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# Intercultural Communication Systems and Discourses of Cultural Identity

**Abstract:** The analysis of intercultural communication, which is adopted in mainstream applied linguistics and communication studies, aims to explain the meaning of cultural differences and identities in the present global world. The present analysis of intercultural communication is based on theories of cultural variability, which highlight the basic distinctions between values determining cultural differences and identities. Some studies in applied linguistics observe cultural variability as a discursive construction based on a form of epistemological essentialism, produced in the Western part of the world to give meaning to its hegemony. However, these studies share some epistemological foundations with theories of cultural variability. This paper proposes a theorization of intercultural communication, which explains cultural differences and identities as constructed in communication systems and based on their particular structural presuppositions. In this perspective, the hegemonic structure of intercultural communication is ethnocentrism, including the presuppositions of Us/Them basic distinction, positioning of individuals as members of cultural groups and normative expectations about displays of We-identities. This theorisation also provides an explanation of the discursive construction of new hybrid forms of identity, which are observed as a result of globalisation, and of the interdependence between local and global communication systems. Finally, this theorization leads to explain the meaning of intercultural dialogue, which is presented as an alternative to ethnocentrism. The open question regards the explanation of dialogue as either a new discursive construction of hegemonic Western culture or a new structure, introducing equality in participation, sensitivity for participants' personal expressions and expectations of participants' empowerment in local and global communication systems.

**Keywords:** communication systems, essentialism, ethnocentrism, dialogue, intercultural communication

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# 1 Introduction

The analysis of intercultural communication, which is adopted in mainstream applied linguistics and communication studies, originates from theories of cultural variability. These theories see intercultural communication as based on a variety of cultural forms, and identify this variety of forms as the salient aspect of globalisation and multicultural societies. In their view, individuals make communication intercultural, in that they construct their cultural identities and display these identities in communication. The present paper suggests that this analysis of intercultural communication is too simplistic and proposes a new theoretical perspective on intercultural communication as an empirical social process.

The paper starts with the analysis of the problematic foundations of theories of cultural variability. In the following section, the paper analyses some studies in applied linguistics that observe cultural variability as a discursive construction, but that do not challenge the assumption of individuals as authors and actors of their cultural identities. Starting from these studies, the paper suggests a theory of intercultural communication systems, which can explain the discursive construction of cultural variability as a consequence of the structure of ethnocentrism. Then, the paper discusses the most important challenges to ethnocentrism (and discourses of cultural variability) in today's process of globalisation of intercultural communication systems. Finally, it analyses the meaning of dialogue as a possible alternative to ethnocentrism.

## 2 Theories of cultural variability

To quote a recent handbook, “Conventionally intercultural communication studies refer to studies of both interaction between people of different cultures and comparative studies of communication patterns across cultures” (Zhu 2014: 1). These studies are mainly based on theories of cultural variability, which explain intercultural communication highlighting the basic distinctions that determine fundamental cultural differences in the global world (Piller 2007, 2011): In the 1970s, Hofstede (1980) introduced the basic distinctions between values, which mark differences among “national cultures”; over time, other authors have proposed distinctions to account for cultural differences (e.g. Hall 1976; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997). Among these, the distinction that has probably been most widely used is the one between collectivism and individualism (Hofstede 1980; see also Ting-Toomey 1999; Triandis 1995).

These theories of cultural variability are based on cross-cultural research, which *compares* different cultural conditions in nations or groups. Findings from cross-cultural research make it possible to interpret intercultural communication, as participants in communication are expected to follow the cultural values and orientations that they have acquired in their respective groups. In this view, individual participants *make* communication “intercultural”, in that they act as members of specific groups. Individuals construct their cultural identities, or We-identities, within the groups to which they belong (Ting-Toomey 1999), and display these identities in communication; therefore, the cultural orientations of participants’ identities explain intercultural communication. On the one hand, individuals determine communication and its cultural orientation. On the other hand, culture determines individual identity, transforming it into We-identity and, ultimately, communication. Communication is thus determined directly by individuals and indirectly by culture, “as a system of values and practices of a group or community of people” (Zhu 2014: 1).

Some studies in applied linguistics adopt the theory of cultural variability and observe the ways in which intercultural communication produces and shows this cultural variability (e.g. Kiesling and Paulson 2005; Kotthoff and Spencer-Oatey 2009; Spencer-Oatey and Franklin 2009). In the perspective of these studies, cultural variability concerns the use of language in the interaction. These studies, while keeping their focus on individual participants, look at them within the framework of the intertwined actions they perform. That is why the use of language in communication is central to these studies; as suggested by a well-known theory in applied linguistics, the focus is on the linguistic cues showing the “cultural presuppositions” that guide participants’ actions (Gumperz 1982, 1992). Gumperz notes that in conversations involving speakers from different cultures, some contextual assumptions can be observed, that give meaning to what is said and to the interactional construction of culture. Cultural presuppositions are highlighted or made salient through “contextualization cues”, which are defined as verbal and non-verbal signals constructing “the contextual presuppositions that underlie situated interpretations” and thereby affect “how constituent messages are understood” (Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz 2009: 24); contextualisation cues are revealed through language use. This approach identifies the cues for cultural presuppositions in specific features of participants’ actions, such as prosody, paralinguistic signs, choice of linguistic code, lexical forms and formulaic expressions (Gumperz 1992).

