

# Intercultural Communication: A Semiotic Approach\*

*Farzan Sojoodi (Ph. D)*

*University of Arts*

*Head/ English Department*

*Academy of Arts*

*Head/ Department of Art Semiotics*

*This article is an attempt to study intercultural communication from a semiotic perspective. Indeed a thorough account of the theoretical basis of such semiotic approach is beyond the domain of a paper like this. However I will give a general view of the main terms used so that the audience not fully familiar with semiotic terminology and theory can also communicate with the paper.*

## **1- Introduction**

Semiotics in its broadest sense is the study of all forms of formation and exchange of meaning on the basis of sign systems. One of the broadest definitions is that of Umberto Eco, who states that "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign" (Eco 1976: 7). In a semiotic sense, signs can take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects (Chandler 2002: 2). Contemporary semioticians do not study signs in isolation; they are interested in studying the meaning

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formation and exchange through texts and discourses in their historical contexts. For the semiotician, a "text" can exist in any medium and may be verbal, non-verbal, or both. *Text* is a physical, but not definite, phenomenon. From a semiotic standpoint, a text is not necessarily verbal and any assemblage of signs (such as words, images, sounds and/or gestures) in a multi-layered physically perceptible message which is constructed and conceived (and interpreted) with reference to some social conventions (codes) is a text. Thus *codes* are those socially accepted conventions upon which production and interpretation of texts depend (Jakobson 1971). No sign might be conceptualized without a code which acts as a framework within which signs might sense. Individual sign is nonsense. Signification is a process dependent upon workings of a system, a code. "A code is a set of practices familiar to users of the medium operating within a broad cultural framework" (Chandler 2002:147). But what is culture and what are these cultural frameworks? Man as a creature equipped with semiotic abilities adapts and modifies the given surroundings. "Via an ongoing modification process our environment is changed and becomes historical. Such a historicized dynamic universe is what we call *culture*" (Johanson & Larsen 2002:4). Thus from a semiotic point of view, in contrast with the humanist tradition of for example Matthew Arnold<sup>†</sup> (1822-1888), who considered culture as "the best that has been thought and said in the world" (Arnold [1869] 1971:6) and considered literature and especially poetry as the major embodiment of "culture", culture is a sign-complex, a complex system of signification which through its internalized codes and sub-codes creates meaning and makes its exchange possible, and in fact includes the whole human's meaningful behavior and the codes which grant value to the same and make them understandable. From such a

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<sup>†</sup> English educator, poet and professor of poetry at Oxford University

theoretical standpoint whose brief account I presented here, this paper is going to discuss the issue of intercultural communication.

## **2- Culture as a complex of sign-systems**

Let us present our semiotic model of culture and its workings. When we say that culture is a complex of sign systems, in fact we believe in *cultural codes* as socially internalized, abstract signification systems which as said above govern our cultural behavior<sup>‡</sup>, and grant socially accepted meaning and value to the same. These codes are said to be abstract systems "hovering" over us, governing our cultural behavior. (We will come back to this theory of codes.) But any everyday realization of culture in areas such as our verbal discourse, literature, art, body language, rituals, religious ceremonial activities, garment, etc., the real physical events are *cultural texts*. Thus culture is a comprehensive system at work in two planes of codes and texts. One undesirable conclusion which might put us in danger here is that of a one way, deterministic relation between codes and texts. It goes without saying that such a conclusion may not be defensible, because in such case we can not explain the dynamicity and plurality of man's cultural behavior.

Let's continue our discussion with a question. Is "a" culture, a homogenous, rigid system which acts as the fix authority governing the beliefs, behaviors, gestures, rituals, art, literature and verbal discourse of the members of such "a" culture, thus creating clear-cut borders, separating a group of people from another? In other words, do we have a culture in contrast to another culture, or we should give another picture of culture and its workings? My answer to the first question is yes and no,

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<sup>‡</sup> By cultural behavior I mean a range from our daily verbal, non-verbal (gestures, facial mimicry, etc.) behavior, our garment, the food we eat, to beliefs, rituals, art and literature.

