A COGNITIVE PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

Silviu ŞERBAN *

Abstract: *Starting from the "relevance theory" put forth by Sperber and Wilson and Sperber's epidemiological perspective on culture, Vladimir Žegarac proposes an analysis of the intercultural communication situation from the internalist perspective of cognitive psychology, replacing the linguistic and extra-linguistic context with a cognitive one, represented by the set of already existing assumptions which interact with new information within the communication process. Culture is defined through the set of meanings shared by a social group, and communication involves the social interaction along with the inclusion of new meanings into the initial set. But the communication process always implies the risk of failure because of the fact that the assignation of a meaning depends on the interlocutor's ability to reason in the same way as the communicator and to select the appropriate context for interpreting his/her act of communication. And as the cultural knowledge of the individual determines the context of communication, the risk of failure is even higher within the intercultural interactions where the individuals have different cultural backgrounds. Žegarac's approach is the best expression of the problems of the intercultural dialogue. It is proved that its performance depends on the intercultural knowledge to a great extent.*

Keywords*: the relevance theory, the epidemiological perspective on culture, the cognitive context of communication*

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's "relevance theory" and Sperber's epidemiological perspective on culture are used by Vladimir Žegarac to build o cognitive pragmatic approach to intercultural communication, emphasizing especially the subjective cultural background within the communication process.

Ostensive-Inferential Communication

The communication theories framed through time had been initially underlain by a code model according to the communication process means encoding and decoding messages (Sperber, Wilson, 1995: 2-3). The standard illustration of the code model is the Shannon and Weaver's mathematical model of communication. The semiotic models initiated by Peirce and Saussure are nothing but the generalizations of the code model specific to verbal communication for all forms of communication (*ibidem*: 6).

Paul Grice and David Lewis propose a new model, the inferential one, where the communication is achieved by producing and interpreting evidence. Unlike the code model which involves the assignation of a meaning to a sign within a code, the inferential one implies the deduction of a conclusion from a number of premises using some rules.

The inferential model may be incorporated in the code one but, in this case, must be explained not only how the speaker and the hearer use the same language but how they share the same set of premises from which, applying the same rules, obtain the same conclusions (Sperber, Wilson, *op. cit.*: 15).

* *Spiru Haret* University, Bucharest, silviuserban2000@yahoo.co.uk

BDD-A29818 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:20 UTC)

The premises, apart from the uttered ones, used in interpreting the utterances form what is called *context* (*ibidem*: 15-16). This is a psychological construction, a set of hearer's assumptions about the world. So, the context is not reducible to the direct information derived from the environment or the antecedent utterances, but contains also some components such as expectations about the future, scientific hypotheses, religious beliefs, memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker.

In order to the communication process to unfold successfully, the speaker and the hearer must share the same context. This is defined as *common knowledge* by Lewis, in *Convention* (1969), or the *mutual knowledge* by Schiffer, in *Meaning* (1972). For a correct recovering of the speaker's intention of communication, each term of contextual information used in interpreting the utterance must not only known by every member of the communication process but mutually known (*ibidem*: 18). Namely both the speaker and the hearer have to know about each other that everyone knows that contextual information.

The code model, and even the inferential one, rests necessarily on this theory about mutual knowledge. But, by accepting this hypothesis some problems appear related to how the partners of the communication process manage to differentiate from the set of the contextual information exactly those common premises. For, in order to identify this mutual knowledge, everyone must do an infinite sequence of validations.

To overcome this hopeless situation Sperber and Wilson propose the substitution of the mutual knowledge with a new concept, taking as starting point Grice's theory about non-natural meaning. Thus, there are two ways of conveying information (*ibidem*: 23): *direct*, through physical presence of evidence of which the conveyed information result; *indirect*, through providing evidence of one's intention to convey that information. While the first method can only be used with information for which direct evidence can be provided, the second method can be used with any information at all, as long as direct evidence of the comunicator's intention can be provided. This second way of conveying information is named inferential communication to the extent that the receiver infers the sender's intention from evidence provided by the latter for this precise purpose.

