

## ***DIMENSIONS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES***

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*Abstract: Initially, the intercultural communication appeared as a conceptual phrase, as a consequence of the obvious globalization of the society, but it subsequently became, due to a complex interdisciplinary effort, a standalone study discipline, methodologically and theoretically substantiated. The dialogue between people who do not share a common history, who talk different languages, who have not only a different communication style, but also a different behavior, represents the overlapping of just as many different voices, each of them expressing values, beliefs and opinions that are dictated by their own culture of origin. The understanding and the awareness regarding the rules and the values of the interlocutor's culture, the openness towards the inevitable differences and idiosyncrasies plays an important role in the intercultural interactions. Nowadays, the capacity to communicate efficiently in an intercultural context represents an advantage on the labor market. We can say, as a conclusion, that the entire contemporary society is fully aware of this multi-dimensional concept, a dynamic concept in diachrony and in synchrony, diversified and – paradoxically – exhibiting an inherent homogeneity.*

*Keywords: culture, communication, diversity, interculturality, management.*

The awareness regarding the communication issues between interlocutors belonging to different cultures has generated, throughout the years, the interest of many researchers such as Hall (1976, 1983, 1990), Samovar (1991, 2000, 2011), Kim (1985, 1988, 2001), Assante (1989), Hofstede (1980, 1984), Ting-Toomey (1988, 1999) etc. Although the sensitization of the public awareness towards the intercultural communication in the 70s has been maximum, the research proceeded at a slow pace. It was due to the fact that the research had to overcome the difficulties

of associating two complex, polymorphous notions: „culture” and „communication”. The difficulty in building the paradigm was arising from the fact that, besides the elements of the communication situation, the researcher had to consider the cultural components as well. The first theoretical elements, which establish the intercultural communication as a field of study, appear in the 80s. Gudykunst is the researcher who inserts the phrase “communicating with strangers” in the scientific literature. The numerous definitions are due to the different perspectives possible for approaching this phrase: geographic political, linguistic, sociologic, economic etc. Among the many definitions, we will focus on the definition of Samovar *et al.* (2000): „*intercultural communication is communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbols systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event*”.<sup>1</sup>

In this complex process called intercultural communication, the transmitter and the receiver have a different perspective on the world, dictated by the culture of origin. A genuine intercultural dialogue imposes the acceptance of the relativism of one’s own culture. While analyzing the intercultural communication phrase, it is important to associate the speaker with the acquisition of certain specific competences, the intercultural competence respectively, defined as „the capacity to communicate successfully with persons coming from different cultures”.<sup>2</sup> This concept does not imply abandoning one’s own cultural values and the interiorization of the other culture, but knowing and understanding other cultural values, tolerating and respecting them (Balboni, 2004). This capacity to decide, select, manage different attitudes, knowledge and abilities necessary for building an optimal communication with individuals from other cultures can be innate, in part, but it also involves a targeted learning. However, the intercultural communication is not limited to memorizing certain information about the nonverbal and paraverbal communication and about the communication styles; one’s personal experience and even intuition can be decisive because - sometimes – the interpretative differences can be very thin.

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<sup>1</sup> „*the intercultural communication is the communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are different enough to modify the communicative act.*” în Samovar, L.A. și Porter, R.E., 2000. *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*. A 10-a ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, P.48.

<sup>2</sup> Center of International Competence – [www.cicb.net](http://www.cicb.net)

Among the factors influencing decisively the intercultural communication, the communication style is to be noticed, the conception about time and space, the nonverbal aspects of communication and last, but not least, the stereotypes and the prejudices. The nonverbal communication concepts, the chronemics and the proxemics, render Hall's writings, such as *The Silent Language* (1959), *The Hidden Dimension* (1966) or *Beyond Culture* (1989) very current.

In an intercultural communication situation, language represents a frequent cause of misunderstanding, the cultural differences being "hidden" within the linguistic acts. Any language has culture-specific expressive forms, classified in grammatical and lexical categories or even nonverbal categories (Müller-Jacquier, 2010.) Choosing the language tone, choosing a certain topic can differ from one culture to another. The communication blockage is also due to a superficial knowledge of the interlocutor's language. Finding a universal language, which overcomes the difficulties regarding the communication between people belonging to different cultural-linguistic areas remains a utopia. Overcoming this blockage can be performed in three different ways: using the services of an interpreter, using the interlocutor's language or using a common language, English being today the "lingua franca" in many fields. Nevertheless, if the knowledge of the English language is not a solid one, the communication is prone to failure.

Considering the role of the context within communication, Edward Hall, by means of his reference work, "The Silent Language", establishes a distinction between the high context cultures and the low context cultures. In the high context cultures, the nonverbal elements are those predominating the communication process. Thoughts and feelings, not being expressed explicitly, need to be interpreted. The style chosen for communicating is the indirect one. In the low context cultures, the information is sent in an explicit manner, while the nonverbal components don't have a significant role. The commonly used style during a communication process is the direct one. The communication between a person belonging to a high context culture and a person belonging to a low context culture becomes a true challenge.

