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Sektion 8.14. **Gemeinschaft in Differenz: Kollektive Agenten im interkulturellen Kontext / Community in Difference: Collective Agents in Intercultural Contexts**

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A naturalistic explanation of communication across cultures

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Summary:

In order to understand how communication works across cultures, it is no longer possible to “naturalize” meaning presupposing that the human mind behaves like a “black box”, where intelligence is completely determinate by external linguistic-conceptual schemes every language, or more broadly, every culture owns. The very idea of the existence of radically divergent conceptual schemes entails the absence of a relation of equivalence among sentences in different languages. If there is a difference between conceptual schemes, it could concern the cultural access we have to the world, but, at any rate, we need to share this world and some cognitive capacities. The human mind owns its own structures that cannot be ignored in order to explain the fact that language depends on the creativity of a rich and articulated mind. Consequently, communication can be considered an inferential practice that involves the specific human capacity of mind-reading, a natural ability of intuitively attributing mental states to others and to oneself. In intercultural communication, translation is nothing but a kind of metarepresentation based on an interpretive and context-dependent use of language.

Content:

1. **An intersubjective background**
 - 1.1 Equivalence and conceptual schemes
 - 1.2 A “communicative triangulation”
2. **An attempt to “naturalize” the common background**
 - 2.1 Metarepresentations and intercultural communication
 - 2.2 The interpretive resemblance
3. **A bridge between nature and culture**

3.1 Evolution and human capacity of mind-reading

3.2 A cumulative cultural transmission

Bibliography

1. An intersubjective background

One of the question this paper would try to answer is: “What is a social norm?”. To answer this question, I would assume the central role of communication in explaining social rules and conventions, their similarities and differences across cultures. Above all, I would like to give a naturalistic explanation of how communication works across cultures and how social norms emerge through communication. There are different ways to give a naturalistic explanation of communication across cultures. In analytical philosophy, Willard Van Orman Quine tried to “naturalize” meaning in communication among people, by taking for granted Behaviourism. His famous mental experiment of radical translation attempted to show that a linguist could establish “*some equations*” between sentences of the source language and the target language by observing speakers’ *dispositions to verbal behaviour*.

This way of giving a naturalistic explanation of communication presupposes that the human mind behaves like a “black box”, where intelligence is completely indeterminate: it can be determinate only by an external linguistic structure coming from the different conceptual schemes every language, or more broadly, every culture owns. In translating or in approaching a different culture we cannot assume that *the conceptual scheme of the foreign speaker is equal to our own!* To impose a translation means to attribute a particular segmentation to the language of natives and to their way of seeing the world. One of the major difficulties in translating is the possibility of divergent points of view between members of different cultures.

1.1 Equivalence and conceptual schemes

Quine tries to clarify these difficulties, observing that «*when from the sameness of stimulus meanings of “Gavagai” and “Rabbit” the linguist leaps to the conclusion that a gavagai is a whole enduring rabbit, he is just taking for granted that the native is enough like us to have a brief general term for rabbit stages or parts*» (Quine 1964, 464). The possibility of a dramatic incomparability between cultures, as in the strongest version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, or of the indeterminacy of translation comes from the assumption of the very idea of conceptual scheme, as a “cognitive function” inside language itself. That is why, according to Quine, there is *no relation of equivalence* among sentences that give a translation of the same sentence in any language. As Quine explains, in countless places translation manuals «*will diverge in giving, as their respective translations of a sentence of the one language, sentences of the other language which stand to each other in no plausible sort of equivalence relation however loose*» (Quine 1960, 27). Aside from the well-known limits of Behaviourism, I would like to explain why I cannot accept this kind of naturalistic explanation of communication across cultures. By giving another kind of naturalistic explanation of communication, I would propose the possibility of finding an “equivalence” among cultures (Cfr. Pujja-Ervas 2005).

