Deconstructing Culture
Towards an Interactional Triad

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Abstract

How may culture be defined? Numerous works and important contributions have been answering this crucial question for the past thirty years; yet the problem remains unsolved. When taking a close look at 'intercultural communication', we may see that some utterances might not be *that* cultural at all. If we have a clear definition of 'intercultural communication', then what is 'intra-cultural communication' (Winch 1997, Ma 2004)? Is there really a sharp difference between these two concepts and is miscommunication necessarily 'cultural' when implying individuals or groups from alleged different cultural backgrounds? We will study various examples and try to separate the cultural from the non-cultural by taking a close look at intercultural and intra-cultural miscommunication, insofar as their definitions seem to ultimately cover the same conceptual maps. After this first step, we will deconstruct the concept of culture, as it has been defined by scholars in various research fields over the last decades; we will thus see that culture might not be a set of shared values or behaviours (Knapp & Knapp-Pothoff 1990; Scollon & Wong Scollon 2001): culture may only be a very personal variable of a complex, strangely organized and experimental toolbox (Kay 1999) which would constitute a product of our education, psychology, social encounters and language and would only remain activated through particular contexts. This exploration will eventually be followed by a proposal for a redefinition of 'culture' as a concept, based on interactional pragmatics, contextics (Castella 2005) and a triadic declension of this very concept with three notions: *bathyculture*, *dramaculture* and *osmoculture*.

Keywords: *culture, intercultural, intra-cultural, communication, interaction*

Intercultural Vs. Intracultural Miscommunication

In many ways, intercultural misunderstandings often focus on social habits which we may consider as "normal" or "obvious". In this sense, past and current research exposes differences between cultures by looking at such habits in order to explore their various definitions (Hofstede 2001; Scollon, Wong Scollon 2001; Heringer 2004; Lüsebrink 2005), which may lead to the following thinking:

- When misunderstandings (**M**) imply people with different cultural backgrounds (**C1** or **C2**, for instance), these misunderstandings are labelled as *intercultural* (**M(IC)**) and therefore exist as *and mainly as* *intercultural* phenomena;
- In this perspective, this intercultural misunderstanding (**M(IC)**) is explored and understood by looking *mainly* at cultural differences (**C1** or **C2**);
- Eventually, further unsuccessful communication may be avoided thanks to an expansive knowledge of cultural elements (**C1** or **C2**).

We may use the following formula in order to formalize this pattern:

- *if* **M (C1 + C2)**, *then* **M = M(IC)**.
- *in order to understand* **M(IC)***, learn to know* **C1** *and* **C2**.
- **C1** *and* **C2** *may avoid* **M(IC)**.

As we will see, this logical train of thought may be considered as naive if we compare intercultural to intracultural misunderstandings. In order to explore this perspective, we will propose interactional examples dealing with time, physical contact, visual contact and terms of addresses.

Time

The perception of time or, more specifically, the perception of lateness is defined as a relevant cultural marker. It has been studied in various contexts since at least Edward T. Hall's studies on the matter (Hall 1978) and remains a key factor for so-called intercultural misunderstandings. Examples regarding the perception of lateness or punctuality in various cultures (following Hall's African VS. Northern American perception of punctuality for instance) are mostly based on social and almost existential conceptions of time (circularity vs. linearity). Intercultural studies still feed on this anthropological concern, which has led to the definition of monochronic and polychronic types of societies and cultures. The following example is quoted by Emmanuelle de Pembroke et Montgomery and exposes the complexity of the integration of Japanese expatriates in Paris, France (de Pembroke et Montgomery 1996: 250-251):

'Women complain about services and men complain out of solidarity with their spouses. 'Technicians or delivery men won't specify the time, sometimes not even the day. We got used to it and we are not impatient anymore, but in the beginning, it was very difficult for my wife'. (…) One thing is still shocking to them: technicians and delivery men never apologize. To Japanese expatriates, it is unbelievable and beyond understanding. It is not necessarily lateness itselt, but the lack of respect expressed by this attitude which is perceived as frustrating. In fact, in Japan more than elsewhere, punctuality tells about interpersonal respect. If there is a country where the customer is king, it surely is Japan in the first place. (…) For Japanese women, shopping activities are symbols of power and domination. If this is refused to them, these women will have the feeling that they do not matter anymore. This lack of respect is particularly hurting them because it reaches to their identity. Some expatriated Japanese women (…) have stated that they simply went to pieces and burst into tears during one of these misunderstandings'[i].