Communication does not occur solely by means of the word; it involves, as well, signals such as the proxemics, the kinesics and the paralinguistics, which underline, complete, substitute and sometimes contradict the messages of the verbal communication. The nonverbal communication, although allows the communication between persons using different linguistic codes, must not be approached as being a universal communication; it is actually culturally determined, just like the verbal one. Hall (1966) refers to the nonverbal communication

phenomenon as “The Hidden Dimension” of culture, because the messages are hidden in the communication context.

The gestures, the body movements, the posture are codified and vary from one culture to another. A very good example is that of the Italians, who are well-known for the wide range of gestures used in communication. A look, a visual contact can differ from one culture to another. Looking the interlocutor straight in the eyes characterizes the Latin cultures, the Latin-American ones, while the North-Europeans and the Asians prefer the discreet look, the peripheral one. An efficient intercultural communication implies knowing the rules concerning it, in order to be able to decode correctly the message transmitted to the interlocutor.

The nonverbal communication includes, as well, the way in which we communicate by means of the distances. The distance between individuals, as Hall points out, represents one of the more frequent source of misunderstandings within the intercultural communication, the perception of the space being different, depending on the culture. In “The Hidden Dimension” (1966), Hall analyzes the way in which the individuals refer to the space and the way in which the space influences the interpersonal relationships. All these proxemics characteristics are part of the nonverbal communication and are aspects that need to be taken into consideration by those involved in situations of intercultural communication.

The chronemics concept refers to the way in which time is perceived. Authors such as Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), Hall (1976), Hofstede (1984), Trompenaars (1993) or Usunier (2005) have exploited this time concept, establishing various typologies. Thus, we are talking about a linear time vs. a circular time<sup>3</sup>, about orienting towards the past, the present or the future<sup>4</sup>, about monochromatic cultures as opposed to the polychromatic ones or about long-term or short-term orientation.<sup>5</sup>

E. T. Hall makes a bipolar classification of cultures, releasing the concepts of „monochronic time vs. polychronic time”. The monochronic time is divided and can be resumed in one single expression "when the time comes". Things are to be done one at a time, being an attentively planned time. Within the polychronic cultures, there is no clear delimitation between

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<sup>3</sup> Usunier, J-C., Lee, J., 2005. *Marketing Across Cultures*, Pearson Education.

<sup>4</sup> Kluckhohn, F.R. și Strodtbeck., F.L., 1961. *Variations in value orientations*. Evanston, IL: Row, Peterson.

<sup>5</sup> Hofstede, G., 1984. *Cultures Consequences: International Differences in Work-related values*. Abridged Ed., Beverly Hills: Sage.

the past, the present and the future. The members of a monochronic culture plan in detail their activities, any deviation from the plan producing anxiety, while the members of a polychronic culture are flexible, less strict when it comes to organizing time, they do more than one thing at a time and they easily modify their schedules. Within the intercultural interactions, these differences when it comes to time perception can lead to misunderstandings. An Italian's polychronic manner of managing the time is not always appreciated by a foreign person belonging to a monochronic culture.

Among the factors hindering the intercultural communication, the stereotypes and the prejudices are the main factors. The stereotypes, considered a an erroneous and inferior manner of thinking (Miller, 1982), unjustified generalization (Brigham, 1971), a consensual opinion about the characteristics of a group (Taifel, 1981) or as a set of characteristics assigned to a group, reflect a range of standardizations, clichés, at the level of the race, the gender, the regions, but also at the level of nations. Simplifying the reality, the stereotypes and the prejudices often offer a false image of the other culture. The stereotypes create expectations concerning the behavior of the members of another culture and the role of these expectations is that of anticipating and interpreting the other person's behavior. Very often, we hear stereotypes like: the Romanians are hospitable people, the Italians are artists, the Germans are serious and punctual, the French are gourmands. However, not all Italians are artists, not all the Germans are punctual and not all Romanians are hospitable people. Unlike the stereotype, the prejudice does not have any positive nuances. While intending to establish a clear delimitation between stereotype and prejudice, Fiske (1998) states that "while the stereotype is the cognitive component, the prejudice represents the affective component, the emotional one."<sup>6</sup> The stereotypes and the prejudices derive from the confrontation between the cultural backgrounds of the people involved in the interaction and from the erroneous perception on the other culture and the lack of knowledge regarding the other culture's values.

Reassuring the most important ideas of the "intercultural communication" field presentation, we can conclude by saying that the entire current society is fully aware of this

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<sup>6</sup> Fiske, S. T. , 1998. Stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination, *Handbook of social psychology*, New York: McGraw-Hill, Nr.2 p. 357.

multi-dimensional concept, a dynamic concept in diachrony and in synchrony, diversified and – paradoxically – exhibiting an inherent homogeneity.

### **Conclusions:**

The intercultural communication reflects the force-idea that within communication, the cultural variables play an important role.

Defining the notion of intercultural communication keeps an ambiguity area, sine the concepts it comprises (culture and communication) are defined through heterogeneity, polysemics and complexity of signification.

The concept of culture cannot be seen and analyzed as a static and closed concept and in the same manner, an exclusive definition cannot be assigned to the intercultural communication, which remains open for the integration of new elements and aspects.

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