

Culture and Communication

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3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces some basic features of culture and communication and provides a brief outline of the interplay of cognitive and environmental factors in explaining cultural variation. I consider the implications of an analogy between cultures and epidemics for culture research and describe and illustrate the importance of two features of human cognition for explaining culture and communication: our capacity to form representations of representations, and, therefore, to think about our own or other people's thoughts (technically, the capacity to form metarepresentations) and our tendency to seek novel information which seems worth having (technically, the orientation of human cognition and communication towards relevant information). I try to show how these features provide the basis for a plausible account of the relation between communication and culture and a framework for analysing communicative interaction.

3.2 Culture

The concept 'culture' is rather intuitive. People generally have clear judgements about whether particular objects, behaviours, relationships and beliefs are cultural. At the same time, the word 'culture' is thought of as referring to something abstract that defies definition. As Banks and McGee-Banks (1989) observe:

Most social scientists today view culture as consisting primarily of the symbolic, ideational, and intangible aspects of human societies. The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviors in the same or in similar ways.

This definition highlights several important features of culture:

1. Culture does not consist only of physical objects.
2. Culture involves symbolic mental and physical (i.e. public) representations of the world.
3. Only those representations which are relatively stable and which are shared by the members of a social group are cultural.

4. Culture distinguishes one social group from another.

To be sure, these are not the only important characteristics of culture, but they provide a good starting point for introducing this term and for explaining the importance of culture in communication.

Perhaps the clearest way to illustrate the observation that culture crucially involves the way we mentally represent and think about the world is to consider a simple example. Imagine that you are walking on a pebbly beach. Are the pebbles under and around your feet part of culture? Are they cultural things? Let us assume that a particular pebble catches your eye, say because of its shape and colour, and that you pick it up. You have formed a mental representation of this pebble and you may also have some affective representations relating to it (i.e. you like it, you would be sorry to lose it, etc.). This makes the pebble a prized possession, but I hope you will agree that the pebble is not really a cultural thing. It means something to you, but this meaning is not shared by the social-cultural group you consider yourself a member of, because the pebble does not have (even roughly) the same meaning for the group that it does for you. Now imagine that you put the pebble in your pocket, you take it home and spend some time thinking about what you could do with it. You might display it as a decorative object on the mantelpiece, you could use it as a paperweight or perhaps as a doorstop. Let us say that, having given this matter some thought, you have come to the conclusion that your pebble is best used as a paperweight (it seems too light to be an effective doorstop, and if used as a paperweight, it can be decorative and practical at the same time). Is your pebble-as-paperweight now a cultural thing? In a way, it is, because a paperweight is certainly an artifact, and artifacts are generally assumed to be cultural things. However, in another respect your pebble is not a cultural thing, because only you think of it as a paperweight. Now, let us assume that your flatmates also come to think of your pebble as a paperweight: they go to the beach, they collect similar pebbles and they start using them in the same way as you. One of them has the bright idea of setting up a stall at the market in his native town which is much further inland and to start selling pebbles-as-paperweights. Let us further assume that he is successful, that the idea has caught on: a relatively large number of people have come to think of pebbles of this shape and size as paperweights. In this event, both your pebble and other similar pebbles will have become cultural things. In sum, for pebble paperweights to become cultural things, several conditions needed to be met:

1. certain things needed to be represented mentally, i.e. thought of, as pebbles (e.g. ○○○ are pebbles),
2. some people need to form some beliefs about these representations of those things (e.g. pebbles like ○○○ make good paperweights),
3. these beliefs about pebbles like ○○○ as paperweights needed to be shared and presumed to be shared by a considerable number of people over a period of time.

This simple example shows how culture comes to include both the tangible, physical, things and why it also always has an intangible component. Culture can be characterized as a system of cultural representations. A cultural representation is particular type of metarepresentation (i.e. representation of a representation). It is a belief (e.g. these pebbles are paperweights) about another mental representation (e.g. ○○○ are pebbles) which has become wide-spread across a human population over a significant time-span (for detailed discussions on metarepresentations, see articles in Sperber 2000). It is important to note that both elements of

a cultural representation may be intangible. For example, social relationships such as friendship or marriage involve beliefs about mutual rights and duties that those who enter into the relationship accept, and these differ significantly across cultures. From this perspective culture is a comparative, rather than a classificatory concept, because particular (types of) things can be more or less cultural. For example, the category 'pebble-paperweight' is more cultural if more people think of (particular types of) pebbles as paperweights and it is also more cultural if this belief persists over a longer time span (e.g. if it is passed on from generation to generation rather than being a short-lived fashion.). Another important aspect of cultural categories is that they are not equally important. For example, practical artefacts, such as paperweights, do not interact with vital spheres of social life in the ways that systems of moral, religious or political beliefs do. The latter are intuitively more central parts of culture, because they inform many important decisions and plans people make, including those about what sorts of things are considered appropriate for use as decorative paperweights (e.g. in most cultures, a pebble or a small stone would be deemed more appropriate for this use than a human skull).