This analysis of intercultural communication is based on the observation of the ways in which individuals use language, thus displaying their cultural identities, awareness and competences. This type of analysis requires the observation of both cultural groups and individual cultural presuppositions, following the general paradigm of cultural variability.

To sum up, the theory of cultural variability assumes that individuals introduce their cultural perspectives and identities in communication processes through their actions; therefore, the relationship between individual actions can produce intercultural communication.

Moreover, cultural variability is not only a scientific theory; it is also enhanced by the frequent claim for cultural identities supported by groups, minorities and majorities in the communicative arena of the global world and multicultural societies. This communicative arena includes neo-colonial hegemonic claims for universalism, intra-national claims against racial or cultural discrimination of individuals and groups, and specific, international and intra-national claims for ethnic identities. These claims for cultural differences and identities are empirically evident in the present global world. Against this backdrop, theories of cultural variability seem to be able to explain the communicative production of claims regarding cultural differences and identities.

### 3 The critical discourse analysis of cultural variability as essentialism

Recent studies on intercultural communication have observed cultural variability as a discursive construction based on a form of epistemological *essentialism* (Dervin 2011a; Fougère and Moulettes 2007; Piller 2007, 2011; Verschueren 2008; Zhu 2014). In particular, theories of cultural variability have been observed as part of the neo-essentialist ideology of Othering, i.e. the process whereby the Western part of the world attempts to legitimise its hegemony at the expenses of “Others” (Holliday 2011).

This critical approach analyses the discourse of Western cultural tradition, deconstructing myths like “the West” and “the Orient”, revealing their constructed and historicised form (Qu 2013). Cultural differences appear to be the historical consequences of power relationships, as the Western cultural tradition has been imposed on the rest of the world through colonialism and imperialism (e.g. Parry 2004; Said 1978; Van Dijk 1984). The crisis and decline of colonialism, however, has determined new power relationships, based on the dynamics between domination and reaction to domination in colonised and post-colonised countries. This critical approach focuses both on the power distance between the West and the rest of the world (e.g. Fougère and Moulettes 2007), and on local cultural productions and intercultural interactions in Western and non-Western countries (e.g. Holliday 2011, 2013).

Some interactionist analyses (e.g. Gumperz and Roberts 1991; Koole and Ten Thije 2001) have highlighted ways in which intercultural communication creates the meaning of cultural differences. Against this background, the critical approach in applied linguistics investigates “intercultural encounters as a new, emerging set of cultural identities and values” (Zhu 2011: 7) and as construction of “a relationship through negotiating images of the self and the other, cultures, languages” (Dervin and Gao 2012: 8). However, although the focus is “on the process of interaction”, this theorization insists on considering “what the participants achieve from the experience in terms of new identities and practices” (Zhu 2011: 7). In other words, in this approach, “group members’ statements *about* ‘culture’ or ‘their culture’ should be seen as products of the culture, expressing how they socially construct their image of their own culture, rather than a direct description of their culture” (Holliday 2011: 144). According to this analysis, cultural differences are constructed in discursive practices, which are based on participants’ actions and reproduce cultures and cultural identities.

This analysis defines participants as actors and authors of cultural presuppositions and cultural identities, which can be negotiated in discourse; culture is “something people do or which they perform” (Piller 2011: 15), and “individuals identify on a permanent basis and co-construct who they are, be it in interaction with others or with each other” (Dervin 2011b: 72). According to this analysis, therefore, individual actors, or complex webs of actors (Dervin and Gao 2012: 9), reproduce and negotiate cultural identities in discourse and interactions. Therefore, in this perspective, “the field of intercultural communication is primarily concerned with how individuals, in order to achieve their communication goals, negotiate cultural or linguistic differences which may be perceived relevant by at least one party in the interaction” (Zhu 2014: 200).

This approach criticises domination, based on essentialism, dealing with the ways in which available cultural presuppositions are enacted and negotiated in the interaction. However, it does not challenge the assumption of individuals as authors and actors of cultural presuppositions and discourses about cultures and cultural identities; therefore, this approach does not challenge the main theoretical foundation of essentialist theories of cultural variability.