This strong emotional reaction is related to the perception of a personal identity being threatened by an unusual or unwished behavior. In this sense, emotions seem to be triggered by the perception of this very threat. The context is clear, as Japanese women, according to de Pembroke et Montgomery, seem to have a strong cultural grip on shopping activities. In this sense, we understand that their area of power is being aggressed by something that they cannot explain. Still, this emotional response does not mean that every Japanese woman would have had the same reaction. First, what is the social area or level of these expatriated women? Second, would all Japanese women feel this threatened? Could this negative explosion of emotions be simply related to the stress generated by the expatriation itself and the discovery of a whole different country with different habits and ways of conceiving and perceiving social behaviors?

Another question needs to be asked though: if a Japanese woman feels that this situation should not be tolerated, what about French people? Could this situation only be intercultural and not intracultural? To be objective, lateness is never particularly liked; it is simply tolerated to various degrees. As a French man, I have myself experienced this kind of situation: did I told myself "this is completely normal: he's French, I'm French too so everything is fine and he's allowed to be late"? Surely not, and as a scholar, I cannot assume that my reaction would be related to some kind of "Frenchhood" or cultural explanation. People have various tolerances regarding lateness or punctuality, and if cultural models do play certain roles in our conceptions of time, these conceptions may be altered depending on the very individual. Comparing intercultural and intracultural patterns for the same interaction lead us to the same conclusion: there could be no difference at all in terms of reaction and tolerance. Furthermore, there are many kinds of situations during which the perception of lateness may be perceived as a relevant trait:

- Lateness towards friends;

- Lateness in professional situations;
- Lateness towards colleagues;
- Lateness in the family, etc.

It could even be posited that whatever the place, lateness in a professional environment is legally and socially unwished, while being late at a social meeting with friends may not be considered as that big of a deal. Having myself asked Japanese students about this very example[ii], I was very surprised to see that to them, as young women and men, there was no real problem about punctuality, especially between students. Tolerance or intolerance about lateness could then be a matter of social context and even of generational habits. In this perspective, "culture" as a set of habits is only a parameter among others: it should not be overestimated for the purpose of so-called intercultural studies. Moreover, in this very case, there may be little or even no difference between intercultural and intracultural situations.

Physical contact

Another cultural dimension clearly affects the perception of the human body and particularly the social distance and contact between our imagined physical personalities. According to various works (Hall 1978; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1998; Hofstede 2001), cultures evolve through various ethoses which clearly impose the rhythm of social life. In this sense, physical contact traditionally stands in the ethos of "distance VS proximity" in terms of actual psychological embodiment. It is for instance often reported that cultures from Southern Europe may have a tendency to increase and maintain the frequency of physical contacts and could thus be labelled as "warm", "friendly" and "enthusiastic". However, if we take a closer look at intracultural and intercultural differences, we may observe that this feeling might in fact reinforce stereotypes about the alleged hospitability of certain societies.

To this extent, we wish to use a vivid example mentioned by Loveday which also depicts the misunderstandings surrounding physical contacts (Loveday 1986: 111) and stresses out the need for individuals to interpret behaviours in a cultural way:

> « When I had finished my first hour of teaching and was preparing to leave the classroom, an American coed called out to me. She was taller than me and looked quite imposing to me as she started walking to me. As I watched, she came closer and closer until it seemed that I would touch her if I raised my hand. It was my first class and I had no confidence about how it had gone so that, even though she did not look angry, I wondered if she might not be going to complain about something. Her facial expression was not at all that forbidding, but she came so close to me that I involuntarily took a step backward. But when I did that, she took another step closer to me. I felt like I was being pursued by that tall student towering over me, and I retreated a second time. However, the blackboard was behind me so that I could not withdraw any further. I felt uneasy and made an effort to smile... But she obviously moved closer once again and said she had a question... This experience was an unsettling one for me because the distance between us was much shorter than that normal between a Japanese man and woman ».

In this case, various interpretations allow this Japanese teacher to think that he is precisely experiencing awkward interculturality through distance management. His reaction does not indicate if he comes to his conclusions because he is indeed aware of these cultural differences, which may already shape his mind. In order to examine this case, some elements need to be delimited:

- The alleged physical appearance of the student (which may already alter the teacher's representation of this "tall" girl);
- Is this girl's behavior really representative of all American students? We do not know if in other cases, this student may also trouble American teachers;
- Which social group or ethnic group is this student part of?
- Is this Japanese teacher also representative of other Japanese colleagues who may not have reacted the same way?

