

Intercultural Issues in Virtual Professional Settings

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Abstract

The purpose of this introductory chapter, far from presenting the whole multifaceted scenario, is to underline some of the issues at stake, producing the synthesis of a case study as an example of intercultural business communication online. Considering the channel and the need for a company to construct its identity in relation to an unpredictable global audience, this study follows a three-dimensional concept of space (Soja 2001). A mixed methodological approach, both quantitative and qualitative, has been adopted, although reference to numerical data is made only to support discourse analysis (DA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Indeed, DA and CDA are, in this case, the best approaches to describing business communication that implies a high level of intercultural interaction.

Keywords: intercultural communication, space and identity, virtual encounters, local/global culture.

1. Introduction

The interest in analysing and defining the concept of culture stems from the increasing awareness of some basic principles: culture is not a static entity, as it changes from time to time and even within the Self, from situation to situation. Culture can no longer be considered as a “unit” *per se*, but rather in relation to various aspects of human behaviour which can be either conscious or unconscious; it is meaningful in contemporary life only if it is compared with the contents of other “cultures” (Spencer-Oatey 2009).

Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) identified something in the region of one hundred and sixty definitions of the term ‘culture’, each of them focusing on one or more of these categories, according to different theoretical assumptions: thought, speech, environment,

action and human behaviour, knowledge and its transmission, and values and beliefs concerning social groups and identities.

In fact, all these factors play a role in intercultural relationships in the present world, as Fairclough states:

[...] the networks, connectivities and interactions which cut across spatial boundaries and borders crucially include, and we might say depend upon, particular forms (or what I shall call *genres*) of communication which are specialized for transnational and interregional interaction. And the ‘flows’ include flows of representations, narratives and *discourses*. In that sense, it is partly language that is globalizing and globalized. (Fairclough 2006: 3)

In particular fields, such as management, business and the media, culture is increasingly deterritorialised and language reflects this process in each of these different contexts.

It is no surprise, then, that language studies in an intercultural perspective have developed in the last decades. It is appropriate to mention here the contribution given, concerning both written and oral communication, by Winnie Cheng, co-editor of the present volume (among many other works, see Cheng 2011; Cheng and Warren 1999).

2. The complexity of intercultural communication

Culture can be defined on different levels of analysis, ranging from the national level to the professional and organisational levels to the group level (Hofstede 1980). Culture has been analysed with reference to identity (Scollon and Wong Scollon 2001), defined as both the “projection of the self” and “the social and collective identity”. Indeed, the “private” aspect of cognition and experience (the *inner* self, according to Benwell and Stokoe) has been matched and integrated with a “public” domain of discourse in which identity is shown. More than that, they state that “... rather than being *reflected* in discourse, identity is actively, ongoingly, dynamically *constituted* in discourse” (Benwell and Stokoe 2010: 4). Therefore, alongside ‘personal identity’, ‘social identity’ has been studied (*Social Identity Theory*, SIT: Tajfel and Turner 1986; Straub *et al.* 2002) in order to define individual identification with a group. The analysis of interactional contexts has convincingly shown that identity cannot be considered a ‘fixed’ entity, being contingent on local conditions.

At a macro-level, the analysis of the cultural categories mentioned in the previous paragraph has often been referred to as geographical positioning which, however, includes several sub-categories; for example, the macro-category “European” implies sub-categories, such as North, South, East, and West European (Hofstede 2001).

Attention has also been paid to cultural layers within cultural categories: “Layers of culture consist of national, regional/ethnic/religious/linguistic, gender, generation, social class, and organizational cultures” (Karahanna *et al.* 2006: 33). When several occupational and professional cultures interact, Gullestrup (2002) states that, in order to study intercultural communication in cross-cultural management, different “segments” of culture also have to be considered: economic, social, political and religious institutions; technology; socialisation; ideology; language and communication. These segments are manifested in numerous ways in professional life and also combined in different ways. Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson (2003) focus on a view of culture as something created through interaction in the context, so that cultural differences are negotiated and socially organised. In this perspective, the many research methods and techniques that have been adopted to date to analyse culture, both theoretically and empirically, have to be implemented by an in-depth view of how much and to what extent language has effects on and is affected by intercultural communication. This perspective is particularly interesting when the language adopted, English in our case, is a second language used by non-native speakers to communicate for professional reasons, still maintaining their native culture twinned with new ‘disciplinary’ cultures. The evolving situation of intercultural communication, which involves an increasing number of actors, is many-sided in so far as each communicative professional situation is unique and has to be specifically analysed and understood. For this reason, the ethnographic approach is gaining ground to describe and analyse interactions in different and complex settings, each in its specific context (Salvi and Tanaka 2011).