## 4 Intercultural communication systems

Theories of cultural variability see communication as dependent on participants as members of groups, who *have*, and therefore show, cultural identities and are guided by their own cultural presuppositions. According to this view,

individuals own and reproduce cultural identities. Critical approaches assume that individuals manage and negotiate their cultural identities in discourse and interactions; however, their cultural presuppositions and cultural identities continue to be the focus of the analysis.

Critical approaches assume that intercultural communication means co-production and negotiation of participants' cultural presuppositions and identities. However, intercultural communication is also a structured process. Zhu (2014: 215–216) suggests that, “although negotiation is the key to construction of cultural identity, there are limits to it”. These limits are fixed by social structures. While stressing the importance of negotiations and personal trajectories, Holliday (2013) acknowledges the importance of social structures, including a range of cultural resources (nation, religion, language, economics), intertwined in global positions and politics. In this paper, I suggest that social systems theory (Luhmann 1995) is a useful starting point to understand the structured process of intercultural communication, challenging essentialist theories of intercultural communication and developing the analysis of discursive constructions of cultural variability.

#### **4.1 Communication systems and their structural presuppositions**

Social systems theory explains communication processes as *autopoietic* processes. Autopoiesis is a neologism, derived from the ancient Greek term *poiesis* (i.e. “creation”), which means “self-creation”; autopoiesis means that communication is created through other communication, i.e. through a communication process. This process constitutes social systems, which are therefore observed as chains of intertwined communications, i.e., autopoietic communication systems. The explanation of autopoietic communication systems is based on the interpretation of communication as the unity of action and understanding. In order to be accomplished, communication needs both participants' actions, which consist in uttering information for other participants, and other participants' understanding of the actions performed and information uttered. Therefore, the achievement of communication requires that participant's action as utterance, and what is uttered through this action, are understood by (an)other participant(s); neither action, nor understanding alone can produce communication.

In this perspective, therefore, communication is based on both action and understanding. However, understanding can only be shown through further action, which is the only visible part of communication; therefore communication processes can only be observed as sequences of actions. Each action in the

sequence shows understanding of both previous information (“*what* did you say?”; “*this* is an interesting idea”) and previous action (“*Why* did you say that?”; “*you are saying* an interesting thing”). Each action shows that understanding has been achieved, and consequently that communication has been accomplished. The autopoiesis of communication systems can be observed in that actions relate to each other, i.e. in that each action shows understanding of previous action, thus showing accomplishment of communication. In other words, the autopoiesis of communication systems can be observed only through chains of actions, but these chains are always based on understanding.

Building on the idea that chains of actions are based on understanding, social systems theory shows that, although individuals actively participate in communication, they cannot determine communication, which also requires other participants’ understanding. Therefore, communication is not produced by individuals, it is produced in the autopoietic process of communication.

If applied to intercultural communication, this theory implies that individual actions cannot determine cultural differences: culture and cultural differences are produced in autopoietic processes of communication, that is in communication systems. Cultural meanings “exist” if they are both uttered and understood, i.e. if they are produced in communication processes (Luhmann 1980). All communication processes, therefore all autopoietic communication systems, produce cultural meanings. Cultural identity may be seen as one of these communicative constructions of meanings, implying that these meanings are shared as We-identities; cultural difference is the communicative construction of difference between We-identities. The main question here is *how* autopoietic communication systems can create cultural identities and cultural differences.

The communicative construction of cultural identities and differences is based on structural presuppositions of autopoietic communication systems. Structural presuppositions are cultural meanings that become stable structures of communication systems, through systematic reproduction in communication processes, as they are successful in guiding these processes. Structural presuppositions enable the orientation of communication events to previous communication, i.e. they guide the autopoiesis of communication systems. In this paper, I am interested in structural presuppositions of *intercultural* communication systems.

According to Luhmann (2000: 185) the “basal structure” of a social system is a “code”, which is based on a primary distinction between the positive and negative values. Codes make it possible to identify communications as belonging to a certain social system. It is possible to expand this theorization, observing that the coding of the system creates the conditions for the “positioning” of participants (Harré et al. 1999), i.e. the way in which individual participation is

made meaningful and intelligible in communication through participants' actions. Coding and positioning create "structures of expectations" (Luhmann 1995), which are visible in communication processes.

Coding, positioning and the resulting structures of expectations may be seen as the structural presuppositions of communication systems. These structural presuppositions are constructed in the history of social systems. Firstly, autopoietic communication processes create and reproduce specific cultural meanings. Consequently, these cultural meanings are transformed in presuppositions that guide and select communication, producing the organized order of social systems. Social systems are historical systems, which are (1) created through autopoietic communication processes, (2) preserved through stable structural presuppositions, and (3) changed through new autopoietic processes of communication producing new structural presuppositions. The structural presuppositions of social systems can be changed by means of autopoietic communication processes.