Quine’s experiment had the task to “make radical” the conditions in which translation happens, to dig out the mechanisms and the difficulties implied in the comprehension of a foreign language and culture. A central problem of Quinean philosophy taken up by Donald Davidson was that of describing what is “the same meaning” in different languages and cultures. He believes this problem concerns every kind of translation, not only the *interlinguistic translation* (between different languages) but also the *intra-linguistic translation* (within the same language) (Cfr. Quine 1969; Jakobson 1959). Even when we communicate with a speaker in our same language, we might wonder what makes us sure he gives our words “the same meaning” we give them:

On deeper reflection, radical translation begins at home. Must we equate our neighbour’s English words with the same strings of phonemes in our own mouths? Certainly not; for sometimes we do not

thus equate them. Sometimes we find it to be in the interest of communication to recognize that our neighbour's use of some word, such as "cool" or "square" or "hopefully", differs from ours, and so we *translate that word of his* into a different string of phonemes in our idiolect (Quine 1969, 46).

This is the kind of translation to which, according to Quinean perspective, we could apply an *homophonic translation manual*, a system of rules that directly correlates to each linguistic expression a linguistic expression in the same language. Also in this case, according to the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, it is permissible to translate expressions of our interlocutor without a homophonic manual, incompatible with the homophonic one, but legitimate.

Understanding another person *always* requires a "radical" interpretation, whether she speaks our native tongue or a language we do not know. In Davidson's words:

The problem of interpretation is *domestic* as well as *foreign*: it surfaces for speakers of the same language in the form of the question, how can it be determined that the language is the same? Speakers of the same language can go on the assumption that for them the same expressions are to be interpreted in the same way, but this does not indicate what justifies the assumption. All understanding of the speech of another involves *radical* interpretation (Davidson 1984, 125).

At the base of the interpretation of a speaker's linguistic utterances in our native tongue, there are mechanisms and difficulties very similar to those connected to the comprehension of foreign utterances. The question on translation is "radical", because it concerns the *conditions of possibility* of translating (Cfr. De Caro 1999). At this level, Davidson explains why there cannot be a radical difference between conceptual schemes. Following Davidson's theory, I think that using the word "radical" to suggest a complete incomparability of cultural systems is misleading. Because if we state that the incomparability is complete, we should in some way have already compared them against a common background:

The dominant metaphor of conceptual relativism, that of differing points of view, seems to betray an underlying paradox. Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability (Davidson 1984, 184).

So we cannot use the word "radical" to hint at a difference that makes translation impossible.

Difference in translation is a *matter of degree*, and it can be understood only if it remains "local": «*We can be clear about breakdowns in translation when they are local enough, for a background of generally successful translation provides what is needed to make the failures intelligible*» (Davidson 1984, 192). Only "untranslatabilities" that are projected on a background of successful translation make sense. Just as a massive error would not help us to focus on a *significant* disagreement, an excessive level of untranslatability would not lead us to catch the difference between languages. While supporters of the conceptual relativism believe that «*the test of difference – among conceptual schemes and so among languages – remains failure or difficulty of translation*» (Davidson 1984, 191), Davidson believes the *criterion of identity* of a natural language lies in its *translatability* into another one (Cfr. Forster 1998).

I do not believe this means, as Hacking seems to point out, that claiming that the silent, presupposed agreement can be useful only for the interpretation of speakers' more trivial utterances (Cfr. Hacking 1986), because we are talking about a common background as a condition of possibility of communication across cultures. In my opinion, we should still recognize that understanding is *in principle* possible because both speaker and interpreter are human beings. Based on this premise, we can understand the differences. But without it, every difference would be meaningless, or every difference could not even be recognized as such. I believe Ian Hacking's perplexity toward Davidson's proposal and Hans-Georg Gadamer's insistence on the existence of a "radical difference" between "horizons" could come from an ethical point of view (Cfr. Gadamer 1960). Gadamer was especially

concerned about the reduction of the “other” to the “self” and he needs to postulate a “radical” difference that cannot be eliminated also for dialectical reasons (Cfr. Sparti 1994; Greblo 1996; Ervas 2003).