In order to overcome the view of culture perceived as a disturbing force that alters the meaning of messages and interferes with social communication, two variables in particular have to be explored: the

perception of space and the construction of identity in intercultural encounters.

3. Space and identity in an intercultural environment

Most of the research carried out in the intercultural environment has been based on the theoretical view of a binary conception of space incorporating both physical and mental dimensions which have been transferred into a local/global perspective. I intend, instead, to follow the geographer Edward Soja's (2001) theory which overcomes the dichotomy in the conceptualisation of space. Actually, he recognises the category of 'perceived' space (which consists mainly of concrete spatial forms and things that can be empirically mapped) as distinct from 'conceived' space (a spatial variety adopted on some occasions and in specific circumstances, it is constructed in mental forms and expressed in systems of signs and symbols). Moreover, he introduces the concept of a 'third space' or 'lived space' beyond physical ('perceived') form or mental ('conceived') construct. Lived space embodies the lifeworld of events, experiences and emotions. It draws upon both material and mental spaces, but extends beyond them in scope, substance and meaning. This type of space is created by the effects of a changing culture and is characterised by simultaneity and transience. In this sense "spatiality", which is an essential aspect of human life and way of describing the world, is a "socially produced space".

Soja's geographical theory can be integrated with Fauconnier's (1997) distinction between "base space" and "mental space", which helps us to approach language analysis more directly. In particular, he considers reality as a "base space" (the mutually known world of the interlocutors, Croft and Cruse 2010: 33). "Mental space" is, instead, a cognitive structure, consisting of complex conceptual interconnected networks, constructed as we speak and think. Fauconnier maintains that mental space is context-dependent and includes information about specific situations. The bridge between the two types of space is built by relevant factors in virtual communication, such as roles and values. In line with Fauconnier's theory, "space builders" can be detected, that is "a grammatical expression that either opens up a new space or shifts focus to an existing space" (Fauconnier 1997: 40). Together with grammatical expressions, Golshaie argues that

names and descriptions “either set up new elements [of space] or point to existing elements in the discourse construction” (Golshaie 2011: 46).

Indeed, the “third space”, where roles and values come together, is at present largely occupied by new technologies and the media. Web-based acculturation is indicated as an important factor in disseminating a culture’s norms and values, so that the social construction of reality, the shaping of public consciousness and the development of professional skills occur, to a great extent, through the media.

The intercultural environment we are dealing with, therefore, is part of the “heterotopias” or “heterogeneous relational spaces” (Soja 2001: 14), i.e. the ‘third space’ that allows individuals to redefine themselves in relation to new situations they encounter. Indeed, multicultural professional settings provide a hybrid cultural space in which different cultural groups can work, develop and change together (Salvi 2013). The construction of “newer” identities is the immediate consequence; that is, the formation of in-between positions which Hall (1995: 208) represents by “routes” rather than by “roots”.

Indeed, Spencer-Oatey argues that “When people interact with each other, they do not passively reproduce their decontextualized preferences [...] Rather, they dynamically co-construct their discourse with their co-participants” (Spencer-Oatey 2009: 6). Dynamic processes of identity construction can be best understood in intercultural professional and business contexts where the participants have to organise their interactions according to norms which, although not written, are expected. This will be clear in the case study discussed below: on the one hand, we can see how a multinational company defines its corporate identity to reach a global market; on the other, we can perceive how local national consumers expect their traditional models, values and beliefs to be taken into due account and respected.

One of the most salient linguistic features emerging from the encounter between space and identity in professional settings is the widespread introduction of narrative in descriptive, expository and even argumentative modes (Salvi 2007; 2012b). Talking about one’s life and experience is a way of understanding the self (self-narrative) and transmitting the native culture (Fougère 2009: 189).

Moreover, according to Spencer-Oatey (2009: 33), four strategic variables influence the use of language: participant relations, message content, socio-interactional roles and activity type. In professional settings, I would add the relevance of the channel, in our case, widespread virtual communication.