## 4.2 The structural presuppositions of intercultural communication systems

The social systems theory helps to explain the meaning of intercultural communication without hypothesizing the prior existence of cultural variability and cultural groups, not only avoiding the discourse of essentialism but also clarifying its social origins. This theory makes it possible to explain intercultural communication as an autopoietic communication system that highlights understanding and treatment of information as cue for cultural difference and action as cue for cultural identity.

On the one hand, information (produced through utterances) is understood and treated as cue for cultural difference regarding structural presuppositions of communication. For instance, in the interaction between a Sinhalese and an American, the difference in the use of pronouns can be understood and treated as information about a difference regarding the participants' positioning. In Sinhala spoken language, the use of first person plural pronouns (*api*, i.e. "we" and *apee*, i.e. "our") is understood and treated as a cue for positioning participants as members of a group (Premawardhena 2007). In American English, the use of first person singular pronouns ("I" and "my") is understood and treated as a cue for positioning that implies personal responsibility and individual performances.

On the other hand, actions (utterances) are understood and treated as cues for participants' cultural identities. For instance, a Sinhalese uttering plural



pronouns can be assigned a specific We-identity as “collectivist” and an American uttering singular pronouns can be assigned a specific We-identity as “individualist”. “In-group based” appeals can be understood and treated as cues for participants’ collectivist identity, while “substantive” appeals can be understood and treated as cues for participants’ individualist identity (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998).

Intercultural communication systems construct the meaning of information as cue for cultural differences (e.g. regarding participants’ positioning) and the meaning of action as cue for participants’ cultural identities (We-identities). In this perspective, cultural differences and identities are not pre-established realities, but constructions in autopoietic communication systems. There is no such thing as “cultural difference” between Sinhalese and American people, and Sinhalese and American identities, before the communication system creates their meanings. The construction of these cultural differences and We-identities depends on structural presuppositions of intercultural communication.

In the history of human societies, intercultural communication systems have been based on a distinction between Us (positive value) and Them (negative value), which are meaningful only in relation to each other, i.e. as a code of the system. In these intercultural communication systems, positioning includes roles of membership in different groups, and is indicated through the specific actions that are associated with these roles. Structures of expectations are visible in the establishment and preservation of norms (“normative expectations”, Luhmann 1995), which are associated with the construction of Us/Them code and positioning as group member. These structural presuppositions have founded *ethnocentrism* (e.g. Gudykunst 1994; Pearce 1989).

Ethnocentrism means that cultural difference is construed as a difference between two values (Us and Them), guiding a communication system. Ethnocentrism originates because the mere construction of difference between Us and Them is not sufficient to produce a communication system; therefore, the basic structure (code) of intercultural communication systems requires the association of difference with an assessment of (positive) Us and (negative) Them; the ethnocentric code of intercultural communication systems is based on the distinction between Us (positive value) and Them (negative value). This code creates the conditions for positioning participants as members of groups and for developing normative expectations about their culturally defined We-identities. The ethnocentric code determines the participants’ positioning as members of differently assessed cultural groups, as well as specific normative expectations about their display of differently assessed We-identities.

In the history of human society, intercultural communication has been produced in ethnocentric communication systems, coded by the distinction

between Us and Them as a distinction between opposite values. As we have seen above, this ethnocentric structure originates from communication processes that produce information about a difference, which is visible as a difference in ways of acting. These communication processes highlight that it is not possible to have a code, a positioning and expectations accepted by all participants, in that participants' actions confirm one value (one way of acting) and refuse the other one. The "intercultural" meaning of this difference arises if and when specific structural presuppositions can stabilize the communication process, for example by associating one way of acting with "individualistic" Western tradition and the other way of acting with "collectivist" Eastern or Islamic cultures. This association enhances an intercultural communication system, based on an ethnocentric code (Western Us vs. Eastern/Islamic Them and/or vice versa) that orients communication to the cultural meaning of differences and creates expectations about the We-identities of participants as members of different, and differently assessed, nations, cultures or groups.

### **4.3 The discursive construction of cultural differences and identities**

Structural presuppositions originate specific discursive constructions in communication systems, which have been analysed by critical studies in applied linguistics (see Section 3). In particular, the ethnocentric structure of intercultural communication systems originates the discursive construction of cultural differences and cultural identities. These discursive constructions are based on the Us/Them code, on positioning as membership and on normative expectations regarding We-Identities. The ethnocentric structure enhances discourses that stress the specific meanings and values of Us and Them as foundation of "cultural difference", and the positioning of participants as individuals having specific "cultural identities". Moreover, the ethnocentric structure of intercultural communication systems allows for the definition of the discursive construction of relationships that can be established between cultural groups (Us and Them).