If this sketchy account of what makes a thing part of culture is along the right lines, then the study of culture appears to be similar to the study of epidemics. For instance, it is often observed that culture is both an individual and a social construct (see Matsumoto 1996: 18). There is no epidemic without diseased individuals, but the study of epidemics cannot be reduced to the study of individual pathology. By the same token, a culture cannot exist without some cultural representations being in the brains/minds of individuals, but it does not follow that the study of culture can be reduced to the study of individual psychology. Just as infections are in individual peoples' bodies, mental representations are in their minds/brains. And, just as the spreading of diseases is explained by investigating the interaction between strains of micro-organisms with the environment that they live in, the distribution of cultural representations is explained in terms of communicative, as well as other types of, interaction between people and their environment. From this perspective, the boundaries of a given culture are not any sharper than those of a given epidemic. An epidemic involves a population with many individuals being afflicted to varying degrees by a particular strain of micro-organisms over a continuous time span on a territory with fuzzy and unstable boundaries. And a culture involves a social group (such as a nation, ethnic group, profession, generation, etc.) whose members share (and presume that they share) similar cultural representations held by a significant proportion of the group's members. In other words, people are said to belong in the same culture to the extent that the set of their shared cultural representations is large. This characterization of a culture naturally accommodates the existence of multicultural nations, professions, and so on. It also suggests a straightforward characterization of sub-culture in terms of a set of cultural representations within a given culture which are shared (mainly) by a subset of its members (e.g. an age group, members of particular professions and different social classes within a national or ethnic cultural group). Although the term 'a culture' is more often used to describe an ethnic group or a nation, there is no reason in principle why it should not equally be used to describe a professional or an age group.

The analogy between cultures and epidemics also provides an intuitive account for the observation that all members of a culture do not share all, and exactly the same, cultural representations. Just as an epidemic does not affect all individuals in an area to the same extent (typically, some people are more seriously afflicted by the disease than others), we should not expect all members of a culture to share all cultural representations. The 'epidemiological' perspective on culture suggests that it is cultural regularity, rather than

cultural diversity, that should be surprising. Cultural variation occurs within the range of possibilities allowed by human cognition. For example, it seems that people in all cultures distinguish between right and wrong, so it is reasonable to assume that the moral faculty is biologically specified. Moreover, it seems that there are moral values which are universal. Thus, there is no culture in which it is considered morally acceptable to take the life of another human being. This may not seem true, as in most cultures humans often take human life. However, this is considered acceptable only in specific circumstances, and these need to be socially ratified (e.g. killing another person in self-defence where the person who has been attacked has used only justifiable force to protect their own life). Given that human populations live in different environments and have different histories, it is surprising that their cultures should share as many regularities as they do (for a detailed account of the epidemiological approach to culture, see Sperber 1996). From a cognitive perspective, research in the field of culture should focus on the causal links between biologically determined aspects of culture and culture specific phenomena which are due to the interplay between the human cognitive make up and various environmental factors. Social approaches to culture tend to focus more on describing cross-cultural differences and identifying their implications for cross-cultural interaction (e.g. rapport management in situations of intercultural communication, or adaptation to life in a foreign culture). The culture of a given group can be seen as a complex web of cultural representations relating to different types of regularities, or themes, such as the following (cf. Spencer-Oatey 2005):

- Orientations to life and beliefs.
- Values and principles.
- Perceptions of role relationships, including rights and obligations associated with them.
- Behavioural rituals, conventions and routines, which may involve the use of language.
- Various norms and conventions of communication.
- Institutions, which may be formal, such as the legal, political and educational system, or informal, such as a poetry reading group, a cocktail party or a knitting club.

Members of some cultural groups share more cultural representations relating to some regularities than to others. This observation has some interesting implications. To give but one example, it leads to predictions about the relative ease with which new or non-members are likely to be able to integrate into a group: other things being equal, the more similarities there are in the relevant types of regularity between the person's home culture and their host culture, the easier it will be for them to integrate into the host culture. For instance, if the home culture and the host culture share the same language and, possibly, also various culture-specific norms and conventions of communication, cultural adjustment should be easier.

3.3 Communication

A particularly important aspect of culture which has both universal and culture specific characteristics is our communication system. This section looks at some universal characteristics of human communication and tries to show how they can be systematically related to cultural differences in the way the general mechanisms of communication are used. The following are the main features of human communication introduced in this section:

- Communication is a form of social interaction which involves the production and the interpretation of the evidence of the communicator's intentions.
- The interpretation of a communicative act is a reasoning process which takes as input the signal produced by the communicator and the context (assumptions drawn from the addressee's background general knowledge and immediate perceptual environment).
- The addressee's search for the right context is best explained on the view that communication is driven by a general principle and some culture specific, more or less standardized, strategies.
- Communication is made easier by the organization of the pool of general world knowledge from which the context is drawn into mental structures known as schemata, frames and scripts.
- These assumptions also provide the basis for a natural account of communicative (in)directness.

Our cognition tends to be oriented towards improving our general world knowledge (i.e. our belief system). This does not mean merely that people value novel information. Rather, we tend to value novel information independently of any other practical goals. This is a major difference between humans and other species, which tend to seek new information in response to immediate practical needs, such as finding food or shelter. Virtually everything that impinges on our senses is potentially informative, but we have limited cognitive resources (e.g. memory capacity and attention span), so we are constantly under pressure to decide what to pay attention to, and how much time and mental processing effort to invest into figuring out new information on the basis of the available evidence. In other words, our quest for novel information that is worth having is constrained by the need for cognitive efficiency. The efficiency measure which guides our quest for novel relevant information is technically called relevance. Relevance is defined as a positive function of novel information (technically, cognitive effects) and as a negative function of mental processing effort required for figuring out novel information on the basis of the available evidence. It should be clear that communication is a very powerful means of improving the world knowledge of those we communicate with as well as our own. In other words, communication boosts the chances of success of our cognitive system's quest for novel relevant information. Although we generally tend to pay attention to phenomena which seem relevant to us, there is no guarantee that what we have decided to pay attention to (by representing it mentally and integrating this representation with the context) will actually turn out to be relevant. In other words, there is no guarantee that the mental processing effort expended will turn out to have been well-spent. (These are the main assumptions of the approach to human communication known as Relevance Theory. For a detailed account of this approach to communication, see Sperber and Wilson 1986, 1995).