1.2 A “communicative triangulation”

If there is a difference between conceptual schemes, it could concern the cultural access we have to the world, but, at any rate, we need to share this world and some cognitive capacities typical of the human mind (Cfr. Marconi 2007). In my opinion, the problem lies instead in understanding the characteristics of human nature that we share. Thus the problem of translation leads philosophical inquiry to another question: «*what, more exactly, is it that we detect when we recognize a creature or object as a thinking being?*» (Davidson 2004, 136). When can we say that a creature is thinking? At a deeper level, translation raises a philosophical question not only about the problem of understanding others, but also about the nature of thought itself. Davidson answers this question stating that thought is linked to the possibility of recognizing error, but that this possibility comes only with a “*communicative triangulation*”, whose apexes are represented by the *interpreter*, the *speaker* and a *shared world*.

Triangulation also creates the space needed for error, not by deciding what is true in any particular case, but by making objectivity dependent on intersubjectivity. [...] The point of the study of *radical* interpretation is to grasp how it is possible for one person to come to understand the speech and thoughts of another, for this ability is basic to our sense of a world independent of ourselves, and hence to the possibility of thought itself (Davidson 2004, 143).

The knowledge of the world essentially depends on the fact that it can be shared with others through language. Thus to own a concept of objectivity, we need to communicate with others and to know what they think and believe (Davidson 1991, 60). Only here we can state a *normative dimension* of communication: we can recognize an error only if there is an inter-subjective space governed by some social rules, according to which an error can be recognized as such.

But the description of how this communicative triangulation works seems to become more and more complex when it is applied to a cultural-literary context. In his essay “Locating Literary Language”(1993), the description of how this communicative triangulation works is applied to translation of texts, where the triangulation of interpreter, speaker and world turns into the triangle writer, reader (or translator) and common background created by the text:

The objectification of parts and aspects of the world which is made possible by intersubjective triangulation is appropriate to the origins of language and to what I have called “radical interpretation”. But how does the primordial triangle bear on literature? On the one hand it is clear enough that the elements of the triangle remain: writer, his audience, and a common background. But the distances between the elements have lengthened, the connections have become attenuated and obscure (Davidson 2005, 303).

In this case, we can say a reader also can be a “radical translator”, especially when reading involves the understanding of the creative and productive power of language, as in William Shakespeare, Dante Alighieri and James Joyce (Cfr. Davidson 2005, 159-165). They take their reader back «to the foundations and origins of communication» and they put him «*in the situation of the jungle linguist trying to get the hang of a new language and a novel culture*» (Davidson 2005, 157). The “*radical reader*” somehow understands the meaning of what the author has written, creating this meaning in a “common conceptual space”. By continuously adjusting his “passing theories”, the reader comes «*into retrospective dialogue with the text, and through the text with the author*» (Davidson 2005, 162) and his culture.

2. An attempt to “naturalize” the common background

But what is the nature of this common inter-subjective background that makes social normativity possible? I would propose another attempt to “naturalize” normative aspects of communication, to provide a scientific explanation of the nature of social norms that guide communication and how they are represented by the human mind as part of nature. Within this theoretical approach, this paper would focus particular attention on public language and its use in communication, because language use plays a fundamental role in the expression and communication of thoughts among people, in what Davidson called “communicative triangulation”. Moreover, intercultural communication is not a process of coding and decoding, as Behaviourism claimed.

In his essay “A nice derangement of epitaph”(1986), Davidson describes the search for equivalence as an attempt to bring continually into action our expectations in the single communicative encounter according to incoming information, to obtain in translation an actual and concrete agreement with our interlocutor. The interpretation is no longer a mechanical process governed by a clearly defined set of rules and conventions learned before their infinite cases of application. Davidson himself compares such theory to a “machine” that seems to make language a

complex abstract object, defined by giving a finite list of expressions (words), rules for constructing meaningful concatenations of expressions (sentences), and a semantic interpretation of the meaningful expressions based on semantic features of individual words. [...] We tend to forget that there are no such things in the world; there are only people and their various written and acoustical products (Davidson 2001, 107-108).

