# From intercultural communication to interdisciplinary communication

MIGUEL RODRIGO ALSINA*

# FROM INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION
# TO INTERDISCIPLINARY COMMUNICATION

Any kind of communication involves negotiation between those who intervene to reach agreement over the sense to be given to this discourse. On some occasions it is easy but sometimes it's more difficult. With intercultural communication the difficulty may be considerable, but this may also be the case with communication between distinct theoretic perspectives.

In the first place I'd like to express my thanks to Athanasios Moulakis for reading my article. Any criticism is interesting, because it helps you to reconsider ideas and arguments which you believed were clearly exposed and developed. Of course, if one reads Moulakis' text it becomes clear that he isn't my model reader (Eco 1981). Exactly because of this he is a model reader of great interest for debating and for trying to make myself clear. Moulakis offers me an extremely rich text for discussion. My answer results being very difficult because, I must admit, I feel incapable of responding to each and every one of his assessments or simply to his 39 direct questions which he asked me in the same text in five or ten pages. Some questions, such as, "does modern European civilization constitute *one* civilization?", are worth all the pages I have at my disposal for my answer. Other questions such as, "how, in the epistemological world, does a prejudice differ from a considered judgement?" or the one about objectivity, I believe could be answered by pointing to the pertinent bibliography (Navas 1997) (Maturana 1997). But I cannot guarantee that the bibliographic references are in a language known by my interlocutor (of course, in this case, language is an obstacle for communication and moreover I don't consider my answer to be a list of bibliography. Anyway, I have gathered new biographical references so that my reader may more easily relate to my text.

*Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Miquel.Rodrigo@uab.es

If A. Moulakis believes that I can respond to everything he says in his text in a limited space, he overestimates my capacity of synthesis. Therefore, between answering only one question or almost all of them through bibliography, I have opted for a third solution, which, being the least bad, will leave us both unsatisfied. Moulakis' exposition places me in a difficult position, because the only option I have had is to make a selection. I have had to decide what I answer to and what I do not answer to, following my own criteria, trying to see what Moulakis considers the most important.

Saint Thomas Aquinas affirms "quidquid recipitur, recipitur per modum recipientis". This seems to me clearly exemplified when Moulakis considers that speaking of human necessities I only refer to food and shelter. It is not necessary to remember Shylock's dialogue to know that human necessities encompass more than these two aspects.

As I have already shown, sometimes, interdisciplinary communication is more difficult than intercultural communication because the references from which we depart from can be different or because the sources of authority are valued in different ways. Of course my bibliography is eclectic because it's interdisciplinary. In relation to its quality, I think, "in sua esfera, un suo ordine", for example, Foucault's has as much interest as Schulz's.

In any case, the communicative effort to make myself clear suits me. I'll try to do it, although I don't know if I'll succeed.
I have structured my text in three parts:

a)   acceptable criticisms
b)   misunderstandings
c)   answers to some of the provoking questions

Critics I accept without any doubts.

Of course, it is certain that one could have developed other points and even developed some further ones, but any author knows that in one article he has to make definite choices  which can be more or less fortunate, but which in the end are unavoidable. In this sense he is right when he affirms that I'm not developing the concepts "production modes" and "social organisation" because with the reference to the thinking in which they appear, I intend to point out that you should not fall into cultural reduction. Anyway it is clear that I wanted to say too much in too limited space.

The ambiguity of which I'm accused is sure and assumed, therefore I use the expression of "spirit of time". I think I make myself clear when I say "the spirit of a time can never be defined easily"; or when I affirm "the spirit of a time does not have a definite profile". I think it might be a simplification and a reduction to clame to define "spirit of a time" more precisely, therefore I have opted for ambiguity.

In effect it is certain that somebody brilliant gives form to theories, but let us remember the famous affirmation of Ortega and Gasset ; "I am myself and my circumstances". In my text I would like to emphasize the circumstance, the context. For example, a discipline does not only begin simply because of a brilliant personage, but because of the historical context which allowed its development and the scientific community awaken it. Ritzer (1988:7) considers Abdel Rahman Ibn-Khaldun (born 1332 in Tunez - Christian calendar) as one of Sociology's ancestors. But I think that everybody will agree that the discipline of Sociology was not born in the 14$^{th}$ century.

I think that the challenge of interculturality leads to a form of reflection under tension because it calls for a questioning of one's own thinking. This puts us in a position of inevitable uncertainty as far as our own certainties are concerned, producing an attitude of expectation. As Moulakis rightly points out, this same tension can be detected within my own text. From its very outset, interculturality was a specific way of looking at things comparable to semiotics, ethnomethodology, the school of Palo Alto or constructivism.