The difference between the general orientation of human cognition towards relevance and the role of relevance in human communication is clearly illustrated by ordinary real life situations, such as the following:

- (1) It is Sunday morning and you are in a part of town you do not know well. You are trying to find your way to the local market, which you know is on Sundays. You are not sure where the market is, but you know that it is not far from where you are. What

sorts of things are likely to seem relevant to you in this situation? Answer: those which provide evidence about the market's location. For instance, you see some people in the street carrying the sorts of goods normally purchased on the market. You assume that they were purchased at the market and you pay attention to the direction from which most of the people carrying what looks like market shopping are coming from. You conclude that the market is that way and you walk in that direction.

The chances are that your guess was correct and that you will find your way to the market, but it is also possible that you were mistaken (say, the shopping the passers by were carrying came from the local shopping centre). Let us now consider a slightly different scenario:

Upon seeing people carrying what looks like goods purchased at the local market you approach one of them and say: 'Excuse me, is this the way to the market?' while pointing in a particular direction. The passer by replies: 'Yes, it's just round the corner after the traffic lights.'

You are now in possession of far more reliable information about the way to the market, than when you were basing your conclusions on the evidence which happened to be available in the environment (i.e. the sight of people coming from a particular direction with particular types of goods). It is more reliable because you do not have any reason to doubt the sincerity and the competence of the passer by. Of course, the quality of their directions depends on their own knowledge of the local geography and their ability to communicate it clearly, as well as on their good intentions. However, if they deliberately mislead you, you will, intuitively, be justified in assuming that they were not communicating genuinely. Thus, if you follow the passer's by instructions accurately and discover that they were not correct, you will assume either that the passer by was sincere but not competent, or that he was competent but insincere for some reason (e.g. they might not want to be seen not to be unable to help, or they might, somewhat perversely, enjoy their power to deceive others). The important point here is that we intuitively feel entitled to assume that a person who engages in communication commit themselves to observing certain standards of social behaviour. This is an important difference between novel information obtained by communication and by relying on our general cognitive ability to seek relevant information. Communication is a social activity in which novel information comes from a helpful source, helpful in the sense that, by engaging in communication, communicators commit themselves to observing certain norms, e.g. that they are sincere and that they are giving only information which is worth having in the best way they can or that they consider appropriate. This commonsense intuitive insight was the basis of the explanation of communication put forward in the mid 1960s by the Oxford philosopher Paul Herbert Grice (see Grice 1989: 22–40).

3.3.1 Grice's Co-operative Principle

Grice argued that human communication should be explained as a form of social interaction whose success depends on the interactants' presumption that communicative behaviour is driven by certain norms and rules. On his view, the most important of these norms is the generalization that communicators are co-operative in that they aim to make their communicative acts appropriate to the situation of communication in content and form:

The Co-operative Principle

Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

On Grice's approach, the Co-operative Principle is generally observed by meeting specific criteria which he called the Maxims of Conversation:

Maxim of Quantity (informativeness)

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of Quality (truthfulness)

Supermaxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

Submaxims:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of Relation (relevance)

Be relevant

Maxim of Manner (style)

Supermaxim: Be perspicuous.

Submaxims:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly.

The Co-operative Principle and the Maxims of Conversation explain how it is possible to communicate more than 'what is said' (i.e. more than the thought directly expressed by the utterance). In other words, this approach explains the systematic dependence of meaning on context (where the context is the set of assumptions used in interpreting a communicative act). The basic idea is that if people who engage in communication presume that the Co-operative Principle and the Maxims of Conversation are observed, then it is possible to give an explicit, step by step, account of the way the reasoning process involved in utterance comprehension takes the linguistic meaning of an utterance and the context as inputs and yields the interpretation as output.

3.3.2 Relevance Theory and the Communicative Principle of Relevance

Relevance Theory, which is the most important theoretical development of Grice's approach to communication, calls into question two general theoretical (and a number of more specific) assumptions of Grice's approach. First, the view that co-operation, understood in Grice's sense, is central to explaining how communication works seems implausible. According to Grice, co-operation presupposes a pre-established task on which the participants are working together. However, many, perhaps most, instances of communication do not fit this description. Communication often begins by introducing a topic, and topics often change in the course of (most interesting) conversations. Interesting conversations often do not have a specific goal or stable direction. Of course, a social disposition to be generally co-operative may well explain why we decide to engage in communication in some situations, say, when the information is purely in the interests of the addressee, rather than the communicator. For example, when a passer by stops you saying: 'Excuse me, have you got the time?' the information requested is relevant to the passer by, rather than to you. The only reason why you might decide to answer the question is some degree of a general human disposition to be co-operative. This general disposition to co-operate is very different from what Grice had in mind, and, though important in explaining social interaction, it is not specific enough to explain how people actually succeed in interpreting communicative acts and responding to them.

Second, Grice did not spell out the standards or measures which people who engage in communication use in order to decide whether and to what extent the communicator has observed the Maxims of Conversation. For example, it is not clear on what basis we make judgements about whether a particular utterance is optimally informative, relevant and brief. Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986/95) characterizes explicitly Grice's Maxim of Relevance (Relation) as a design feature of human cognition and communication, rather than a norm. In Sperber and Wilson's framework, relevance is a property of inputs to cognitive processing. It is a cognitive efficiency measure defined as a positive function of novel information and a negative function of processing effort required for deriving this information. On this approach, human cognition tends to be oriented towards relevance, and this generalization is known as the Cognitive Principle of Relevance. The Cognitive Principle of Relevance is important in human communication for the following reason: a communicative act (such as an utterance or pointing gesture) makes it evident that the communicator intends to draw the audience's (hearers' or readers') attention to this act. An important consequence of the Cognitive Principle of Relevance for communication is that the communicator can be justified in evidently claiming the audience's attention only provided the effort involved in mentally representing the communicative act and mentally processing this representation will lead to enough novel information (technically, to enough cognitive effects) to warrant the mental processing effort expended in deriving this information. In other words, every act of (overt) communication makes evident a guarantee (technically, a presumption) that it is worth paying attention to. This generalization is known as the communicative principle of relevance.