The interpretation is instead a gradual process led by the interpreter’s ability to adjust her own solutions according to what the speaker seems to believe and mean. This interpretive process is possible because of a common background, a “basic agreement” or a “deeper equivalence” expressed by Davidson’s principle of translatability (Cfr. Davidson 1984, 183-198) or Jerrold Katz’s principle of effability (Cfr. Katz 1978, 191-234). According to these principles, the translatability would be guaranteed by a “basic cognitive apparatus” that is common to all human beings and enables the interpreter to detect in the speaker’s utterances the similarities that make it possible for them to understand each other.

But what does this “basic cognitive apparatus” look like? It no longer can be considered a general intelligence totally indeterminate inside, and communication cannot be explained by supposing a “cognitive function” of languages. The human mind cannot be considered a “black box”, as Behaviourism claimed. The human mind owns its own structures, as empirical research shows us, that cannot be ignored in order to explain the fact that human language depends on the creativity of a mind not indeterminate, but rich and articulated.

2.1 Metarepresentations and intercultural communication

From this point of view, communication can instead be considered an inferential practice that involves the specific human capacity of mind-reading. As Dan Sperber noted:

Cognitive systems are characterized by their ability to construct and process mental representations. Cognitive systems capable of communicating also produce and interpret *public* representations. Representations, whether mental or public, are themselves objects in the world; they are found inside cognizers and in the vicinity of communicators; they are potential objects of second-order representations or “metarepresentations” (Sperber 2000, 3).

So, understanding this evolved capacity to construct metarepresentations is a way to go to the roots of human sociality, because it allows us to give an explanation of human communication, comprehension, translation and transmission of thoughts in terms of a specific, natural ability of attributing mental states to others and to oneself. The capacity of mind-reading also plays a crucial

role in a child's social and communicative development, because it is the condition of possibility of understanding other people as intentional actors. "Theory of Mind" is the name of the complex set of competences that guide intuitive understanding of other minds. It has its roots in naive psychology or in common sense psychology: the set of ideas human beings own about their minds and their desires, emotions, beliefs and intentions, as main causes of their behaviour.

Consequently, we could ask how metarepresentations work in intercultural communication. In intercultural communication, translation – as a paradigmatic way of communicating among cultures – is nothing but a kind of metarepresentation based on an *interpretive use* of language where it is represented a new, additional utterance built from another one and resembling it in some respects (Cfr. Sperber-Wilson 1986; Gutt 1991). Then, as any utterance may be used to represent another utterance it resembles, any thought may thus be used to represent another thought. So thoughts themselves may be *interpretively used*, or as interpretive representations of other thoughts that they resemble. This mental mechanism constitutes the condition of possibility of communication and constitution of social groups.

In this way, we can give a solution to the problem of the definition of translation equivalence at another level, that requires an explanation of how something new can be created by the translator, by grasping a *resemblance* between sentences of source text and sentences of target text. This solution presupposes a passage from a theoretical account based on an "externalist view" of communicative triangulation, as in Davidson, to an "internalistic view" of communicative triangulation, to a theoretical account based on a translator's competences, as an intercultural communicator. That is why it is fundamental to refer to human mind and its specific capacities.

The object domain of competence-oriented translation research is, therefore, very different from that of input-output-oriented research; since communicative competence is most likely located in the human mind, that is where the focus of the research lies. Source and translated text obviously play important roles, too, but primarily as data that allow conclusions about the mental faculties concerned. [...] The idea is that once these faculties are understood, it is possible to understand not only the relation between input and output, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the communicative effects they have on the audience (Gutt 1991, 205-206).

Adopting a Relevance theoretic approach to translation, we do not aim to build a descriptive-classificatory hierarchy of equivalent values of languages, but rather an explanation of how the translator as an intercultural communicator could communicate something expressed in another language, because translation is nothing but «*an act of communication, an act of interpretive use across language boundaries*» (Gutt 1991, 211).