Against this backdrop, essentialism can be observed as a discursive construction that gives meaning to the ethnocentric structure of intercultural communication systems between the West and the rest of the world (e.g. Fougère and Moulettes 2007). The discourse of essentialism declares the existence of cultural differences between Us and Them, positioning of participants as members of cultures and normative expectations about the display of We-identities. On the one hand, this discursive construction depends on structural

presuppositions; in particular, essentialism depends on the Us/Them code, positioning as roles of members and normative expectations about the preservation of coding and positioning. On the other hand, this discursive construction enables the reproduction of structural presuppositions, by describing and explaining their detailed meanings and their possible application in social systems; the discourse of essentialism describes and explains the application of the Us/Them code, roles of members and corresponding normative expectations in intercultural communication systems.

The ethnocentric structure of intercultural communication systems enhances essentialist discourses of cultural coherence and hegemony (Holliday 2011), which are based on the primacy of the positive Us. These discourses determine the meaning of hierarchical cultural differences. In the recent history of human society, primarily, it has enhanced the Us that produces the discourses of Western civilisation. However, it has also enhanced the Us that produces alternatives to this discourse, e.g. the discourses of Asian communication ethics (Ishii 2009), Afrocentrism (Asante 1998), or Islamic identity (Khatib 2003; Lapidus 2001).

Starting from challenges to the primacy of the positive Us, the ethnocentric structure enhances discourses of conflicts as intercultural (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998), as “clash of civilisations” (Huntington 1997), war against evil, fight against oppression and domination, and so on. In particular, from a linguistic point of view, the ethnocentric structure promotes the transformation of misunderstandings and other linguistic expressions into source of conflict in intercultural communication systems: the Us/Them code leads to the social constructions of any linguistic expressions as an attempt by Them to attack or offend Us, thus preventing its possible clarification and blocking any attempt to repair it.

## 5 Beyond ethnocentrism?

Ethnocentrism is a paradoxical structure of intercultural communication systems, as it solves a problem (guiding intercultural communication systems) by creating another problem, i.e. generating negative understanding and treatment of cultural difference (negative value of Them).

These negative understanding and treatment are visible in the discursive construction of homogeneity of society (Verschuere 2008), requiring assimilation (Zhu 2014). This discursive construction attempts to preserve the hegemonic discourse of “Western culture”, as a solution for the problems associated with different cultural identities (Holliday 2011, 2013); assimilation can lead to the

progressive integration of an homogeneous society, overcoming problematic cultural differences. The discourse of assimilation has been applied to any political system aiming to reach high levels of societal integration, and transformed into laws regarding the treatment of cultural difference. The discourse of assimilation enhances a negative approach to cultural difference in order to overcome it; therefore it promotes the ethnocentric structuration of social systems (positive assimilating Us and negative different Them), with the paradoxical consequence of amplifying cultural differences rather than eliminating them.

By generating this negative understanding and treatment of cultural difference, ethnocentrism has also stimulated the discursive construction of effective management of intercultural communication, which aims to enhance a new, “positive” way of dealing with cultural differences in communication systems.

First, ethnocentrism has stimulated the discursive construction of multiculturalism, which is proposed as a reaction to the failure of assimilation (e.g. Kymlicka 1995; Taylor 1994; Wieviorka 2001). Multiculturalism means “recognition” of the cultural identities and collective rights associated with cultural groups in Western societies; in this perspective, these societies should be differentiated in a variety of interdependent cultures (Lubinda 2010). The discourse of multiculturalism introduces the positive value of cultural differences, but without considering the complexity of intercultural communication systems. In fact, multiculturalism results in a reinforcement of ethnocentrism, for a number of different and contrasting reasons. Depending on the perspective adopted, multiculturalism may be (1) accused of underscoring the importance of Western universalistic values, particularly the value of individual rights, (2) blamed for being a strategy to reaffirm the hegemony of Western culture as unavoidable limitation to recognition, (3) attacked by fundamentalisms demanding more radical and substantial We-identities. The discourse of multiculturalism is silenced by its own unexpected effects in terms of ethnocentric intercultural communication.

Second, ethnocentrism has stimulated an “interventionist discourse” (O’Regan and MacDonald 2007), which assumes that ethnocentrism can be turned into the positive value of cultural difference. For example, this interventionist discourse suggests that “ethnorelativism” is a possible basis for effective intercultural communication (Bennett 1998), or that ethnocentrism can be mitigated by “bridging differences” (Gudykunst 1994). This interventionist discourse aims to show that it is possible to change the structural presuppositions of intercultural communication systems through the creation of individual intercultural competences (Guirdham 2005; Spitzberg 1997; Zhu 2014). This implies that individuals can become aware of ethnocentrism and change or mitigate

their own ethnocentric attitudes. This focus on individual awareness, attitudes and competences ignores the complexity of intercultural communication systems, adopting a paradigm of “self-governance of the individual” (Ferri 2014: 14), which suggests that individuals can change social systems with their actions.