The Communicative Principle of Relevance

Every act of overt communication communicates (i.e. makes evident) the presumption that it is optimally relevant.

[Note: a communicative act is optimally relevant if processing it leads to some relevant cognitive effects without putting the audience to the expenditure of greater mental processing effort than is necessary for deriving those effects.]

(adapted from Sperber and Wilson 1995: 260–270)

In terms of Relevance Theory, violations of Grice's maxims of conversation can be described as different ways in which the utterance or other signal falls short of being optimally relevant. Consider again the asking-for-directions-to-the-market scenario:

Upon seeing people carrying what looks like goods purchased at the local market you approach one of them and say: 'Excuse me, is this the way to the market?' while pointing in a particular direction. The passer by replies:

- (a) 'Yes, it's just round the corner after the traffic lights.'
- (b) 'Yes, it's just round the corner after the traffic lights, and the National Gallery is at the other end of London.'

Both (a) and (b) give accurate directions but (b) is more complex and requires more processing effort without leading to any novel information which is relevant in the context of your question. Therefore, in this situation, answer (b) is less relevant than answer (a). This example shows that the Communicative Principle of Relevance makes it possible to characterize overinformativeness explicitly without positing a special Maxim of Informativeness. The same type of explanation carries over to the Maxim of Quality (truthfulness). Accepting false assumptions as true will most likely lead you to make plans and carry out actions which will not fulfil your goals. Thus, if the passer by has advised you to turn left at the traffic lights, whereas, the market is in fact on the right, his instructions will have been less than optimally relevant to you, because they will have led you to form an assumption which is likely to interact with your other beliefs in a counterproductive way (by guiding you to go the wrong way). In other words, misinformation is not relevant because it does not make a positive contribution to our existing beliefs. Therefore, we do not need to posit a Maxim of Quality (truthfulness) to account for the observation that people generally expect communicators to be truthful.

Three further observations are important here. First, from the Relevance-theoretic perspective, the quality of an utterance is (partly) determined by the truth of the message which is communicated by that utterance, rather than by the truth of the utterance itself. Thus, metaphorical utterances (e.g. 'You are the sunshine of my life') do not violate the Communicative Principle of Relevance because, though false, they communicate something true (e.g. 'You are very dear to me', 'When I see you, I am happy', 'You make me feel optimistic about life', 'I could not live without you', and so on). Second, misinformation does not necessarily lead only to the formation of false beliefs which are detrimental to the addressee's general world knowledge. The expression 'white lie' denotes a deliberately communicated untruth whose integration with other beliefs leads to some cognitive effects worth having. For example, when encouraging somebody to complete a task the communicator may well deliberately convey something false (e.g. 'You can finish it in three days if you work hard.') while also genuinely communicating something true (e.g. 'The communicator believes that the hearer should not give up trying to complete the task', 'The

hearer will complete the task successfully if they try hard,' 'Completing the task is more feasible than the hearer assumes'). Third, communicators often fall short of being optimally relevant for many different reasons, such as lack of concentration, poor awareness of the addressee's background knowledge and abilities, poor communication skills, and many others. This does not go against the Communicative Principle of Relevance. What follows from this principle is that the addressee is entitled to expect that the communicator is aiming to be optimally relevant. That is why accidental failures to be optimally relevant are generally found more acceptable than deliberate ones (such as the manipulative withholding of relevant information).

3.3.3 The Role of Contextual Knowledge in Communication

Recent work in the theory of human communication has emphasized the importance that general world (contextual) knowledge plays in determining the thought expressed by the utterance (see Carston 2002). The thought (or proposition) expressed by the utterance is a mental representation capable of being true or false, and thus specific enough for it to be possible to integrate it with other beliefs and to figure out the consequences for the belief system as a whole (i.e. to figure out the cognitive effects). The evidence from everyday conversation and other forms of communication strongly favours the view that contextual knowledge contributes to the thought expressed by the utterance (technically called the 'explicature'), and not just to the assumptions which follow from the thought expressed by the utterance and the context (technically called 'implicatures'). Consider (2):

(2) Vlad: Can you play the twelve-string guitar?

Nic: It's the same.

By saying, 'Can you play the twelve-string guitar?', Vlad indicates that he expects Nic to give him some information relating to this question, and Vlad's ability to interpret Nic's answer correctly depends on his assumption that Nic is aiming to say something relevant in the context of his question. As the speaker, Nic bases his choice of words on his estimate of Vlad's background knowledge about him as an individual and about musical instruments. As the hearer, Vlad needs to figure out the best explanation about what Nic intends to convey by saying: 'It's the same'. Since he has the required contextual knowledge (that Nic can play the six string guitar) and is aware of having requested information about Nic's ability to play the twelve string guitar, Vlad is in a position to interpret Nic's utterance correctly, as expressing the thought: 'Playing the twelve string guitar is (roughly) identical to playing the six string guitar'. In the context of the assumption: 'Nic can play the six string guitar', the thought expressed by his answer leads to further conclusions: 'Nic can play the twelve string guitar', 'Nic did not need special training to learn how to play the twelve string guitar', 'Nic probably does not play the twelve string guitar as well as the six string guitar' and probably others. So, in this situation, the less direct answer that Nic actually gave was more relevant than a more direct answer, such as 'Yes', would have been because it is more informative while not putting the hearer to the expenditure of significantly greater processing effort.