2.2 The interpretive resemblance

But how can a translator infer from the context speaker's meaning and intention? How can the translator represent the speaker's thought by what she is saying? According to the Sperber and Wilson theory of Relevance, the relationship between what we say and the thoughts we intend to communicate is not one of *equivalence*, but one of *interpretive resemblance*. In Deirdre Wilson's words: «*Interpretive resemblance is resemblance in content: that is, sharing of implications. Two representations resemble each other (in a context) to the extent that they share logical and contextual implications. The more implications they have in common, the more they resemble each other*» (Wilson 2000, 426).

Translation as an interlingual quotation would be a particular case of linguistic metarepresentation, where the translator makes some assumptions about the kind and degree of resemblance involved, since resemblance is context-dependent. As Ernst August Gutt claimed:

Utterances are intrinsically bound up with communication: they exist to convey interpretations; interpretations, however, are dependent on considerations of relevance, and relevance is context-

dependent. Hence the interpretations of utterances are context-dependent. This also means that resemblance between utterances is context-dependent; utterances that resemble one another may not resemble each other in a different context (Gutt 1991, 44).

Above all, a translator has to pay attention not only to *«the fact that two utterances interpretively resemble one another, but that one of them is intended to be relevant in virtue of its resemblance with the other utterance»* (Gutt 1991, 210) in another culture. In order to do this, she should start with the most relevant hypothesis and compute the logical and contextual implications to satisfy her expectation of relevance, trying to maximize the explanation of cognitive effects and minimize the comprehension effort required.

3. A bridge between nature and culture

Thus the condition of possibility of pragmatic communication is the mental mechanism of mind-reading responsible for the building of metarepresentations. Nonetheless, in order to explain the human mental capacity to build metarepresentations as “representations by resemblance”, we need to refine our critical analysis and to understand whether pragmatic interpretation is linked to a metapsychological faculty as a rational, normative, person-level, general-purpose mechanism or to the specific “theory of mind” module (Cfr. Leslie 1987; Leslie 1991; Bloom 2002), a domain-specific, informationally encapsulated capacity subject to selective deficits, as experimental data on autism show (Cfr. Baron-Cohen-Leslie-Frith 1985; Baron-Cohen 1989; Baron-Cohen-Ring-Wheelwright-Bullmore-Brammer-Simmons-Williams 1999).

The first hypothesis would imply a communication process that is too costly in terms of cognitive resources and of competences, while experimental data show that even infants are able to understand conversational implicatures linked to the mental states of their interlocutor. The second hypothesis leaves open to debate how this module could use the regularities available in intentional behaviour and their normative aspects. This issue is crucial because its answer brings with itself some important consequences for the general architecture of mind, about its possible massively modularized state and the subsequent open problem of explaining how it could then be a flexible, creative system (Cfr. Carruthers 2006).

Nonetheless, noting that linguistic communication is the more differentiated kind of action in the set of intentional behaviour and that there are various levels of metarepresentations involved in inferential comprehension, Sperber and Wilson have proposed the hypothesis of a specialised sub-module of the overall “theory of mind” module. This sub-module would be specifically dedicated to inferential comprehension and would have its own internal mechanisms and basic knowledge (Cfr. Sperber-Wilson 2002). The principles proposed by Relevance theory to explain regularities in inferential communicative behaviour provide an explanation of the possible mechanisms of this dedicated sub-module, which underlies representations by resemblance that make the comprehension of speaker’s meaning possible.

The tendency of humans to seek relevance and the exploitation of this tendency in communication, provide the justification for a dedicated comprehension procedure. This procedure, although simple to use, is neither trivial nor easy to discover. So how can it be that people, including young children, spontaneously use it in communication and comprehension, and expect their audience to use it as a matter of course? Our suggestion has been that relevance-guided inferential comprehension of ostensive stimuli is a human adaptation, an evolved sub-module of the human mind-reading ability (Sperber-Wilson 2002, 21).

Would this sub-module be able to explain the regularities in our ability to find out the relevant resemblances suitable to communicative context and responsible for a successful communication

process? Far from being confirmed by experimental pragmatics, the hypothesis of the existence of a sub-module dedicated to inferential comprehension must also interact with the plausible hypothesis of the existence of various other sub-modules that belong to the complex macro-module of mind-reading. One of these sub-modules could be the sub-module responsible for the capacity of joint-attention, a necessary condition to begin acquiring language lexicon, but also a condition to select relevant information from particular communicative situations.

