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Does intercultural communication differ from intracultural communication?

1 Understanding culture

Theoretically, human verbal communication can be considered a process with two extreme end points: the intracultural at one end, and the intercultural at the other. However, these end points are only theoretical because practically, communicators in any interaction are always in between, closer or further to one of the ends, creating and interpreting meaning by using their existing linguistic tools and knowledge. So it would be a mistake to talk about a dichotomy. According to the *socio-cognitive approach* (Kecskes 2010, 2014) there is nothing like pure intracultural or intercultural communication. What we have is something in between on a continuum between the two hypothetical end points.

Before we explain how the continuum works we need to define culture as understood in this paper. We adopt Bates and Plog's definition according to which culture is a system of shared beliefs, norms, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another (Bates and Plog 1980:6). Culture cannot be seen as something that is "carved" in every member of a particular society or community. It can be made, changed, manipulated and dropped on the spot. In fact, it is not culture that can be changed, manipulated and dropped in talk but its manifestation. This, however, does not mean that there is nothing relatively stable and unifying in culture. On this issue there is a significant difference between the constructivist view represented by Blommaert (1998), Gumperz (1982) and Rampton (1995), and the socio-cognitive approach (SCA). According to Blommaert, Rampton and others, there is no single language, culture, or communicative style. What we have is language, culture, and communicative style instantiated in different group and individual varieties. Interlocutors have a repertoire of varieties of styles and a combination of styles which are deployed according to communicative needs in changing contexts. The difference between the constructivist view and the socio-cognitive approach lies in the understanding of the nature of existing "communicative repertoires", and the ways these repertoires are deployed. In intercultural communication, existing communicative repertoires have been developed from prior experience and communicative encounters in a language or languages other than the common language of communication. What the online¹ creation of culture means is the blending of existing repertoires and newly emergent elements. Culture is characterized by both regularity and variety. It certainly is more than just an online-created and co-constructed phenomenon.

In communication, interlocutors can rely mainly on two types of repository of prior experience and encounters: lexical units and communicative styles. Like lexical items, cultural patterns (often expressed in different communicative styles) encode prior experience and encounters, i.e., relatively standard cultural behavior models and expectations, which are activated in a given situational context. Here is, for instance, an exchange between a librarian and a student:

Student: - I'm returning these books.

Librarian: - Can I see your library card, please?

Student: - Here you are.

Librarian: - Do you want to extend the due date of any of these books?

Student: - No, thank you.

Librarian: - Here's your card. You're all set.

In the course of interaction, these existing models are modified and blended with situationally emergent new elements. This process of blending, that relies both on existing and emerging factors, constitutes the communicative encounter. Blending means joining existing and emerging elements/factors into new "intercultures" (see Kecskes 2013, 2014) So in the interaction, the communicative repertoires of speakers are not just deployed but they are actually modified and blended with emerging elements as the process develops. The socio-cognitive approach emphasizes that this "third culture" creation means not just putting together what we have, and bringing about a third phenomenon which is neither this or that/neither one nor the other, but actually giving sense to the communicative repertoires and changing them by relating them to the actual situational context, that also adds to or takes away something from what already exists. Cultural constructs and models change diachronically, while cultural representation and speech production by individuals change synchronically.

2 The differences

The dominant view is that there is no principled difference between intracultural communication and intercultural communication (e.g. Winch 1997; Wittgenstein 2001). This is true as far as the purpose and mechanism of the communicative process is concerned. However, according to Gumperz&Gumperz (2005) monolingual people and multilingual people do not differ in what they do with language, but in how they do what they do. So when we

¹"online" here refers to creation of culture in the moment of speech.

intend to explain the relationship between intracultural and intercultural interaction our focus should be on the "how".

Now we can present a working definition of the two phenomena in the socio-cognitive approach. *Intracultural communication* occurs in interactions between members of a relatively definable L1 speech community following conventions of language and conventions of usage with individual choices and preferences. *Intercultural communication* refers to interactions between speakers who have different first languages, communicate in a common language, and, usually, represent different cultures. So how is this difference reflected in language use?

2.1 Shift from the communal to the individual

From a pragmatic perspective, the main difference between intracultural communication and intercultural communication appears to be that the latter, to some extent, shifts the emphasis from the communal to the individual. Kecskes (2014) argued that what standard pragmatics assumes about how things work in communication depends on there being commonalities, conventions, standards and norms between speakers and hearers. This, however, may not be exactly so in intercultural communication. Commonalities, conventions, common beliefs, norms, shared knowledge and the like all create a core common ground on which intention and cooperation-based pragmatics is built. (Of course, there are plenty of varieties within those commonalities.) However, when this core common ground is limited, as is the case toward the intercultural communication end of the continuum, interlocutors cannot take it for granted; rather they need to co-construct it, at least temporarily. So there appears to be a shift in emphasis from the communal to the individual. It is not that the individual becomes more important than the societal. Rather, since there is limited common ground, it should be created in the interactional context in which the interlocutors function as core common ground creators, rather than just common ground seekers and activators, as is mostly the case toward the intracultural communication end of the continuum. So the nature of intersubjectivity, the way rapport is established between interlocutors seems to be being changed.

