously important contributions of the sciences of language, especially the socio-linguistic one, followed by semiotics, philosophy, epistemology, demography, human geography, history, political sciences, international relations or the studies on the socio-economic development. From the angle of intercultural education, Constantin Cuceş wrote: In general, interdisciplinary connections ensure an epistemological support incidental to the intercultural pedagogy. From this perspective, intercultural pedagogy remains always open to new disciplinary topics (Cuceş, 2000, p. 6).

### **Acculturative stress**

The acculturative stress does not supersede the psychological concept of *cultural shock* defined in the literature as “an emotional and intellectual experience lived by the one who, placed accidentally or due to a specific activity, outside the original sociocultural context, feels a powerful discomfort and an existential stress” (Cuceş, 2000, p. 131).

“Acculturation triggers the re-evaluation of identity and the reorganisation of the system of values. Such transformations generate cultural shocks and stress (...). The *Acculturation Stress* is manifested through anxiety, depression, feelings of marginalisation and exclusion, confuse identity, psychosomatic diseases” (Marian and Onu, p. 4-5).

One of the few researches regarding the stress to which an individual facing “intercultural confrontation” (*coping process*) is subject to is the one conducted by Zehua Li Hahn among international students studying in the U.S.A. in doctoral programs (Hahn, 2010). The purposes of this study were to investigate international students’ depression prevalence rate and to explore the relationships among stress, coping, cultural orientation, and depression. A stress measure, a depression scale, a coping measure, a cultural orientation measure, and a demographic questionnaire were administered to international students studying at an elite north-eastern university<sup>2</sup>.

The depression prevalence rate is around twice as high as those reported for domestic students. International students also reported high levels of acculturative stresses such as academic burdens, language barriers, financial difficulties, concerns over the future, cultural shocks, and racial discrimination<sup>3</sup>.

*Acculturative stress*, which is only known as *Acculturation stress*, was defined three decades ago by John W. Berry, who considered it a measure, in inverse ratio, of cultural integration: “the integration and assimilation are associated to the lowest level of stress”. It is the result of several factors that emerge in the process of cultural change: *the circumstances of the change* (deliberate or forced), *the level of similarity between the original culture and the host culture*, *the individual’s psychological stability*, *the acceptance of the cultural differences by the host culture*, *the image of the original culture within the host culture* (the

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<sup>2</sup> A total of 648 international students from 74 countries and areas responded to the survey. Results found that 22.6% of the participants were clinically depressed.

<sup>3</sup> Nota bene! A series of analyses found that students expressing religious beliefs, and those from collectivistically oriented regions were more likely to experience depression.



stereotypes of the latter regarding the original culture of the individual). According to Berry, there is no alternative to Acculturative stress than multiculturalism.

Therefore, I consider that the issue of acculturative stress is placed at the crossroads between Intercultural Psychology, Anthropology and Inter-cultural communication because this type of stress has a determined ethology, nurtured not only psychologically but also linguistically, semiotically, epistemologically and philosophically. In my view, the acculturative stress is generated by the failure of the individual who comes in contact with a new culture to elaborate hypotheses about the Other and to sense the hypotheses that the Other elaborates about him. And when he manages to *elaborate* such hypotheses, he cannot *test* them. This double inability is associated with uncertainty, both co-generating anxiety and stress.

The hypotheses that the individual fails to elaborate or test are not only psychological, but also linguistic, semiotic, philosophic and epistemological. The uncertainty of the stressed individual does not focus only on the psychical features of the other, his attitudes and intentions, as it happens when we interact within the same culture. In situations of interculturality, the uncertainty also involves the linguistic competence – his and the Other's: his capacity of uttering sentences intelligible for the Other and to understand the other's utterings as well as the Other's capacity of uttering phrases intelligible for him<sup>4</sup>.

In an academic lecture dedicated to intercultural communication, Constantin Cucuș seizes the multifactorial character of acculturative stress, linking it to a “cultural, linguistic, psychological misbalance”: “How can we perceive and settle the possible cultural, linguistic, psychological misbalance? This remains an on-going issue to be solved. Together with others, of course. The dissolutions and axiological displacements may lead to stress and imbalance at individual and social level (Cucuș, 2011, p. 47).