Defining the non-natural meaning Grice refers to two intentions: the intention to convey a message, and the intention to achive the first intention through its recognition by the receiver. Starting from this double intentionality, Sperber and Wilson speak also about two intentions (*ibidem*: 29):

(i) *the informative intention*, by which the communicator conveys an information to the receiver;

(ii) *the communicative intention*, by which the communicator informs the receiver of his/her informative intention.

Although, generally speaking, all people share the same physical environment, they still do not share the same cognitive environment: speak different languages, belong to different cultures, have different pictures of the world and, therefore, do different inferences (*ibidem*: 38-39). Sperber and Wilson define the cognitive environment through the concept of „manifest fact":

- a fact is *manifest* for an individul at a given time if and only if he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true;
- *cognitive environment* of an individual is a set of facts that are manifest to him.

BDD-A29818 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:20 UTC)

So the common knowledge is replaced by *mutual cognitive environment* composed of facts that are manifest to the members of the communication process (*mutual manifest facts*) (Sperber, Wilson, *op. cit.*: 41-42).

The notion of mutual manifestness does not explain as well the conjecture of common knowledge, the equilibrium between the sender and the receiver within the communication. The main reason for which the common knowledge hypothesis and the code model of communication process are embraced is represented by the request in explaining the way how the success of communication is secured, how a firm algorithm guarantees that the receiver can rebuild accurately the mening of the sender. Within this theoretical model, the failure of communication is explained either through the difference between the sender's and the receiver's code or through the noise that disturbs the transmission of the message. Giving up the common knowledge hypothesis, the idea of an existing algorithm within the communication process is also abandoned. On the contrary, the communication is dominated by the heuristic processes, while the error occurs everywhere. What is enigmatic and need to be explained is rather the success of communication than its failure. (*ibidem*: 44-45).

The cognitive environment of an individual includes a set of manifest facts. The problem is: resting on what criterion the individual choose one of another of many facts manifest to him/her to use within the communication process. This criterion is related to the fact that the purpose of every communicative interaction of an individual is to improve the own representation of the world. Thus, what matters in communication is getting a new information that Sperber and Wilson call it *relevant* (*ibidem*: 48). And the behaviour which makes manifest an intention to make something manifest taking into consideration the relevance for the receiver is called *ostensive* behaviour (*ibidem*: 49). So, the guarantee of relevance is assured by the ostensive behaviour, and this condition represents the *principle of relevance* that is essential for explaining the inferential model of communication (*ibidem*: 50).

The ostensive behaviour provides two layers of information: first, the information that was pointed out, then the information that the first information was intentionally pointed aut (*ibidem*: 50). Consequently, the ostensive-inferential communication may be defined in terms of both the informative intention and the communicative intention.

For Paul Grice, who distinguished between natural and non-natural meaning, between the ostensive behavior of „showing something" and the communication through „meaning something", the first level of information was not able to be completely regained without the reference to the second level of information. According to Grice, in a successful communication the sender intends as the recognition of his/her informative intention to be, at least in part, the reason for the receiver's message production. For Sperber and Wilson, this differentiation between „showing" and „saying that" does not exist, but they put an equivalence sign between the ostensive behavior and the inferential communication. This equivalence leads to the description of communication as ostesive-inferential which corresponds to the same phenomenon seen from two different angles: the sender's one involved by the ostensive behavior, and the receiver's one involved by the inferential behavior (Sperber, Wilson, *op. cit.*: 53-54).

BDD-A29818 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:20 UTC)

The communicator's informative intention is represented by his/her immediate intention to modify the cognitive environment of the receiver (*ibidem*: 58). By his/her informative intention, the communicator intends to make manifest or more manifest to the receiver a set of pressupositions (representations of the world). The communicative intention generated by an ostensive behaviour consists in producing a certain stimulus with the aim of fulfiling the informative intention (*ibidem*: 60-61). By his/her communicative intention, the communicator intends to make mutual manifest his/her informative intention.

To be effective, an act of ostensive communication must direct the receiver's attention to the communicator's informative intention. In its turn, by virtue of the *Principle of Relevance*, the communicator's informative intention showed by an ostensive stimulus conveys automatically to the receiver the idea of a *presumption of relevance*, suggesting that information he/she conveys is relevant for him/her. The receiver's task is to build possible interpretative hypotheses about the content of the pressupositions that the communicator has come to his/her notice, and to choose the appropriate one. And the correctness of the interpretation means its characteristic to be consistent with the Principle of Relevance (*ibidem*: 156-164).