I accept that the tone can be, on some occasions, apodictic. Where I write "must", on more than one occasion, there should be "would be". I admit that passion might affect the necessary caution.

Misunderstandings I would like to clear.

I believe that the main misunderstanding has been of pragmatic disposition. Maybe I have not been able to explain the objective of this article in an adequate way, although it seems clear enough to me in the abstract. Anyway I will try again. In my article I seek:

    a)   to point out that there are some significant changes (for the topic of globalisation, see for example Baumann (2001) in the present social reality which invite a rethinking of what was called modernity (for a discussion of modernity I follow Toulmin's line of argumentation).

    b)   to point out that in this context a new field of studies and not a

new theory of intercultural communication is being worked out. One should not confuse intercultural communication as communicative practice with an object of study.

c)    to stress some elements to be taken into account when a process of intercultural communication develops.

As can be duly appreciated I move from the most general to the most concrete. It is important to remember what the intention of the article is, because if one does not, one will analyse it from the wrong point of view.

In my opinion the most serious misunderstanding is produced when one attributes things to me I do not really intend to say. At no point of my argumentation do I speak of a theory of intercultural communication. I simply try to have an intercultural look at distinct, already existing disciplines, without going as far as Fornet-Betancourt (2001). What I actually postulate is the necessity to widen our perspective and to reconsider our present understanding of things. In no way do I seek to establish a theory. I think this is clear enough when I refer to the complex thought of Morin: "it does not try to find a complete knowledge or a unitary theory, but to lead us to find a different way of understanding complex realties".

One last misunderstanding: Moulakis tries to place me where I am not: I am not an anti-rationalist. Is it necessary to remind one that my thoughts stem from rationalism and not from a magical view of reality? Why should criticism of a certain kind of rationalism prevent one from adopting in some aspects a rationalistic point of view?

Some questions I would like to reply to.

I think we agree that constructivism is very useful for analysing how reality is perceived and evidently experience is the key element to this construction. When we accept that experience is basically subjective, although inserted in a permanent process of socialisation, we can reach an agreement. We do not talk collectively and listen individually; we both speak and listen individually from a collective base. What is not pertinent, as a serious argumentative strategy, is to over-accentuate some aspects of another's argumentation while avoiding others because this leads to caricature. It seems to me that Moulakis is falling into dichotomic thinking putting forward the idea that opposed concepts can not be complementary. It is the nature of dichotomic thinking to exclude the opposing position. Comprehensive thinking presupposes the coexistence

of contradictions. It is known that interpretation and discursive production are both social and individual, although my text over-emphasizes the individual aspect of interpretation.

One of the problems in interdisciplinary communication is the lack of common knowledge between the interlocutors. As this text will be published in a scientific journal dedicated to communication sciences it seems inadequate to me to deal with elementary questions of communication. Answers to these problems can easily be found in any manual dedicated to the subject (Rodrigo 2001). But it is essential to remember that within the academic community the discussion of the scientific status of communication studies is not over and done with yet. The well known *Journal of Communication* (summer vol. 43 n°3 and autumn vol.43 n°4) presented a redefinition of the field in 1993, and this one full decade after its first special edition in 1983. In this case they produced two monographic issues with the title "The Future of the Field - Between Fragmentation and Cohesion".

I will allow myself to recall some of the theoretical positions exposed so far. This may be excessive for a specialist in communication, but I deem it necessary so that A. Moulakis will be able to understand in which theoretical context we move as researchers in communication.

When describing the field of communication sciences Sheperd distinguishes three specific positions (Sheperd 1993: 88-91):

a)   the indisciplinary

"This point of view defends communication as an academic object, but it is not by itself a discipline, it is cross-disciplinary." (Sheperd 1993: 88).

b)   the antidisciplinary

For Sheperd (1993: 89-90) this is the most post-modern attitude. It denies that communication is a discipline. In this way the field of communication would not know any boundaries and could develop into any academic domain.

c)   the disciplinary

The authors who defend this point of view proceed to establish the status of a discipline in communication studies differentiating it from other disciplines (Valbuena 1997).