The uncertainty also involves the *communicative competence*<sup>5</sup>, which deals with a set of rules regarding various extra-linguistic aspects such as: knowing to manage problems related to the “access to the word”; knowing what to talk about in a certain situation; knowing to synchronise the mimics with our own utterings or with those of our interlocutor; knowing to handle the other's image; knowing to master the behaviours required by the approached genres of discourse. The communicative competence has an implicit character; it is acquired in and through interactions, in a *tacit learning* process. It is characterised by continuous change: following the acquired experience, the individual becomes more and more competent, in direct ratio to the multitude, the variety and the scope of his interactions with others. In case of interactions with individuals from a different culture, the individual acquires an *intercultural competence*: the communicative competence turns into intercultural competence!

In fact, an individual may have diverse communicative competences when it interacts with representatives of different communities. Similarly, this aspect applies when the

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<sup>4</sup> Here I use the term linguistic competence in the meaning given by Chomsky: “The ability of the inhabitants of a language to produce and comprehend an unlimited number of utterances” that he calls *grammatical competence*. This is completed by the *pragmatic competence*, focused on the rules allowing a subject to interpret an utterance by reporting to a particular context.

<sup>5</sup> The notion of communicative competence was introduced by the Ethnography of communication and defined by D. H. Hymes as follows: “Knowing how to use your language in an adequate manner in a large number of different situations” (Hymes, 1972).

individual interacts with representatives of different cultures. When his communicative competence is displayed in interactions with *any* other culture, we may speak of transcultural competence which, in my view, is the culmination of intercultural education<sup>6</sup>. I propose as educational ideal of the global world the *multicultural man* as part of a new ideal of humanity.

### **Sound Communicational Behaviour by means of the “Third Culture”**

It is here that the concepts of “universal communicator” (Gardner, 1962), “universal man” (Walsh, 1973) or “multicultural man (Adler, 1974) come into play. They refer to a person whose identity is founded on the *diversity and universality* of the cultural forms and of the human life conditions. Such a person is devoted to the conservation of the fundamental differences, while being willing to discover the essential similarities that enrich the interpersonal relations. According to Fred L. Casmir, the *multicultural man* “has the ability to suspend its cultural identity so as to create new forms of reality, based on the human diversity and on the unpredictability of human evolution” (Casmir, 1990, p. 295).

Albeit difficult, I believe we can achieve such a goal only by means of *interculturalisation* i.e. that set of processes through which individuals or groups belonging to two or more structures which claim different cultures or report to separate cultures (Clanet, 1993, p. 70, *apud* Cucuș, 2000, p. 10). According to this author, in the attempt to understand and come closer to *alterity*, an individual must take several steps:

- i. The subject expresses in his specific code. When facing a new code, he translates it according to the already known data. The new code is assimilated in the old code.
- ii. The subject realises, however, that his own cultural code approves to be unable to express data of the new reality. The subject enters the cultural code of another subject, appropriates the new code or the code shall appropriate the subject. This type of appropriation has different levels: institutional, relational, and intrapersonal and it can be constraining or freely chosen by the subject. The subject becomes another, operating with the new code (at a certain point, he can come back to the old code). The old code does not completely disappear. This rupture (definitive or temporary) may generate crises.
- iii. The misbalance or the conflict generated by the presence of two different codes may lead to the search for mediation, the endeavour to create a symbol of union between the two codes. In this case, the subject creates a critical distance by advancing a discourse, placing himself in the position of researcher of cultural assembles. A relativization of the cultural codes he operation with may take place.
- iv. The subject shall face the realities of the two cultural codes, being placed either in a code, or in the other or in another outside the first two. A sort of a third cultural space is thus created (a sort of meta-code or meta-culture) that borrows some elements of the two reference codes. The goal of an intercultural development could be the attempt to step out from culturo-centrism by creating an intermediary space between the two cultural codes.

This mechanism reminds us of the one discovered by Fred L. Casmir and his collaborators who speak of a *third culture*: although relying on different, sometimes opposed, perceptions and behaviours, the individuals belonging to two different cultures create, through their

<sup>6</sup> I have broadly tackled the concept of transcultural competence in another paper (Borçun, 2013).

interaction, a single framework for this interaction. As a result of the conjunction of the two cultures, a *third culture* comes into being, wider than the former ones and taken over by the both sides (Casmir, 1978).