2.2 More reliance on ad hoc created language than on prefabricated language

Toward the intercultural communication end of the continuum there is more reliance on language created ad hoc by individuals in the course of interaction, than on prefabricated language and pre-existing frames. Intracultural communication is dominated by preferred ways of saying things and preferred ways of organizing thoughts within a particular speech community (see Kecskes 2008, 2014). However, this is not the case toward the intercultural communication end of the continuum. Using a particular language and belonging to a particular speech community means having preferred ways of saying things, preferred patterns of use and preferred ways of organizing thoughts. This is expressed in a well-balanced blend of prefabricated language with ad hoc generated language in L1. Preferred ways of saying things are generally reflected best in the use of formulaic language and figurative language. Americans *shoot a film, run a business, make love, do the dishes and put out the fire*. The TV anchor asks you to *stick around*, and the shop assistant tells you at the end of the transaction that *you're all set*. Language socialization, to a great extent, depends on the acquisition of what is expected to be said in particular situations, and what kind of language behavior is considered appropriate in the given speech community.

Formulaic language is considered the heart and soul of native-like language use. In fact, formulaic language use makes language use native-like. Pawley and Syder argued that "it is knowledge of conventional expressions, more than anything, that gives speakers the means to escape from the one-clause-at-a-time constraint, and that is the key to native-like fluency (Pawley and Syder 2000:164)." Several studies have referred to the low rate of formulaic language in intercultural communication (Prodromou 2008; House 2002, 2003; Kecskes 2007). Researchers argued that the main reason for this is that interlocutors prefer semantically analyzable units, because they cannot be sure of how much of formulaic language their partners can process the way they do. This definitely is an important reason. But it is even more important that the development of preferred ways of saying things and preferred speech patterns and frames is the result of conventionalization and normativization in a speech community. The more we move toward the intercultural end of the continuum the less we can rely on these preferred patterns, frames and language use conventions that they interlocutors do not share as they come from different L1 language communities.

2.3 Context-sensitivity

Context-sensitivity works differently in intracultural communication and intercultural communication. One reason is that actual situational context cannot play the role of catalyst toward the intercultural communication end of the continuum in the way it does in intracultural communication, because the participants' different socio-cultural background ties them to culturally different L1 communities, where both prior context and actual situational context function in a variety of different ways. Interlocutors in intercultural interactions may be more affected by prior context (based mainly on their L1) than actual situational context.

Context-sensitivity, which in the socio-cognitive approach means *actual situational context-sensitivity*, works differently in intercultural encounters and intracultural encounters. There are universal contextual factors that affect language processing similarly, no matter what language is actually used. These factors are connected with general knowledge of the world, such as weather, landscape, human relations, etc. When I say "have a good one", it is not necessary to name/specify whether I mean day, night, afternoon or morning, as the actual situational context does that. Or in Russian, when we say *Саша и Света поженились* (*Sašai Sveta poženilis'*, Shasa and Sveta got married), we do not have to refer to the fact that they got married to each other. However, most actual contextual factors are language- and culture-specific. Each language has interpretation-sensitive lexical items, expressions and utterances, where a part or all of the knowledge that is necessary for processing is taken for granted in the given culture. No wording is needed because actual situational context does the rest. For

instance, when in Russian we say “Как дела?” (*Kak dela?* How are things?), speakers know what the word “дела” (*dela*, things) refer to. Or in Chinese they ask “Ni chi le ma? (Have you eaten today?), which lexically differs from the Russian expression but functionally not. Basically, the closest functional equivalent of these Russian and Chinese expressions in English is “how are you doing?” This is where the major problem of intercultural communication with context occurs. *Whose context are we talking about in a communicative encounter?* The prior context of the L1, or the prior context of the L2, or the actual situational co-constructed context, or all three?

If we go back to the definition of interculturality above then our answer should be “all three”. However, we should know that the lower the target language proficiency of speakers is, the more they will be affected by the prior context of the L1 and ignore or pay less attention to the actual situational context. So context-sensitivity in these cases cannot work the way it does toward the intracultural communication end of the continuum, where salience and common ground are governed by the relatively more homogenous socio-cultural background knowledge.

3 Conclusion

The paper has promoted the idea that the relationship between intracultural communication and intercultural communication can be explained by a continuum whose hypothetical two ends represent the two “types” of interaction that never occur in a pure form. Variation on the continuum and differences between the two phenomena are affected by different factors.

As a main difference it was mentioned that there is a shift from the communal/societal to the individual because conventions, common beliefs, norms, shared knowledge and the like that constitute a core common ground in L1 are quite limited in intercultural interaction so the participants should co-construct them. The socio-cognitive approach emphasizes that this shift does not mean that the individual is more important than the societal. What it means is that both are important but the actual situational frame is expected to be co-constructed by individuals who participate in the process. This is because language use frames and contexts do not function the way they do in intracultural communication where prior experience of members of a speech community results in relatively similar interpretation of situational frames and the use of existing speech patterns and formulas.

The process of co-construction of common ground, shaping intersubjectivity and developing interculturalities that all characterize the intercultural communication end of the continuum should be described by using a “success approach” that focuses on how interlocutors manage to get their messages through rather than focusing on miscommunication and troubles in the process.

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