4. The click of a button

It has been proved that the use of technology for personal communication differs from culture to culture. Barker and Ota (2011: 39), for instance, report on the preference of young American women to connect with their peer group via Facebook, whereas young Japanese women communicate via Mixi diaries, so revealing their preference for more private and somewhat more reserved contacts than Americans. Despite the pervasiveness of the Internet, differences still remain. On the one hand, an interethnic relationship is facilitated but, on the other hand, technology is also used to maintain ethnic ties or favour interaction among restricted social/professional groups, thus producing the opposite effect to the expected purpose of integration. As we all know, processes of standardisation and homogenisation do not happen quickly. In professional fields, we observe opportunities for “glocalisation” (Robertson 1995) in encounters where global and local relations interact synergically. Language plays a central role in virtual communication because in multimodal analysis we are primarily concerned with the thoughts and feelings that people are expressing, and thus the way they choose to express them. In web-based professional exchanges (whether they are e-mails, blogs, corporate and institutional websites and so on) attention and awareness are high, due to the expected reactions each message intends to promote within a specific community of practice. Encounters occur in a multi-party context and often cover a multi-topic discourse. In addition participants, wherever they are and whatever nationality they belong to, share or refute certain categories and functions (such as giving information, assuming/rejecting responsibility, and so on) which encode aspects of institutional and professional realities. The language used on line reflects these features in both the selection of words and the construal of discourse.

5. Websites: virtual encounters and intercultural identities

The analysis offered here is part of a larger research developed within a PRIN (research of national relevance) project, for which fifteen local websites of Nestlé in their English versions, plus the Global Website, have been analysed (Salvi 2012b). The corpus consists of about 20,000 words (for 2,922 types) and includes homepages and the “About us” sections. Among the fifteen sites, six (Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the UK and the USA) are addressed to native speakers of English, whereas the others (Bulgaria, China, Ghana, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore and South Africa) refer also to non-native speakers, so adopting English as a *lingua franca*. They are, therefore, particularly suitable for an intercultural analysis as they are not translations of a specific webpage from one language into English, but rather the presentation in English of contents that are relevant to the local community. This allows us to answer the two basic questions about identity posed by Pan and the Scollons (2002: 9): 1. What do members of a corporate group select as crucial aspects of their self-presentation? 2. How do non-members, especially from another cultural group, respond to these presentations?

5.1. A case study

Nestlé websites represent an example of “Internet English” for business communication and marketing on a large scale. Before some of the features of the local websites are outlined, it is interesting to compare the Italian and American homepages (websites accessed in March 2011) from a cultural point of view.



The logo (birds in a nest) suggests a family, thereby recalling the company founder's commitment to nutrition (in 1867 Henri Nestlé developed a milk-based food for babies unable to drink breast milk). Words are carefully chosen to confirm the concept. The images on the homepage show children and sports champions. There are

recipes for children's cakes, articles on fitness, and a "Wellness News" section, with the title in English. Also a popular product is presented in English (Have a break, have a Kit Kat!) which is probably due to the spread of globalisation and to the company's international vocation.

The home page of Nestlé USA is very similar in its presentation.



The picture on the same page shows a family (but parents and children have different physical features to represent an ideal multiethnic community) and the words "nutrition, health and wellness" accompany the picture, thus perfectly reflecting the Italian version. The first piece of information on the page, however, does not concern products, but is instead addressed to the American lifestyle:

WORKING AT NESTLÉ

At Nestlé, we don't offer jobs – *we offer possibilities*. Nestlé is a place where you can shape your own career, get exposure to unique and challenging experiences and be part of a bright, energetic and dedicated team.

Real Possibilities, Real People make Nestlé a great place to work.

Moreover, the collection of recipes is in Spanish, implying that the Spanish community is more involved in cooking than the average American family: this proves that culture can no longer be defined only in terms of nationality or citizenship. Linguistic elements are not a direct translation from one language into the other; instead, they give life to local expectations, at different communicative levels, such as in working, cooking and other aspects of living. In this sector an articulated geo-semiotic system prevails (Scollon and Wong Scollon 2003), in which socio-cultural factors emerge as the company has to establish a local/global relationship.