Casmir calls the third culture a “situational subculture”, within which the individuals in interaction can adjust their temporary behavior for as long as they pursue common aims. Within the common efforts of mutual adjustment, individuals *accumulate and experience of their common aspects*, which can later provide them with starting points for new interactions. Subsequent researches coordinated by Fred L. Casmir confirmed and reconfirmed these observations on three levels of analysis: individual communication, organisational communication and media communication (Casmir, 1990). Within the third culture, the original ones can communicate better than in the case the third culture is missing. Thus, the third culture is not just a result of the fusion of two or more entities, but rather the product of their mutual “harmonizing” and becoming the components of a coherent whole. That is why the individual study of the original cultures will not reveal the base rules of the communication within the third one. The third culture has its own, specific rules<sup>7</sup>. One of the realities pertaining to the third culture is the *fading up to evanescence of the acculturative stress*, due to the disappearance of the conditions that generate and/or favour it.

## Conclusions

The pessimism towards the possibility of an intercultural communication without *acculturative stress* could be justified only by the classical paradigm, where cultures are regarded in their objectivity, as exterior, immutable and out of the communicational context. But the *third culture* idea brings about a new paradigm, which constraints the participants to communication to take part in the fulfillment of certain common tasks, being forced to adapt their references mutually and progressively, in the process of communication. The flat and contemplative descriptivism of “multiculturalism” is overcome by a new point of view in which the human subject (individual or collective) can build a new trans-cultural vision, a “common house” where communication can be efficient. In such a paradigm, none of the subjects is to elaborate a communicational code, so that one culture or another can impose its own communicational standards. This becomes a false problem! One of the main sources of *Acculturative stress* vanishes.

In the constraining situation of a “common task”, the codes and standards appear by themselves, during the process of communication. The role of the specialists in communication (academicians, researchers or workers in social communication) is to facilitate the mutual adjustments of the cultures within the “common task” situation (Casmir), to keep a record of the progress and to make the participants aware of them. The willing assumption of the new standards is the starting point for new mutual adjustments – and so on,

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<sup>7</sup> This characteristic of the third culture reminds us of the “laws of totality” of which Jean Piaget spoke in *Structuralism*: those laws which act at the level of a system but are not to be found at the level of the elements which comprise the system (Piaget, 1970). Through his personal contribution, the Swiss scholar re-formulated the *principle of totality* from the General Theory of Systems developed by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, in his famous *adagio*: „The whole is other than the sum of the parts” (Bertalanffy, 1969, p. 196). According to Casmir, the principle of totality applied to the third culture as well.



in a process where communication has been unblocked. Are we not living in an era where more and more cultures are brought in the “common task” situation? What is, for instance, the European Union? I think that in its current shape, based on economic criteria (which *split* rather than *unify*), the European Union does not offer enough “common tasks” in order to give birth to a new *Pan-European civic culture*, as a variety of the third culture. But, a European Federation could offer the political, economical, social and cultural framework necessary for the achievement of what Casmir called “the third culture” (see Gabriel Andreescu & Adrian Severin, 2001, pp. 3-42)

Under the virtual conditions of a European Federation, the “common tasks” will inevitably multiply, but their cultural imperatives would seem more and more obvious for the Europeans. Realizing them faster could be substantially achieved by social communication, standardized in the social engineering terms (such engineering already exists and it is called *Public Relations*).

From within the new paradigm, the questions are different – less theoretical and their answers are easier to be found:

1. In a growingly interdependent world, how do we define *competence in intercultural communication*?
2. Which are the *instruction methods* that need to be developed in order to achieve this competence?
3. How can *communication and collaboration* between researchers, practitioners and intercultural communication subjects be facilitated?
4. How can *collaboration* be enlarged, so it can incorporate new cultures?
5. What *research types* should be supported for their usefulness for other cultures?
6. What *institutions* should we design in order to be able to use the products of the research work – not merely communicational, but also communicative institutions?

These questions are not theoretical, but practical and immediate. They address researchers and schoolmasters, experts and councilors, politicians and us all, those involved more or less from the professional point of view to social communication in general, but especially to the intercultural one.

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