This example illustrates clearly two ways in which what is communicated by an utterance depends on the context and goes well beyond the meanings of the words used. A plausible explanation of context selection in communication also needs to address successfully the problem of 'mutual knowledge', which is well-known in the philosophy of

language (see Smith 1982). In a nutshell, the problem of mutual knowledge for explaining communication is that, if communication depends on the participants' mutual knowledge (informally, 'presumed shared knowledge'), then it appears that communication could never take off the ground because establishing mutual knowledge involves infinite regress of inferences of the following type: the communicator knows that the addressee knows that the communicator knows that the addressee knows that the communicator knows, and so on, ad infinitum. Within the Relevance-theoretic approach to communication and cognition (Sperber and Wilson 1986; 1995), this problem is solved by assuming that the notion of knowledge, which involves actual mental representation, should be weakened and replaced by the notion of manifestness, which refers to the psychological disposition for mental representation. Sperber and Wilson argue that, once we assume that people who engage in interaction are disposed to treat particular beliefs (including cultural beliefs) as mutual (i.e. presumed shared), the problem of infinite regress disappears. For a detailed discussion of their solution to the problem of mutual knowledge, see Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995).

An interesting consequence of this approach is that communication – especially where it depends on culture-specific beliefs – is generally likely to be at risk of failure: if beliefs are presumed shared without being actually mentally represented, then incorrect estimates of what can and what cannot reliably be presumed shared are likely to occur. Consider (3):

- (3) A British family had lived in an African country for several years. They had become familiar with the local language and culture. After the break-out of civil war in the region, they were forced to leave the country. Before leaving, they accepted the local peoples' offer of help and asked them to try and 'rescue' some of their 'special things'. Quite some time later, they were somewhat surprised to find that their TV set and video recorder were the main rescued items.

(example contributed by Joy Caley)

The British participants incorrectly assessed the extent to which their cultural assumptions about objects considered special to their owners were salient to their interlocutors. Of course, the participants in a communication event cannot establish with certainty which relevant contextual assumptions they share, but the chances of success in communication across cultural boundaries can be improved with appropriate attention to checking, establishing and maintaining the set of presumed shared beliefs which are culture-specific and are likely to be critical for communicative success.

3.3.4 Schema, Frame and Script

Selecting the context for the interpretation of an utterance from a mental knowledge data-base in the form of a random list of unrelated belief-assumptions would take a great deal of time and mental processing effort. However, communication (even when it involves reading texts at leisure) takes place over a fairly limited time span and people have finite cognitive resources which they need to (and tend to) use sparingly. Imagine the difficulty the hearer would have to make sense of an ordinary word such as 'university' in an utterance like (4) if various beliefs that we have about individuals, institutions, and so on were scattered, as it were, in our minds:

- (4) James: I am going to university in September.

Even if we know very little about the speaker (say, the speaker is eighteen and has just passed his entrance examinations), we would most likely conclude with confidence that he is going to university in order to study, because the expression 'go to university' has been used often enough and long enough to acquire the conventional meaning: 'go to study at university'. Many other assumptions will also become very salient to us. These might include the following: 'James will, or at least, he intends to, spend several years as a university student', 'James will need to attend classes, do coursework and take examinations as part of his programme of university studies', 'James will obtain a degree qualification when/if he completes his programme of studies at university', 'James may be moving away from home', and so on. These and other assumptions are made almost instantly available to us on the basis of what we know about the meaning of the word 'university', the standardized meaning of the phrase 'go to university' and about young people of James' age and education (A levels).

It should also be noted that a slight change in our background knowledge may make a big difference to the way we interpret a communicative act. For example, if we know that James is eighteen years old, but that he has failed all his entrance examinations, we may be puzzled by his utterance in (4). We might think that he is joking, or that he has applied for a non-degree course at university. If James intends to communicate that he will go to university without committing himself to all of these assumptions he should indicate this clearly (e.g. by saying: 'I am going to university to do an access course'), otherwise he will fail to be optimally relevant as his utterance will be unnecessarily difficult to interpret in the context available to the hearer who is left wondering what exactly James intends to do at university, given that he does not qualify for enrolling on a BA degree. This example illustrates the generally accepted view that knowledge is organized into mental structures called schemata (see Augustinos and Walker 1995; Ringland and Deuce 1988). These structures may have fixed, stable, contents, in which case they are called 'frames'. For example, the frame associated with the word 'car' includes the information that it has a steering wheel, an engine, and so on. The knowledge associated with types of events is stored in mental structures called 'scripts'. For example, the scripts for 'going to a party' and 'taking part in a business meeting' include assumptions about the typical parts of these events and things involved in them.

Frames and scripts can be thought of as types of schemata. Since mental schemata are knowledge structures which provide the basis for forming expectations about new situations, they can be said to be theories that people have, systems of hypotheses which we expect are true. For example, our mental schema for the word 'university' includes our knowledge about who goes to university, why people go there, what student life at university is like, and so on. When we hear the word 'university', our university schema is activated and all the assumptions which are stored in this format simultaneously become more salient to us, so we can readily represent them mentally and process them together with other assumptions which have also been drawn to our attention by the communicative act. In the context of our knowledge about specific circumstances relating to the speaker, e.g. James (in (4)) (say, he is eighteen and has just passed his entrance examinations), the script associated with the expression 'going to university' will be activated. This script might include the following assumptions amongst others: 'university studies take several years to complete; they involve taking examinations, written assignments and, probably, other forms of assessment; studying at university involves living close to the university as well as attending lectures and other classes regularly'. In the context of these assumptions, James' utterance directly communicates the thought, roughly: 'James is going to the university to study for a degree'.