3.1 Evolution and human capacity of mind-reading

We could wonder why the human mind is specifically characterized by such a complex linguistic-communicative and metapsychological capacity. A possible answer to this question could come from an evolutionary perspective: the mechanism of socialization would have exerted a strong selective pressure on the development of such a capacity. Adopting a naturalistic and continuistic point of view, we could show how – even if at a much lower degree – this capacity can also be found in other animal societies, as shown by research on chimpanzees' acquisition of sign language or their capacity of tactical deception (cfr. Seidenberg-Petitto 1978; Byrne-Whiten 1991).

Nevertheless, I would also point out how their linguistic-metapsychological capacity is extremely rigid, while the human capacity for language and mind-reading reaches such a refined level as to create a virtuous circle between language and metapsychology that allows more complex forms of socialization. Consequently, it becomes more and more important to understand what kind of relationship between language and mind-reading is typical of human beings. Evidence from evolutionary psychology leads us to state that language evolution has made communication more and more successful, even if all communication rests on the inferential practice of mind-reading:

Language as we know it developed as an adaptation in a species already involved in inferential communication, and therefore already capable of some serious degree of mindreading. In other terms, from a relevance theory point of view, the existence of mindreading in our ancestors was a precondition for the emergence and evolution of language (Origgi-Sperber 2000, 165).

So the adaptive value of public language depends on its use in communication and presupposes an already evolved capacity of constructing and processing metarepresentations of behaviour. Nevertheless, following the hypothesis of a *coevolution* of linguistic and cognitive capacities, language – as a rebound effect – plays a crucial role in the process of constituting metarepresentations themselves (Cfr. Ferretti 2007).

The human capacity for mind-reading is virtuously linked to language and to a kind of information processing based on relevance principles. In this way, it reaches such a refined level that it cannot be compared to animals' corresponding capacity. In this theoretical perspective, the intuitive capacity of reading people's intentions, desires and beliefs is the condition of possibility of a social intelligence that makes culture possible. The successful solutions of social intelligence are those that offer the major cognitive effect because of their relevance to a certain context. In that context, they spread themselves and they are communicated, becoming the "culture" of the social group of that context. Moreover, these solutions can be translated and carried through the boundaries of generations or different cultures. In this sense, it is possible to build a bridge between nature and culture and to give a naturalistic explanation of communication across culture without falling into an unexplainable dualism.

3.2 A cumulative cultural transmission

The human capacity for mind-reading explains why human beings are able to share their cognitive resources in a way totally inaccessible to other animals. But, as Michael Tomasello shows (Cfr. Tomasello 1999), if human beings start from individual cognitive abilities, then they transform them into new cognitive abilities at a cultural level, by sharing them at a social level. And this cultural cumulative process would not happen in a *evolutionary* period of time, but in an *historical* one. In every culture,

generations have not only considered useful to creatively interpret world for communicative aims, but they also found a way to transmit interpretations of the world to other generations.

This social transmission is typical of human beings because it is characterized by a “*ratchet effect*” that does not allow to come back in cultural evolution. The new cultural behaviour will be maintained until it will be changed, improved or translated into another culture. Something similar to this “*ratchet effect*” does not seem to exist in non-human animals: what is a characteristic of an individual, even if it could be shared in a small social group, is not transmitted to another generation, nor is there a communication of a new characteristic across different groups. So, the existence of many varieties of cultures created by this kind of cumulative cultural transmission among social groups is specifically human. But, as this paper tried to show, this human specificity grounds on a specific cognitive capacity that animals do not own. That is why we can state that animals’ sociality is so different exactly *because of* the relationship between (inter)cultural communication and mind-reading typical of human beings.

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8.14. Gemeinschaft in Differenz: Kollektive Agenten im interkulturellen Kontext / Community in Difference: Collective Agents in Intercultural Contexts

Sektionsgruppen | Section Groups | Groupes de sections

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