although it seems a little strange. **Yes** because there are so many forces at work to give homogeneity and fixity to "a" culture, cultural traditions which are settled and historicized in cultural codes tend to be frozen and fixed; **and no** because those codes are continuously being challenged by the actual reality of cultural texts. Cultural codes have continuously limited and defined themselves to create identity and value through difference and at the same time they have always been open to interplay and mingling with "other" cultural codes to exercise the said cultural identity through cultural texts and in a communicational act with this "other". Thus there is a paradoxical situation which is depicted in using the article "a" in quotation marks. From one hand culture tends to be "a" culture, through limiting, defining itself on the basis of its codes, and on the other hand this "a" culture which wants to create cultural identity and clear-cut borders from "other" cultures, is living on the borders, because as said before, to exercise this identity and grant it value, it should accept that "other" and enter into a type of communication with that other. In other words, such cultural identity is differential and negative, and depends on the "other". Let's summarize. Cultures tend to be definite and fixed and create cultural identity and on the other hand to exercise this cultural identity through cultural texts, they should enter into communication with other cultures and in this way that fixity is always threatened and these forces working in opposite directions are the main propelling force in culture, creating its dynamicity, and at the same time protecting its historicity and identity granting function.

Let's continue our discussion with a closer look inside what we called "a" culture. We said that this "a" culture living on borders always goes under the processes of mixing, mingling, hybridization, and at the same time protects itself as a unitary, homogeneous entity. This is the result of the

inescapable relations between this "a" culture with that "another". Now I want to claim that even in(side) "a" culture rupture, fragmentation, heterogeneity and discontinuity is the other side of the coin of unity and homogeneity. "a" culture defines a core, a center for itself, in which central codes are at work and these codes govern "accepted" cultural texts. This is considered to be a cultural "self", and this central "self" again is dependent upon a margin, an "other" which this central "self" tries to push to absence, to deny, and to overlook. This cultural self tends to show itself as standard and legal and the marginal other as illegitimate, impure. Again two forces are at work, from one side the forces that tend to create the illusion of a unitary, identity creating culture and from the other side, the inevitable margins that have already ruptured and fragmented this illusion of unity.

Now the issue of power relations comes to play its role in this model. In fact none of these marginal cultures, by which I mean cultural systems represented by ethnic minorities, marginalized religions, working class, women and the like, are inferior to the central cultural system and at the same time none is superior to any other. Here it is power, manifested in political power but not limited to it, that not only determines and defines the central culture but also marginalizes and suppresses other cultures and it is interesting that the term "subculture" itself is good evidence showing this idea of main culture versus "subcultures". The political power here tries to equalize the concept of cultural identity with national identity, and in doing so exploits the process of mythologizing and meaning reduction. But it goes without saying that cultural identity is something totally different from national identity, because there are clear-cut borders, political borders, separating nations from each other, but as we saw, culture is a continuum, with no definite borders. However we will leave

the issue of power and power relations, and will continue our discussion with the concept of communication.

### **3- Intercultural communication**

The pre-condition of any act of communication is the existence of an "I" and a "you" or as usually it is called the "self" and the "other". This presupposition leads us to accept the principle of difference. It is the difference between "I" and "you" that puts the machine of communication at work. But this coin has another side and that is the side of similarity; because when "I" and "you" intend to communicate through this very act of communication in which each of us want to emphasize on the "selfhood", we need to understand each other (and by this I never mean that understanding is something perfect), and to understand each other we should use a common language or a common code. Now we are facing with three problems: First, in cultural communication what (and I intentionally use "what" and not "who") is this "I" and what is this "you"? Second, what is our common code? And third what is the nature of texts we use to communicate? I will try to give my answer to these questions.

To provide an answer to the first question, I should make a distinction between interpersonal and intercultural communication. In the act of intercultural communication which is in nature different from an interpersonal communication, while individuals may play the role of facilitator, the "I" and "you" of communication are two cultural systems. And I would like to remind you of complexity and heterogeneity of cultural sign-systems. Are the parties to an act of intercultural communication, the central, unitary, homogeneous looking, official cultures, which is what happens in official intercultural rituals, or marginalized cultures are entering the act of communication? Are the

parties of such communication represent the diversity of their cultures, or they are hiding its fragmentation, its cracks, the reality of its not being unitary, not being solid? Let's turn back to the nature of this "I" and "you" of intercultural communication. Intercultural communication happens between cultural texts and cultural codes and this is the frontier, in which cultures are mixed and penetrate into each other. Communities and not individuals are senders and receivers of these texts, and in this process they are always under multilateral influences.

But our second question. Do the communities in their communications use a common code? A perfect common code is an ideal or better to say an illusion. Even in our intracultural domains the illusion of a perfect common code is an idea promoted by the dominant cultural domain. In intercultural communications also we communicate, but not through a perfect common code. We are always in a relative level of mutual understanding and misunderstanding as well. We are always experiencing an act of translation, intercultural translation. While translation is possible, it is never perfect.