Epidemiological Perspective on Culture

In *Explaining Culture* Dan Sperber frames a naturalistic approach to culture, picturing the process of cultural transfer by means of some patterns borrowed from epidemiology. The cultural fact are nothing but the outcomes of some bodily movements of individuals and of enviromental changes resulting from these movements (Sperber, 1996: 24). The nature of these movements is explained by Sperber with the aid of the notion of representation. Two types of representation are differentiated: *mental* (beliefs, intentions, preferences) and *public* (signals, utterances, texts, pictures). The public representations are signs and are able to be interpreted.

The human world is populated by an infinite number of representations. Some of them are individual (the mental representations), others are communicated and transformed in public representations (*ibidem*: 25-26). A small part of the set of the public representations are conveyed recurrently, being dispersed to every individual of a greater or smaller community, and become the cultural representations.

The transmission of the representations, from the mental to the public ones, and conversely, does not spread through imitation, but through interpretation. The communicator's mental representation does not coincide almost ever with the receiver's mental representation within the communication process that involves the chain mental representation (conveyed)-public representation (communicated)-mental representation (received) (*ibidem*: 34). The interpretation implies a representation of a representation based on the resemblance of the content. The communication process involves two interpretative stages: the public representation is an interpretation of the mental representation, and the mental representation resulted in receiving a public representation is a new interpretative process.

So there is no clear delimitation between individual and cultural representation. The attribute of the latter consists in their dispersion to all individuals of a community. The epidemiology of the representations explains the cultural phenomena by means of two types

BDD-A29818 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:20 UTC)

of mechanisms: individual, refering to the emergence and transformation of the mental representations, and inter-individual, regarding the changes of the environment produced by the transmission of the representations (Sperber, *op. cit.*: 50). The explanation of the culture means to answer to following question: why some representations are more popular than others? Some of them are transmitted more slowly but cover more generations (traditions), while others are transmitted more rapidly but last less time (fashion) (*ibidem*: 58).

The factors that contribute to a more dispersion of some individual representations, which become cultural, are psychological and ecological (*ibidem*: 84). The psychological factors include the ease with which a particular representation can be memorized, the existence of background knowledge in relationship to which the representation is relevant, the motivation to communicate the content of the representation. The ecological factors refers to the recurrence of situation in which the representation gives rise to, or contribute to, appropriate action, the availability of external memory stores (writing in particular), the existence of institution engaged in the transmission of the representation.

The cultural representations are representations of other representations, are meta-representations and reflect reflexive attitudes which, unlike the intuitive ones, deducted from a perceptive experience through inferences, are the second-order representations, being grounded on the first-order representations (*ibidem*: 89). Consequently, the intuitive attitudes do not fluctuate essentially from one culture to another, while the reflexive ones may contradict one another, appearing as rational or irational depending how they are pictured into a culture or outside of it (*ibidem*: 91-92). At the same time, unlike the intuitive attitudes, being dispersed through both the perceptive experiences and the communication acts, the reflexive ones are dispersed exclusively through the communication acts and not only consciously, but intentionally, as it happens, for instance, with religious, political or scientific beliefs (*ibidem*: 94-97). The dispersion of these attitudes becomes a social process.

The Cognitive Environment of Intercultural Interaction

Starting from the "relevance theory" put forth by Sperber and Wilson and Sperber's epidemiological perspective on culture, Vladimir Žegarac proposes an analysis of the intercultural communication situation from the internalist perspective of cognitive psychology, replacing the linguistic and extra-linguistic context with a cognitive one, represented by the set of already existing assumptions which interact with new information within the communication process. Culture is defined through the set of meanings shared by a social group, and communication involves the social interaction along with the inclusion of new meanings into the initial set. But the communication process always implies the risk of failure because of the fact that the assignation of a meaning depends on the interlocutor's ability to reason in the same way as the communicator and to select the appropriate context for interpreting his/her act of communication (Žegarac, 2007: 32-33). And as the cultural knowledge of the individual determines the context of communication, the risk of failure is even higher within the intercultural interactions where the individuals have different cultural backgrounds.