When integrated with various assumptions made available by the 'going to university' script and, possibly, other sources, this thought will lead to further conclusions, such as: 'James will spend several years as a university student; after completing his programme of studies at university successfully, James will be awarded a university degree; James will need to move away from his home town for the duration of his university studies; ...'. These assumptions which follow from the thought expressed by the communicator's utterance and the context are said to be communicated indirectly (i.e. implicitly) and are called 'implicatures', while the thought expressed by the communicator's utterance is said to be communicated directly (i.e. explicitly) and is called the 'explicature'. The distinction between direct and indirect communication is important because most communicative acts of linguistic communication convey more than the thought expressed by the utterance.

3.3.5 Directness–Indirectness in Communication

Imagine that you are in a large room with a few friends. One of them gets up (without explanation) and starts walking. You readily assume that your friend is walking with some intention in mind: to open the door and go out of the room, or perhaps to open the window, or in order to pick up something that he has spotted on the floor. It is only as your friend approaches the door or the window or whatever it is that happens to be lying on the floor, that you are in a position to assume confidently that he intends to open the door, or the window, or to pick up the object. And when your friend lifts his or her hand towards, say, the door handle, you will be more or less certain that he intends to open the door. There are two points to be made here. First, the assumptions we make about other people's behaviour depend on the available evidence. If the door, the window and the object lying on the floor are to the same side of the room, and if your friend is still at a fair distance from them, you may well not have enough evidence to conclude what it is that your friend is trying to do. Your ability to draw conclusions about your friend's behaviour improves as his actions begin to provide more and more conclusive evidence about his intentions. Second, people generally tend to conceptualize other people's behaviour in terms of intentions. In the situation described here, we do not think of our friend's arms or his legs as having moved, we think of him intentionally moving them with some purpose in mind. Likewise, when we see two people facing each other and taking turns at making sounds, we will assume that they are engaged in an intentional form of behaviour: verbal communication, and we will make this assumption even if we do not understand a word of what we take to be the language in which they are presumably conversing.

These observations about the interpretation of behaviour in general carry over to the way acts of communication are understood. The more conclusively a communicative act supports a particular interpretation, the more strongly communicated the information in question is; and conversely: the poorer the evidence for a particular interpretation, the more weakly it is communicated. So, communicative strength can be defined as a positive function of the evidence for particular interpretations. When particular linguistic items are frequently used to perform a particular communicative strategy, they become conventionally associated with that strategy. For example, requests such as 'Can you...', 'Could you...' and a number of others are *conventional* indicators of polite behaviour. The speaker who uses one of these will be not be taken to have communicated anything very relevant about his or her politeness, but rather to have simply fulfilled a social convention (except, of course, when the speaker is well-known for lacking good conversational manners, in which case even the observance of a social convention is sufficiently unusual to fairly relevant). Hence, conventionalization has a direct consequence for the study of indirectness: the more an expression is conventionalized

as a marker of indirectness, the less weakly communicated the message will be. The reason for this should be quite clear: if an expression has become a conventional way for communicating, say, disagreement, then it will provide conclusive evidence that the speaker is in fact expressing disagreement with the hearer, and that he or she is observing a social norm of appropriate linguistic behaviour.

Although the distinction between (relatively) strongly and (relatively) weakly communicated assumptions is closely related to that between direct and indirect communication, the two should not be conflated. An assumption is said to be communicated directly if it is a part of the thought expressed by the meanings of the words used (technically called the ‘explicature’ of the utterance). For example the passer’s by reply in (1) communicates directly that the passer by knows where the market is and that it is further from the place of communication than a particular set of traffic lights. The same utterance communicates indirectly that the market is open, that going to the market is likely to be worth the hearer’s while and a few other assumptions (technically called ‘implicatures’). The distinction between direct and indirect communication is also known as the distinction between explicit and implicit communication. Both the degree of indirectness and the degree of strength with which particular types of communicative acts (such as: refusal, disagreements, criticisms, and others) are expressed, depend on the extent to which the expression of the communicative act is conventionalized. As a general rule, the more the expression of a communicative act is conventionalized, the more directly the act is performed and the more strongly its meaning is communicated. However, while the degree of indirectness is determined by the number of contextual assumptions which must be supplied in deriving a particular implicature and the complexity of the reasoning process which leads to their derivation, the strength with which an implicature is communicated depends on how sure we can be about which premises it follows from and how reliable those premises are. Thus, a polite request beginning with ‘Can you/Could you...’ does not communicate ‘request for action’ very indirectly, because the only contextual assumption we may need for this interpretation is that ‘can/could...’ is used to make ‘polite requests’. As this is a well established social convention, there can be no doubt that a ‘polite request’ is also communicated strongly by utterances beginning ‘can/could you...’. But, in principle, the two distinctions are independent. This is important for analysing rapport management, because the strength with which an assumption is communicated may be more important than the degree of indirectness. Consider the following exchange:

- (5) James: Do you want to watch the FA Cup Final with us in the pub.
Peter: I don’t like pubs much, and I hate football.

In (5) B very strongly communicates that he does not want to watch the FA cup Final in the pub, because his utterance provides conclusive evidence for this interpretation. Nevertheless, he communicates this rather indirectly, because the intended interpretation depends on a number of contextual assumptions (such as: ‘people don’t choose to go to places they do not like’, ‘people do not watch on television events which they dislike intensely,’ etc.).