Identity is mainly constituted by the use of evaluative language (Salvi and Turnbull 2007). The sections of the websites analysed in the research perfectly correspond to the type of evaluative language in Hunston and Thomson's terms, "every act of evaluation expresses a communal value-system, and every act of evaluation goes towards building up that value-system" (Hunston and Thomson 2003: 6). Indeed, all the websites include 'narrative' sections such as "About Us" and "History of the Company" in which the corporate reputation is established through two basic value concepts: "offering consumers a wide variety of high quality, safe food products at affordable prices", so affirming the corporate image and identity; and "improving the quality of life in the communities where it operates". These statements match the "base space", meant as local places in which the company is active, to the "mental space", embracing the different further approximations implied in each step of improvement, consciously elaborated by local consumers. If we assume that the main purpose of a corporate website lies in persuading potential consumers and gaining their trust and fidelity, there is a lot of evidence that the unknown writers aim to create solidarity with the unknown readers and, by defining the company's identity through the description of its objectives, they become meaning-makers with particular values and beliefs (Salvi *et al.* 2007). But persuasion, according to Halmari and Virtanen (2005: 7), is a "dynamic, interactive process", and this is a particularly delicate matter in the case of multiple and unidentifiable audiences of the web. It is also evident that the present model of a company's image is based on ideological stances such as its ethical position, social responsibility and its customer-oriented attitude, topics which influence the use of language and affect the discourse organisation producing, in the specific case of a multinational company, context-sensitive expressions (such as the section "Working at Nestlé").

This aspect immediately leads to the consideration of intercultural issues. In our case English is used as a *lingua franca* by both native and non-native speakers, within English-speaking cultures and otherwise. This implies that English is made "understandable" and "normal", according to Firth's (1996: 256) formulation, to avoid misunderstandings and possibly embrace all socio-cultural norms of interaction. The 'simplified form of English' represents the

strength of English as a common global language. Peoples using it have no intention of acquiring a British or American identity, and multinationals' websites show a concern for local factors, such as history, tradition and religion. Atkinson (2004) makes a distinction between "culture in the head vs culture in the world" (283-5) and "big culture vs small culture" (285-7), oppositions which mirror the "exported culture", received from outside and in some way absorbed by local contexts. As Bhabha says: "There is no 'in itself' and 'for itself' within cultures because they are always subject to intrinsic forms of translation" (Bhabha 1990: 210-1). The construction of meaning is therefore a highly dynamic process, shaped by situational expectations and practices, the result being a form of "situated writing" developed across cultures (Connor 2004: 293).

5.2. Local and global culture

It is not surprising that the most frequent content words in the whole corpus are 'products', 'food', and 'milk', which directly identify the core business of the company all over the world. It is also interesting to underline that at the top of the frequency list we find 'quality' and 'nutrition' which confirm the corporate image. Rather than from the long lists of frequencies and occurrences, however, the "situated writing" on the local Nestlé websites can be detected from a large number of hapax items (1,368 words, each occurring only once in the whole corpus) that contribute to the construal of identity at local levels. These words are mainly related to local situations and cultures: they can be considered the 'roots' in Hall's terms. For example, *absinth*, *khalva*, *vishni*, *kapriz*, *vecher* are products which are only present on the Bulgarian website. *Agronomists* and *veterinarians* are found on the Indian site, and reflect the rural tradition of the country. The same can be noted for *desert* and *earthquake* which indicate the close relationship between the company and the Pakistani physical and social environment: "From spreading awareness about nutrition and wellness to digging wells in the Thar desert and succouring earthquake victims, we are committed to serving our country and its people". The collocation *Kiwi kids* obviously appears only on the New Zealand website, as 'Kiwi' is a common nick-name for

“New Zealander”. On the Philippines website a paragraph with a large number of hapaxes (here underlined) describes in a few words the global transformations of our age: “The road ahead teems with bigger challenges as the world grapples with dwindling resources, changing climatic conditions, and increasing complexities in the workplace”. On the Singapore website the hapaxes *preservation* and *conservation* acquire pivotal importance in a country with a highly industrialised and technological economy: “Nestlé cherishes the environment and is therefore committed to environmentally-sound business practices throughout the world in recognition of the pressing need for natural resource preservation and energy conservation”.

As far as space is concerned, a hapax is used to mention the local Islamic religion in Malaysia: “[...] guarantee that all products manufactured, imported and distributed by Nestlé Malaysia are certified HALAL by authorised Islamic certification bodies”. A large number of hapaxes refer to names of cities where the company has established local markets (Beijing and Tianjin in China, Kumasi and Takoradi in Ghana). Also related to the local situation, “a variety of portion- and calorie-controlled meals” can be found on the USA website, where “portion- and calorie-controlled” are hapaxes reinforced by “low-fat offerings” (three occurrences in the corpus), underlining the problem of over-nutrition in rich countries only. Also “educational” is a hapax in the same context: “Nestlé USA regularly contributes to the educational and social development of youth across the nation”, showing a targeted cultural involvement.