As Levy and Gurevitch (1993:5) point out, in the field of communication we can find centrifugal forces, the strongest exponent of would be the anti-disciplinary point of view, and centripetal forces which either look for a synthesis of different points of view or want to impose a perspective with the aim of establishing a discipline. Graig (1993:26)

emphasizes the following paradox: "As the field has grown and has been consolidated and as the researchers of communication, in the last years, have contributed with more and better original theories, the confusion, the uncertainty, the implicit disagreement and to a lesser degree the explicit controversies between points of view, the forms and functions of theories about communication have increased notably." However, as Graig (1993:26) points out, to understand this situation one must integrate it into the general transformation of the social sciences.

As various authors (Barman 1993) (Davis and Jasinki 1993) point out, we are in a situation of change in which it is necessary to reconsider many of the postulates that have been established by modernity. In this sense, for example, Davis and Jasinski (1993: 142-143) criticise what they consider to be three fundamental assumptions of modernity: radical individualism, the inevitable progress to truth and well-being, and the superiority of modern civilisation. For Davis and Jasinski (1993: 143) "social research, research of communication included, has started to show the limits of modern assumptions, its institutions and its social practices."

For Braman (1993: 138) the problem is the following: "Our approach to information policy, objectives and methods of research in social sciences (…) are an inheritance of a vision about a pre-society of information which does not describe our actual environment in an adequate form." That is to say that the society of information asks for revision of communication sciences. One must explore new concepts, such as virtuality, network, autopoiesis, chaos, etc. (Braman 1993: 139). For these authors (Braman 1993) (Davis and Jasinski 1993) the new social realities put forward a challenge for modernity that this has been unable to solve. Social sciences formulate new concepts and generalizations which do not find an answer in the assumptions of modernity (Davis and Jasinski 1993: 143-144):

1) the individual is a product of communication.

2) the smallest social unit which is best conceptualised is the community and not the individual.

3) the most basic and common function of communication is the production and not the distribution of information.

4) the two main problems in any society are on the one hand, the structure of individual experience (a stable and significant personal identity) and on the other, a large-scale coordination of common endeavour (a social identity).

5) for each individual the social world consists of several superimposed and interrelated realities.

As can be appreciated this position mostly concerns the new communication realities and how they affect the traditional principles of research in communication rather than the building of a discipline of its own. This logically comes up only when one makes a methodological proposal (Bramam 1993:139). This would be interdisciplinarity.

Following this line, O'Keefe (1993:76) considers that "the idea that research of communication is just one single discipline is denied by the history of research and by the very organization of the discipline." This does not mean that in our field no form of consensus has been reached between the different communities of researchers. In this way O'Keefe (1993: 77-79) points out the case of cultural studies, social constructivism and cognitive science. In her opinion no attempt to create a discipline has succeded so far. Moreover, O'Keefe (1993:79-81), in view of the fact that disciplinary coherence has not been achieved, proposes cohesion. Cohesion would imply "sub disciplines tightly woven together adopting a position of respect and protection towards other disciplines, presenting a common front before the rest of the academy" (O'Keefe 1993:80). As O'Keefe remarks, this position allows disciplines of communication to lean upon each other, but there is also the peril that in the academic domain, in which coherence may be an obligatory pre-requisite, communication studies may lose their strength. For this author, however, if we focus on research we will notice that interdisciplinary research-teams are the ones that provide the most precious theoretical and methodological contributions.

In my opinion, the excitement created by this field since 1993 still lasts to the present. I think that all communication researchers are aware that a change in the social sciences in general, and in communication studies in particular, has occurred, which is exactly what Moulakis does not seem to acknowledge. This tension between fragmentation and cohesion surely places us in a situation of inescapable indefiniteness.

When Moulakis approaches the topic of methodology in intercultural studies, he notes that the appropriate methods for intercultural studies are the same as the ones in communication sciences in general. In other words, we are faced with a methodological plurality.

I did not include the history of communication studies in my text, because I thought that it would not be necessary since it is well-known. Anyway, I want to answer A. Moulakis' observation on that matter,

because it allows me to touch upon a basic point. Intercultural communication studies are very recent, as a consequence they cannot consider themselves to be a consolidated discipline, even in the case in which they possess a vocation to convert themselves into a discipline. What we are witnessing are simply the first steps of a reality which considers itself worth studied.