3.4 Culture and Communication

The degree of indirectness and strength are determined by the relation between the utterance and the context, and contextual knowledge is largely culture-specific. This is an important way in which context provides the link between communication and other aspects of culture, which is illustrated in this section.

3.4.1 Culture and contextual knowledge

In many ordinary communicative exchanges, culture-specific knowledge plays a very important role. Consider the following exchange:

(6) Mary: Did you have a good trip to London?

Peter: Yes, but I forgot to pay the congestion charge.

Peter's ability to interpret Mary's answer depends on his knowledge about the 'congestion charge' which is rather culture-specific: *it is a kind of tax that motorists driving cars have to pay when driving in the central area of London; anyone who has been driving within the congestion charge zone and fails to pay this charge by a particular time will be fined*, and so on. Example (6) shows that the availability of the contextual assumptions required for the interpretation of a communicative act is largely culture-specific. The more familiar communicators are with particular culture-specific belief-assumptions, the more they are at risk of failing to realize that these belief-assumptions may not be available to their interlocutors, which may lead to misinterpretation, as the situation described in (3), repeated as (7), illustrates:

(7) A British family had lived in an African country for several years. They had become familiar with the local language and culture. After the break-out of civil war in the region, they were forced to leave the country. Before leaving, they accepted the local peoples' offer of help and asked them to try and 'rescue' some of their 'special things'. Quite some time later, they were somewhat surprised to find that their TV set and video recorder were the main rescued items.

In this situation, the misunderstanding was not due to different assumptions about the linguistic meaning of the phrase 'our special things'. For both sets of participants, this phrase had the meaning, roughly: 'personal belongings which are particularly important to their owners'. The misunderstanding was caused by different cultural assumptions about the kinds of items likely to be considered prized personal possessions.

3.4.2 Culture and schemata

The concepts of 'mental schema/frame/script' are very important in analysing cross-cultural and intercultural communication issues. When a schema (frame or script) is presumed shared, its content need not be mentioned explicitly in communication. In situations of intercultural communication, this may be a problem, because it may be unclear whether and to what extent the relevant schemata (frames and scripts) are actually shared. Just as the members of many (though by no means all) different cultures have different languages, they may also have different schemata for the same or similar types of things or events. As the assumptions in mental schemata are typically very intuitive, they are not always easily available to consciousness. For example, if you want to find out what the content of the schema for 'university' or 'restaurant' is, you cannot simply ask people to tell you. Of course, they will be aware of many assumptions which are in their 'restaurant' or 'university' schema', but they

may not be aware of some of these assumptions, typically those which are so central to the meaning of the word or phrase that the members of the culture take them for granted and treat them as inherent parts of the meaning that word or phrase. To give but one example, Beekman and Callow (1974: 47) (cited in Gutt 1989: 80 and adapted below) describe how a Biblical passage (in the Gospel of Mark) was mistranslated due to different cultural schemata associated with 'house' and 'roof':

- (8) The Biblical passage reports how four people lowered a paralysed man through an opening in the roof of a house in order to get him to Jesus. The translation into a local language was produced with the assistance of a local person who relied on his cultural schema for 'roof', which included the following assumptions, among others: roofs are thatched; roofs are very steep; it is not possible to walk on the roof of a house. In the context of these (and a few other) assumptions the local translator first misinterpreted, and then mistranslated, the lowering of the man through the roof as implying a miracle. (adapted from Gutt 1989: 80)

Because implicit beliefs are intuitive and not easily amenable to consciousness, they are hard to change, and may be radically different from consciously held beliefs without those who hold them being aware of this. For example, if an intuitive belief is socially unacceptable (say: 'blond women are dumb'), people who hold this belief may replace it consciously by a more socially acceptable and better evidenced assumption (say, 'there is no correlation between hair colour and intelligence'), whilst continuing to behave according to their old, intuitive stereotype ('blond women are dumb'). Research into culture-specific knowledge often has to rely on observation and indirect evidence, precisely because direct self-reports of the members of a given social-cultural group generally reveal their explicit beliefs rather than the implicit beliefs. Yet is it their implicit beliefs that reflect their internalized values, inform their views and influence their actions.

Example (7) also shows that the regularities in the differences between cultures are largely differences between particular (types of) schemata. It is a clear illustration of miscommunication due to different cultural schemata associated with the concept of VALUABLES (denoted by the phrase 'special things'). The speakers incorrectly presumed that their schema for the concept VALUABLES was shared by their interlocutors. The exchange in (9) is another example which illustrates this point:

- (9) Situation: A French person is at a restaurant. An Indian colleague arrives late. The French person does not know his Indian colleague well. He has tried to make a best guess about the type of drink the Indian person likes and has put in the order. The Indian colleague has arrived in the restaurant.

French person: We ordered wine for the table and ordered you a soft drink.

Indian person: Okay, I'll drink both.

French person: [surprised] Oh, good.