Attention is paid in all websites to avoid cultural stereotypes, only establishing links with the local audience and its identity, so much so that characters in the images often have the local physical features and pictures show local situations (sites accessed in April 2012). The company is also keen on showing adherence to local issues. The Nestlé Pakistan website: “Nestlé has decided to work with the Fair Labor Association (FLA) to investigate whether children are working on cocoa farms supplying its factories” or Singapore: “Nestlé strengthens research and development for fast-growing markets in Asia”. As emerges from these examples the cultural identity of the company is also used to evoke emotions and shift the boundaries between peoples and countries. The possibility given by the web to

change language and visual materials quickly allows corporations to adjust to new business environments, knowledge-driven economies, demographic and socio-economic shifts.

6. Final remarks

The world-wide availability of the Internet has increasingly favoured virtual encounters and identities in various professional sectors. Analysing this type of communication implies overcoming the traditional relationship between emitter and receiver, focusing instead on the cognitive, reciprocal cooperative task of attending to all the other communicants' messages. Corporate websites, revealing the companies' attitudes in coping with global marketing and strategies, progressively show their shared-knowledge intentionality and the will to satisfy the needs of increased human interconnectedness.

Like those of other multinationals, Nestlé websites prove an inexhaustible source for language analysis. Corporate identity is expressed by keeping the company logo and caption identical worldwide. This is also true of the company mission: "As the leading Nutrition, Health and Wellness Company in the world, we aim to enhance lives by offering tastier and healthier food and beverage choices at all stages of life and at any time of the day, helping consumers care for themselves and their families". These are the "crucial aspects", as Pan and the Scollons call them, of the company's self-presentation on a large scale. As the company is well aware of – and needs to respect – national and local identities in order to obtain the consumer's consensus, language is exploited on three levels, which include lexical and semantic aspects (selection of words which the local communities are familiar with), the organisation of discourse for specific topics in different cultural environments (e.g. focus on working in the US and malnutrition in less developed countries), the introduction of semiotic conventions (such as colours and pictures) that appeal to local communities. These areas belong directly to the physical/perceived space in Soja's terms.

Beyond the physical space, the company occupies a mental space in expressing its mission in terms of well-being, improvement of living standards and social commitment: these values are 'conceived' as fundamental targets all over the world.

The following examples show how certain interconnected concepts relating to consumers' identities, determine the "third space": "Better nutrition for India is a perpetual challenge. It's meaning changes with the country's stage of development, the degree of social awareness, and scientific consensus"; "In Ghana the company employs 1,000 people [...]. In Ghana its objective is to be the number one company not only in business terms and the highest profit making business but also the best employer, the most socially responsible citizen and ethically sound company". First of all, they reflect the features of simultaneity (the websites appear at the same time all over the world) and transience (websites are frequently modified and up-dated). Second, the company establishes its role, redefining itself in relation to new markets, expressing commitment toward national needs and expectations, hence corresponding to local values and beliefs. Considering the second question posed by Pan and the Scollons (what is the response of the different cultural groups?), the answer is in each website, for example "Nestlé's China sales increased by more than 20 percent last year and will grow by a double-digit percentage in 2013"; "A new Nestlé investment in India will increase the company's production capacity in one of the fastest growing emerging markets worldwide". If the company is successful, it means that its corporate language is also effective and its corporate culture has been aptly negotiated in a dialogic communication in which participants (the company and the potential consumers) cooperate to create meaning.

Given that "[...] cognitive models shared by the members of a culture are similar and distinct from the cognitive models stored in the minds of people from other cultures" (Ungerer and Schmid, 2006: 55), the new cultural space and the feeling of proximity established online imply a redefinition of cultural dynamics (Craig and Douglas 2006). International consumers prefer locally adapted web content, so "[...] instead of a 'transnational web style' with features, images and categories common across nations, a culturally unique web style is emerging on the web" (Singh *et al.* 2005: 141). In this perspective the Nestlé case is an example of how websites do not only present national differences; rather they develop a communicative tradition in relation to patterns, priorities and attitudes. The analysis has shown the company's social connotation, its adaptation to the customer, and the integration into local cultures. The evidence of

differences cannot affect the permeable cultural nature of virtual encounters.

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