As I already emphasized in my article it is generally accepted that the first to use the term "Intercultural Communication" was Hall in 1959. But it was only consolidated as an academic domain in different universities (Hoopes 1977) in the seventies, in the USA. At the beginning of this decade the Speech Communication Association created a commission for studies in "International and Intercultural Communication", which 1974 started with an annual publication. Nowadays this community is a section ("Intercultural/Development Communication") of the International Communication Association [www.icahdq.org/divisions/intercultural]. Habitually intercultural communication is considered as interpersonal communication and international communication as mass communication. Anyway, the delimitation of the field is still a subject of discussion, since the relationship between the two types of communication has become more and more evident. Some further examples about the history of intercultural communication studies: in France intercultural studies emerged in the mid-eighties, out of an educative concern. As far as Spain is concerned, no such research emerged before the decade of the nineties. Of course we are only talking about the first steps. This means that there is still much to be done. It is necessary, for example, that in the routine discussion of academic communities the concepts be made more concrete. Semprini, for instance, uses "multicultural" where I would use "intercultural" (what I will not do is change his terminology, because of simple scientific rigor). It is necessary to have clear concepts and to suggest this as a subject of discussion in the academic community. I regret not having more space to develop my suggestion to clarify terminology. (Rodrigo 1999: 64- 81)

To put it another way: we are not faced with a theory or a method, but with a social reality, that has become a subject of study asking to be converted into a field of research. In my opinion, and this is the basic thesis of my article, it is the right moment for its consolidation as a field of research for the following motives:

a) Because of a favourable epistemological context. One could speak about a post-modern epistemology (Rosenau 1991)

b) Because of an emergent social reality. One could remember the civil conflicts one is experiencing (Huntington 1997)

c) Because of the social need to know more about intercultural communication. It is not that intercultural communication is in vogue, it is simply a necessity.

d) Because of the existence of researchers who are studying intercultural communication from different perspectives. Evidently, it is still too early to know which is the profile of researchers in intercultural communication, even though my impression is that the panorama will look a lot like communication sciences in general.

In my opinion Moulakis confuses the complex with the complicated. The codes of honour in pre-modern societies can be complicated, but the complexity about which we are talking is something different. I remind you of the quotation of Berger and Luckmamn in my text referring to modern society: "the systems of values and the stocks of meaning are no longer a common heritage for every member of the society. People grow in a world where common values, which fix action in different fields of life, do not exist and where only one identical reality for everybody does not exist." This is complexity.

I totally agree with Moulakis that there are cultural practices which are incompatible with democracy, as for example the death penalty. I said also that one should not confuse cultures with the members of these cultures, because this may end in stigmatisation. When Sartori (2001) points out that a theocratic vision is incompatible with democracy, one can agree, but it is much less arguable, if one says that certain people are incompatible with democracy because they have been brought up in a theocratic society. One should not confuse culture with people. It is sufficient to remember that during the forty years of dictatorship under General Franco Spain was an undemocratic, national-catholic state. However, within this very cultural context the present leaders of the country were born and educated.

I think Moulakis would agree that truth is relative in the sense that it is always revisable by having new data and new interpretations of the existing data. I would like to draw attention to Darwin's Autobiography, where, referring to a theory, he affirmed: "…in accordance to the level of our knowledge in those days, there was no other explanation possible, and my mistake was a lesson to me and taught me never to trust the principle of exclusion in the scientific terrain."

I believe Moulakis makes a mistake in saying that I am waging a battle against rationalism and he is mistaken in saying that I am exaggerating the importance of rationalism. I believe that within the discursive plurality of modernity, in social sciences, it has had a hegemonic role. However, I meant to point out some tendencies taking form in the social sciences, in general and in communication sciences in particular, which question the role of rationalism in some respects.

Anyway, the changes taking place within the history of thinking are very slow. I do therefore not fully agree with Toulmin (1992: 203), when he says that the future will offer two main attitudes: "We may welcome a prospect that offers new possibilities, but demands novel ideas and more adaptive institutions; and we may see this transition as a reason of hope, seeking only to be clearer about the novel possibilities and demands in a world of practical philosophy, multidisciplinary sciences, and transnational or subnational institutions. Or we may turn our backs on the promises of the new period, in trepidation, hoping that the models of life and thought typical of the age of stability and nationhood may survive at least for our own lifetime". I believe that Moulakis does not have to keep his soul in suspense, he can keep calm, as his perspective for sure will be followed, having been the hegemonic one for a very long time.

To end I would like to reiterate that in this type of discussion there is always a certain dose of misunderstanding, because as Mantovani (2001:155) puts it: "(…) when communication involves different research communities some space for misunderstanding can be expected." This, I would add, holds true also in one's own community when setting out from different theoretical positions. Anyway, I believe as well, as Mantonavi does, that one has to build bridges and to thank all those who keep forcing us - even in view of possible difficulties of communication -,to stay alert to our own conceptions.

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