(example contributed by Kate Berardo)

The French person's decision to order a soft drink for his Indian colleague is based on his schema for 'Indian person' which includes the assumption: 'Indian people do not drink alcohol because their religion prohibits it'. In the context of the assumption: 'My colleague is Indian', this schema, associated with 'Indian person', makes highly salient the hypothesis: 'My colleague does not drink alcohol', and this hypothesis is the basis for the French person's

decision to order a soft drink for his Indian colleague. In light of the Indian participant's reply, the French participant will most likely revise his schema for 'Indian person'. He can do this in a superficial way, by forming the assumption like: 'Some Indian people drink alcohol'. However, this revision of his 'Indian person' schema would not be very useful, because it would include incompatible assumptions: 'The religion of Indian people prohibits drinking alcohol' and 'Some Indian people drink alcohol.' If a schema includes contradictory assumptions, then it is very likely that it will give rise to conflicting predictions in a given situation. For this reason, the French person will be better off if he revises his 'Indian person' schema by finding out more about the reasons why some Indian people drink alcohol, as this may be useful on similar future situations. We could say that the French person in (9) made the mistake of acting on a stereotype of 'Indian person', which raises the question of the relation between schemata and stereotypes (see Hinton 2000 for a detailed account of stereotypes in the context of human cognition and culture). Essentially, stereotypes are schemata which, though very general, are held with great conviction, so they provide the basis for unwarranted predictions about members of the stereotyped category (which may be defined in terms of culture, race, profession, age, sex, religion, etc.). One important aspect of cross-cultural research is to describe and explain the similarities and the differences between cultures without stereotyping. Another goal is to uncover the differences between culture-specific schemata which are likely to have a significant impact on intercultural communication. Both of these endeavours are difficult. All research into culture involves generalizations about groups of people or sets of objects or activities. So, the important thing is to uncover generalizations which are warranted. As generalizations can often be based on small samples of category members, ensuring that these samples are representative, avoiding overgeneralizations and unwarranted generalizations, in general, are major challenges for such research.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show that, being part of culture, communication can be explained largely in terms of the same cognitive mechanisms as other cultural categories. What distinguishes it from other cultural things is that it involves evidently informative behaviour which is presumed to be aimed at providing enough information worth having without requiring more mental processing effort than is necessary for figuring out this information. On this view, the comprehension of a communicative act, such as an utterance or a gesture, is an inferential (i.e. reasoning) process which takes the communicative act and the context as inputs and yields the interpretation as output. Therefore, communicative success largely depends on the communicator's ability to assess which contextual assumptions are readily available to the addressee, and the addressee's ability to process the communicative act in the context intended by the communicator. Such assessments are not possible unless the participants can presume with some confidence that they share certain beliefs about each other, the situation of communication and the world. Clearly, the more confident the participants can be that they share many cultural beliefs, the more reliably and the more economically they can assess which contexts are available to them. In situations of intercultural communication the set of cultural beliefs which can be presumed shared by the participants is limited and it may be difficult to establish which beliefs are shared. As cultural beliefs are stored in the form of mental structures called schemata, rather than random lists of items, it is important that work in the field of intercultural communication should focus on cultural schemata.

Key points

- (i) Culture is a system of cultural representations. A cultural representation is a belief (e.g. these pebbles are paperweights) about another mental representation (e.g. ○○○ are pebbles) which has become wide-spread across a human population over a significant time-span.
- (ii) Communication is a form of social interaction which involves the production and the interpretation of the evidence of the communicator's intentions. The interpretation of a communicative act is a reasoning process which takes as input the signal produced by the communicator and the context (assumptions drawn from the addressee's background general knowledge and immediate perceptual environment).
- (iii) Successful context selection in communication is explained by three factors:
 - (a) communicative behaviour is guided by one general principle and various culture specific norms and rules.
 - (b) The context is drawn from the presumed shared knowledge of the participants.
 - (c) The general world knowledge from which the context is drawn is organized into mental structures called schemata.
- (iv) The smaller the shared knowledge of the participants is, the more difficulty they will have in communication. Communication between participants from different cultures is particularly at risk of failure because the shared knowledge of the participants is likely to be relatively small and because the participants cannot be sure what their shared knowledge is.
- (v) Research in the field of intercultural communication should focus on culture specific schemata: what they have in common, how they differ, how they are learnt and how they can change.

Discussion questions

- 1 Taboo topics are generally avoided and talked about indirectly (usually, euphemistically). The choice of euphemisms is largely culture specific. For example, northern India is one of many cultures in which married women do not talk about sexual intercourse openly and directly, but it is one of the few cultures in which sexual intercourse is described by the use of words meaning 'converse' (*bacit*) and 'speak' (*bat karna*).

Question: How can we explain this culture specific association between the concepts of conversing/speaking and sexual intercourse?

You may find the following additional information useful: in this culture there is a prohibition against women being seen by or talking to men to whom they are related in a particular way.

Task: Try to find more examples of euphemisms which can be explained in terms of the local culture in which they are used?

2 Consider the following claim about communication:

‘...all behaviour is communication, with message value, whether intended or conscious or not.’ (Wilden 1987: 69)

Questions: How plausible do you find this claim?
Is this claim compatible with the view of communication outlined in this chapter?
(Answer these questions giving detailed reasons for your opinions.)

3 The act of offering food to guests has different (indirect) meanings in various cultures. Describe how food is offered and accepted in different ways in two or more cultures explaining what you think are the indirect meanings of the offer of food in these cultures.

4 It is generally assumed that communication involves conveying assumptions which the communicator believes to be true. However, it is equally true that in many situations lying (telling so-called ‘white lies’) is considered preferable to telling the truth. The well-known anthropologist Clifford Geertz even argued that in the Javanese culture, lying was the norm:

When we tell white lies, we have to justify them to ourselves ... we usually have to find some sort of reason for telling a lie. For the Javanese (especially the *prijaji*), it seems, in part anyway, to work the other way around: the burden of proof seems to be in the direction of justifying the truth. ... In general, polite Javanese avoid gratuitous truths. (Geertz 1960: 246)

Tasks: Can you think of situations in your culture in which there is a conflict between politeness and truthfulness? Describe these situations and explain how they are appropriately dealt with. Compare your answers with those of people from other cultural backgrounds and identify the cultural differences and similarities that you have observed.

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