And third question on the nature of texts. Verbal texts are only part of the texts exchanged in intercultural communications. Particularly in our time, which is the age of explosion of pictorial texts, linguistic texts are losing their importance increasingly. Cultures communicate through various types of multilayered, multimedia texts. Cinema, television, web pages and books are examples of such texts, which benefit from various codes, from pictorial codes and iconography to music and its auditory codes and to linguistic codes. Even when we participate in intercultural events such as academic seminars, we not only use language as a roughly speaking,

common code<sup>§</sup>, we are always using gestures, body language and other codes and we are always in a state of translation, a relative mutual understanding which is at any moment endangered by the possibility of misunderstanding.

Let's take cinema as an example. Cinema is a multimedia text exchanged in intercultural communication. Films come from different communities and different cultures. Iranian cultural communities also as producer and consumer have their own share in this international cultural market. Different cultural communities in Iran are receivers of these cultural texts, and communicate with them and have a relative understanding of such filmic texts. Indian movies were popular in Iran. People were eager to watch Indian movies (and still they are, but in a lesser degree). In near past they were under influence of such filmic texts. Even the trace of Indian cinema may be found in some products of Iranian popular cinema. People watched the movies, communicated with them and were impressed by them. But indeed there were many layers of such texts which were meaningful for Indian communities but seemed just exotic or non-sense for Iranian viewers. In the experience of watching Indian movies, we participated in a kind of intercultural communication, but not through the ideal of perfect common codes, but through difference and similarity and in a totally relative situation. Indian cultural communities shown in the movies were the "other" of such communication, were the "you" presenting itself to an "I"; an exotic and at the same time familiar you. We felt differences and it made Indian films interesting to us, to find ourselves in the mirror of an "other" and at the same time we<sup>\*\*</sup> experienced so many similarities which made the whole experience of

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<sup>§</sup> The very fact that we use English as a lingua franca to discuss cultural parallels between Iran and India and the type of English we use and its function is itself an interesting issue, deserving research.

<sup>\*\*</sup> And by this "WE" I mean Iranian middle class, urban settlers, because as I discussed earlier, this "WE" is not a fixed, homogenous whole.

cinema going a meaningful experience. The same is true about western movies. Difference and similarity makes the act of communication a meaningful experience.

The same has happened in the past. Take a look at Taj Mahal. Is it an Indian monument? Is it an Iranian or a Mongolian one? The first answer is that Taj Mahal is an Indian monument, it is located in India, and as discussed earlier in this article, where culture is supposed to be defined as a heterogeneous whole with its definite symbols, this monument is Indian and a symbol of Indian culture and history. But the other side of the coin, which tries to reveal fragmentations, ruptures, mixings and hybridizations, tells us that this monument is a mixture of some aspects of Indian, Iranian, Mongolian culture. Taj is the border of cultural communication and has still kept such a quality in itself because it interests tourists from different parts of the world; various cultures praise this multicultural monument and themselves mix with each other, and mix with the monument through their "readings" of it.

But again the power relations come to play their roles, both in historical and in contemporary context. Do different cultures (and marginalized cultures as well) equally benefit from the opportunity of participating in an intercultural communication? Or some of them have hegemony over the others, are senders and the others are always receivers? The same situation we discussed in intracultural relations, the process of marginalization is at work in intercultural communications as well. But there is a point here. It seems that technological developments, paradoxically, while providing better opportunities for "central" cultures, have created good grounds for marginalized cultures to present themselves in an international level. Internet spaces and satellite

televisions are good examples of creation of a multicultural, polyphonic and plural atmosphere.

#### **4- Conclusion**

According to such a model discussed above, we may draw another picture of the cultural relations. Cultures are sign systems which give meaning and value to our cultural behavior. These systems are relative systems and thus there is no fixity in the value and meaning they produce. Cultures participate in intercultural communication through cultural codes but most of the time with unequal opportunities. They influence each other, try to survive and because of this make themselves similar to other cultures and at the same time keep themselves different and it is an everlasting process. We are in an everlasting experience of mixing, merging and hybridization of cultures and at the same time defining borders of difference and keeping a cultural identity. Cultural codes and cultural texts and exchange of such texts in intercultural acts of communication become meaningful experiences only and only through such process of similarity and difference.

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