From the perspective of the epidemiological approach to culture, the intra-cultural communication involves the relationship between the individuals who share a number of representations, while whithin the inter-cultural communication the individuals share a few

BDD-A29818 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:20 UTC)

representations, and sometimes no one. The cultural representations have what Žegarac calls the propriety of being central within a system of representations of a community. According to this propritey, he defines the concepts of cultural proximity and cultural distance (Žegarac, *op. cit.*: 40-41).

In intra-cultural interaction the cultural distance between the participants is insignificant to have some adverse effects on the successs of communication. So, in this case, the communication situation does not require the special adaptations by the speakers. On the contrary, in inter-cultural communication the cultural distance between the participants is important to have the adverse effects on the successs of communication, if the communication situation is not properly adapted by the speakers.

It follows that the research of the intercultural communication has to focus on four points (*ibidem*: 42):

(i) determining the extent to which intented and assigned meanings within the communication process coincide;

(ii) discovering similarities between the context of receiver's interpretation and the sender's intented context;

(iii) identifying the extent to which the cultural representations contributed to the discrepancy between the receiver's actualized context and the sender's intented one;

(iv) assessing the impact of the cultural representation over the success of communication taking into account their centrality.

Insofar as the transmission of the cultural representations is produced by transformation (interpretation) and not by imitation, it follows, first, that the intercultural similarity is almost impossible while the cultural diversity appears to be natural, and second, that the cultural variation is the outcome of the contextual circumstances in which the social groups inhabit.

The success in dispersing the cultural representations is explained by means of the notion of relevance. The Sperber and Wilson's Principle of Relevance gives the basis in analysing both the strategies of the communicator's transmission of the message and the receiver's its understanding (*ibidem*: 46). To convey the message, the communicator has to choose the option which involves receiver's least effort to understand it. The receiver has to build interpretations and to stop when the anticipated relevance is fulfiled.

Based on the notions of cognitive environment and mutual cognitive environment defined by Sperber and Wilson, Žegarac makes the terms of cultural environment and mutual cultural environment (*ibidem*: 49-51). The set of cultural representations that are manifest to an individual at a certain time forms his/her *cultural environment*. The cultural environment shared by two or more individuals and which is manifest to them forms the *mutual cultural environment*. Thus, the individual's cultural environment is a subset of his/her cognitive environment, and the mutual cultural environment is a subset of the mutual cognitive environment. In terms of the Relevance Theory, the communication process involves the production and the interpretation of the evidence of the communicative and informative intentions. But what is considered evidence of a communicative (or informative) intention in one culture, may be less evident in the context of another culture. The understanding of a less evident communicative act related to an informative intention requires receiver's more effort to find the relevant information. Therefore, a communicator

BDD-A29818 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:20 UTC)

who propose an optimal level of the relevance should always choose the ostensive stimuli that give as adequately as possible the evidence of the informative intention. So that within a communicative act, a communicator that conveys a set of the pressupositions in a way less evident than is required will force the receptor to make additional inferences in order to choose the relevant information and to interpret correctly what was communicated. In other words, the receiver will assume that the informative intention is somehow different of what would be transmitted through a communicative act more directly.

Conclusion

Žegarac's approach is the best expression of the problems of the intercultural dialogue. It is proved that the performance of the communication between two different cultures depends on the intercultural knowledge to a great extent, the mutual cultural environment being essential for the success of the communication. The lack of sufficient knowledge about speaker's culture makes the ostensive stimulus superfluous, and makes it difficult, if not even impossible, for the receiver to select the relevant item of information to a correct understanding of the conveyed message.

Bibliography

Sperber, Dan, *Explaining Culture. A Naturalistic Approach*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996.
Sperber, Dan; Wilson, Deirdre, *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*, Second edition, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995.
Žegarac, Vladimir, "A cognitive pragmatic perspective on communication and culture", in Helga Kotthoff and Helen Spencer-Oatey (editors), *Handbook of Intercultural Communication*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2007.

BDD-A29818 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:20 UTC)