Third, in recent years, the increasing interest in the cultural effects of globalisation processes has led to the discourse of creolization (O’Byrne and Hensby 2011) or hybridisation (Pieterse 2004), which observes that global interdependencies blur the boundaries between cultural groups, by producing a *mélange* of cultures and languages in which it is not possible to distinguish We-identities and differences between Us and Them. Hybridisation means plurality of expressions, construction of a “global multicultural” (Pieterse 2007). Hybridisation may lead to the construction of new hybrid forms of identity, in a “third space” or “third culture” (e.g. Bhabha 1994; Casmir 1999; Todd-Mancillas 2000). Therefore, hybrid forms of identity are considered “transcultural” (Milhouse et al. 2001) or “intercultural” (Kim 2008; Nair-Venugopal 2009) identities of “third culture individuals” (Lyttle et al. 2011). These hybrid forms of identity seem to prevent fixation of ethnocentric structures: hybridisation “names the fact that the cultural mechanisms for producing affiliation are always open-ended and incomplete” (Smith 2004: 252). Hybrid identities are observed as a variety of loose, unstable manifestations of cultural identities, and hybridisation is observed as the process of building and rebuilding perpetually incomplete cultural identities.

The discourse of hybridisation should involve moving on from “culturalism”, which considers culture “as a stable and closed corpus of representations, beliefs, and symbols” (Dervin 2014: 193). Paradoxically, however, the discourse of hybridisation increases the observation of cultural differences and cultural variability, producing an essentialist concept of culture and determining new uncrossable intercultural lines (Holliday 2013). The cultural *mélange* produces cultural differences in multiple ways, for example as new forms of consumption (food, music, dance, sport and commodities), but also as global hybrid forms of fundamentalism, which mix gains on the stock market and use of Westernised media with the values of tradition and purity (Roy 2004). Multiple hybrid identities originate from a complex *mélange*, based on “glocalised” markets and companies (e.g. McDonald’s, Coca Cola, Starbucks), migrations, international politics, new forms of art and consumption, counter-hegemonic movements and groups, international and intercultural programs of education, and so on.

Hybrid identities can be seen as part of “global culture as a field in which many cultural forms are announced, accumulate, and collide” (Featherstone 2006: 390). However, the discourse of hybridisation does not explain what

structural presuppositions can handle the different and contradictory versions of *mélange*; in fact, it presupposes the inclusion of all hybrid identities in ordered global systems of communication.

## 6 Discourses and structures of dialogue

The discursive construction of hybrid identities originates from the analysis of complex globalisation processes, which seem to dissipate clear-cut cultural differences and identities. However, these globalisation processes are produced through communication systems, and the meanings of hybrid identities depend on the structural presuppositions of these communication systems. Therefore, the question is: what are the communication systems that enhance the construction of hybrid identities? Are these systems based on new structural presuppositions? What about the new forms of “hybrid” ethnocentrism?

The answer to these questions requires the preliminary observation that globalisation processes are based on interdependence between local systems and global systems (Pieterse 2004; Robertson 1992). This means that, while globalisation processes certainly influence local communication systems, these local communication systems can promote globalisation processes (e.g. Blommaert 2007; Cronin 2006; Holliday 2011). In other words, the complexity of globalisation emanates from “micro-structural arrangements” (Featherstone 2006: 391) or “micro-cosmopolitanism” (Cronin 2006: 14–17), i.e. it is produced by bottom-up processes (Holliday 2013).

Local communication systems can change structural presuppositions in the global social systems in which they are included; for example, frequent local interactions between doctors and migrant patients can enhance new structural presuppositions of doctor-patient communication, which can be progressively introduced in the global healthcare system. Local communication systems are included in the autopoietic reproduction of global social system; therefore, changes in the structural presuppositions of local communication systems can lead to (although slow) changes in the structural presuppositions of global social systems.

Local transformations are more likely to affect participants’ positioning than codes of communication systems. For example, in the healthcare system, through local doctor-patient interactions, the positioning of doctors and migrant patients can change much more easily than the difference between illness and health as values of the basic code; these changes can also modify the structure of expectation about doctors’ and patients’ actions, for example about actions

that can help either recovering or preventing health problems. Structural presuppositions of local communication systems can be amplified in the global social system through the autopoietic chain of communication, which also enhances new discursive constructions of hybridisation.

The *specific* structural presuppositions of local communication systems are very important to define social change. If the local communication system (e.g. the doctor-patient communication system) is based on an ethnocentric structure (e.g. regarding communication between doctors and migrant patients), the global social system (e.g. the healthcare system) will be progressively “ethnified” through discourses of assimilation, multiculturalism, or intercultural competence. For example, in healthcare services this can promote either a request for migrants’ adaptation or an attempt to produce “culture-centred” communication. This ethnocentric structure cannot lead to the discursive construction of hybrid identities.

The discourse of *intercultural dialogue* (Ganesh and Holmes 2011; Holmes 2014) is frequently used today as an alternative to ethnocentrism in local communication systems. Dialogue is seen as a particular structure of communication, which is contrasted with “attitudes such as aggression, hostility, prejudice, sectarianism, and with conflicts of varying degrees, including war” (Wierbicka 2006: 677). David Bhom describes it as “a place where there is no authority, no hierarchy, where there is no special purpose – sort of an empty place, where we can let anything be talked about” (1996: 49), and where it is possible to open up “judgments and assumptions” (53). These statements clarify the force attributed to dialogue in contrasting ethnocentrism as a structure of communication systems. Intercultural dialogue should enhance learning about diversity, mutual understanding and respect. However, the specific conditions of communication are crucial to understand if intercultural dialogue is effectively achieved (Phipps 2014; Riitaoja and Dervin 2014; Xu 2013).

The discourse of dialogue regards structural presuppositions of communication, rather than identities or abstract values. In communication processes, dialogue “implies that each party makes a step in the direction of the other” (Wierbicka 2006: 692). In this perspective, dialogue requires that actions are understood and accepted as positive active participation, as, for example, it has been highlighted by studies on mediation of conflicts (e.g. Bush and Folger 2005; Winslade and Monk 2008). This means that dialogue is seen as a structured communication system, which is primarily coded through a distinction between active participation (positive value) and lack of active participation (negative value). A “secondary coding”, which allows the primary code to operate (Luhmann 1997), is considered equity: dialogue is based on the distinction between fair (positive value) and unfair (negative value) participation (Maoz

2001). Furthermore, dialogue presupposes participants' empathic positioning (Gudykunst 1994), which means taking the interlocutors' perspective (Black 2008), and expectations of empowerment of participants' expressions (Bush and Folger 2005) and production of new narratives (Winslade and Monk 2008). Dialogue is thus seen as a specific structure of a communication system, based on the combined coding of active participation and equity, on empathic positioning and on expectations of participants' empowerment and new narratives.

Dialogue can be seen as a way of re-structuring intercultural communication, as it gives space to different perspectives and narratives. It can be seen as a new structure of intercultural communication, which does not build on the Us/Them code, on the observation of participants' membership and on normative expectations about We-identity. According to this discursive construction:

1. The structure of dialogue enables the display and equal treatment of different narratives in communication.
2. The structure of dialogue constructs the meaning of different narratives as displaying *personal* differences and identities.
3. The structure of dialogue attaches the meaning of personal differences and identities to active participation.
4. The structure of dialogue enhances creative and innovative personal trajectories (Holliday 2013), promoting "the individual's ability to act as an agent" (Block 2013: 144).
5. The structure of dialogue opens the floor to all kinds of cultural difference, but turns them into personal trajectories.
6. The structure of dialogue deals effectively with cultural differences, but enhancing them as personal expressions.
7. The structure of dialogue produces *personalised* hybrid identities.

This discursive construction of dialogue, as a new structured system of communication, may be observed as part of Westernisation, showing preference for individualised positioning. However, the discourse of dialogue does not prioritise Western values and does not produce Othering. The structural presuppositions of dialogue introduce interest in active participation and equity, empathic positioning and expectations of empowerment and new narratives within communication systems. If Westernisation may be observed as opening up opportunities for actions and narratives, rather than imposing them, then dialogue may be observed as a Western discourse. However, this implies a change in the meaning of Westernisation, as a discourse that may be globally acceptable because it is not globalised as dominant.



## 7 Steps to new theoretical foundations of research on intercultural communication

This paper has stressed that new theoretical foundations may improve understanding and explanation of intercultural communication in the present global world. The first theoretical foundation regards communication processes. Communication processes can be seen as produced in autopoietic social systems. In this perspective, communication processes do not depend on individual presuppositions or actions, which can neither shape communication systems nor introduce cultural presuppositions in them. The autopoiesis of communication systems is based on structural presuppositions, which include code, positioning and structures of expectations.

The second theoretical foundation regards the meaning of “intercultural”. Intercultural communication can be seen as produced in a communication system, which has been historically based on an ethnocentric structure, including the Us/Them code, the positioning of participants as members of groups, and normative expectations regarding We-identities. The ethnocentric structure of intercultural communication systems has provided the basis for the production of the discourses of essentialism and cultural hegemony, on the one hand, and of antagonism and clashes between cultures, on the other hand.

The third theoretical foundation regards the meaning of recent global processes. Interdependencies between local and global communication systems seem to prevent the construction of traditional We-identities and to enhance the construction of new hybrid identities. Against this backdrop, the discursive construction of intercultural dialogue has been enhanced to give a new meaning to cultural difference as enrichment in local communication systems, contrasting ethnocentrism. Dialogue is seen as a new structure of communication that includes the combined primary code of participation and the secondary code of equity (vs. iniquity), positioning as display of personal sensitivity (empathy) and expectations of participants’ empowerment and new narratives.

Dialogue can be seen either as a new hegemonic discursive construction of Western hegemony, denying the importance of different We-identities, or as a new discursive construction of coexistence of an infinite variety of personal trajectories based on cultural resources (Holliday 2013). Although political, moral and legal claims for personal rights and responsibilities can be narrated as hegemonic and falsely universalistic (e.g. Ferri 2014), the structural presuppositions of dialogue seem to extend opportunities of personal expression to all participants, including those who claim We-identities, thus opposing hegemony and domination. Therefore, the discourse of dialogue is presented as neither

hegemonic nor alternative to hegemony. The structural presuppositions of dialogue are presented as both a decline of ethnocentrism and a new, effective global structure of communication, which results from the increasing importance of positioning intended as personal expression in global society.

The achievement of dialogue is proposed as one of the main challenges for communication systems today. Dialogue is proposed as a structure of local communication systems that can be generalised to global social systems. However, at present there are no indications that the structure of dialogue is, and can be, generalised in social systems. Instead, it is possible to observe the discursive construction of a *potential* transformation of ethnocentric communication systems into dialogic communication systems. Therefore, it is important to understand if and under what conditions the cultural meanings assigned to dialogue can become stable structural presuppositions of communication systems, through systematic reproduction in communication processes, as they are successful in guiding these processes. In other words, it is important to understand if and under what conditions, coding of active participation and equity, sensitivity for personal expressions and expectations of empowerment, can become structural presuppositions of the chains of actions which make communication visible, guiding the autopoiesis of communication systems (e.g. Baraldi 2009, 2012, 2013). In particular, three problems which characterise the structural presuppositions of dialogic communication deserve empirical research to be better understood and explained.

The first problem regards the production of unpredictability. Unpredictability originates from the autopoiesis of communication, which can produce variability and contingency of both structural presuppositions and discursive constructions. On the one hand, the structural presuppositions of dialogue should enhance unpredictability by promoting the value of active participation (primary coding) and expectations of participants' empowerment. On the other hand, the structural presuppositions of dialogue should ensure an effective management of unpredictability by stabilising equity (secondary coding), thus making active participation acceptable, and empathy (positioning), thus showing sensitivity and support for participants' personal expressions. Can dialogic enhancement and management of unpredictability lead to stable structural presuppositions of communication systems?

The second problem regards the sensitivity for all participants' positioning. The structural presuppositions of dialogue should promote an infinite variety of personal expressions, without generating hegemony, and an effective management of conflicts. Can the structural presuppositions of dialogue support contradictions, ambivalences and cacophonous discourses, generated by this infinite variety of personal expressions?

The third problem regards intercultural communication. The structural presuppositions of dialogue should give a positive meaning to expressions of cultural difference, but they are not observed as structural presuppositions of intercultural communication. The structural presuppositions of dialogue should include empowerment of personal choices of active participation; individual participants should be treated as personally responsible for their actions. The structural presuppositions of dialogue should provide the opportunity to produce and recognise personal expressions, and to receive and show personal attention. They should ensure that personal positioning can be adopted by all participants in order to seek attention to their needs in communication systems. By promoting empowerment of and sensitivity for participants who express their personal needs, the structural presuppositions of dialogue should highlight that personal expression is the condition for both the production and hybridisation of identities in communication systems. Therefore, dialogic communication can be “culture-centred” only if it is primarily “person-centred” (Baraldi 2012); by doing so, it produces the dissolution of We-identities, group membership and, finally, of the Us/Them code. Can the structural presuppositions of dialogue promote opportunities to produce, manage and transform cultural differences in communication, without being structural presuppositions of intercultural communication?

To sum up, future research could explore if and to what extent the structural presuppositions of dialogue (1) can guide the autopoiesis of communication systems, and (2) can promote an unpredictable variety of personal trajectories and new narratives, avoiding ethnocentrism and the discursive construction of cultural hegemony. This exploration implies a redefinition of research on intercultural communication, as observation of structural presuppositions of communication systems in their detailed manifestations.

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## Bionote

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