Many parameters are actually missing in order to understand the whole contextual occurrence of this situation: a teacher's emotions and feelings remain insufficient and his cultural representations are actually based on such feelings (Frijda 2003).

We wish to make another description in order to take a closer look at the diversity of contact situations according to various social groups in different countries. Comparing French and German students, for instance, produces clear information about the supposed "coldness" of the North and "warmth" of the South. For example, what is likely to happen if students meet for the first time in both countries?

- In France, students may shake hands (boy-boy) or give kisses on the cheeks (the traditional "bise"; boy-girl or girl-girl);
- In Germany, students may engage greetings without any physical contact at all – or maybe only by waving to each other.

In this case, French students seem much friendlier. Yet, if we examine established relationships within students, the tendency tends to be reversed:

- In France, shaking hands and giving the "bise" still remains a preferable choice, along with a "check" (an elaborate code of physical signs mostly performed with hands and hugs and between boys);
- In Germany, the situation may radically change with the choice of a warm and long hug.

To sum it up with a question: where is the French warmth and where has the German distance gone? In the case of long relationships, German students seem to act more "Mediterranean" than French students may do. Yet in this case, we only mentioned a very precise social group. However, even in France, intracultural differences remain when it comes to greetings: if someone chooses the "bise", how many kisses on the cheek does one have to perform? It depends on the region, on the social group and most of all on the person. One may even meet French people who do not like physical contact at all and may avoid the traditional "bise" or use the same greeting as German students who are meeting for the first time. In this sense, an in-depth approach may blur the traditional limits between intercultural and intracultural expressions.

Visual contact

Cultural stereotypes do not disappear easily and for many teachers of the CIDEF (Centre international d'études françaises) of the Université Catholique de l'Ouest (Angers, France), Japanese students have been expected to not look their teacher in the eye. However, this alleged cultural practice is everything but a salient norm among Japanese students (Nakai 2002). One may suggest that if they study French in France, they may in fact adopt French codes regarding visual contact: still, if we ask some of these students to explain visual contacts, their first reaction is surprise. Some of them really look their teacher in the eye, and some teachers acknowledge this fact. In this very case, intercultural frontiers tumble and supposed behaviours may not happen at all. Thus, intercultural studies may reinforce stereotypes by developing a comprehensive list of expected behavioural tendencies while everyday interactions do not necessarily use this general pattern, even in the case of visual contact, which remains an essential part of everyday communication (Conein, 1998). Although social or psychological variables do influence the way individuals may perceive and produce visual contact, contextual parameters should not be omitted. In the perspective of intercultural studies, it is even likely that "the observer takes part in the creation of what they are observing"[iii] (Cyrulnik 1995: 24).

An additional example may be taken into account if we take a closer look at the frequency of visual contact. Important links between the Université Catholique de l'Ouest (Angers, France) and the IRIS[iv] (Research Institute for the Implication of French Sign Language) indicate that French deaf people actually increase their need of visual contact. It is relatively easy to notice it when comparing with the visual contact non-deaf French people may produce. Of course, deaf people need to compensate for the loss of hearing, thus mobilizing other senses, such as sight or even the sense of touch. Pragmatically speaking, deaf people need to look at their interactional partners in order to converse in sign language; looking at hands and facial expressions is essential if they wish to understand the

message and produce an answer. In this case, it may be due to deaf culture; still, this culture is also based on a handicap implying physical and pragmatic consequences on everyday communication and the use of sign language. Furthermore, if non-deaf and deaf people meet, non-deaf people may in return increase the duration and frequency of visual contact, particularly if they both use the same sign language, in order to maintain communication. Thus, if they experience a difference between them regarding their use of visual contact, does this really have an intercultural basis? Moreover, do all deaf people have the same use of visual contact? Are there differences between French, German and Chinese deaf people? Again, the interactional situation should not be reduced to simple intercultural extrapolations which tend to classify behaviors according to statistical observations. It would be dangerous to forget that communication springs from a very precise interactional environment and a contextual adaptation responding to the need of individuals or groups, and for the purpose of pragmatic goals.

Verbal terms of address

Language and culture should not be separated when dealing with interactional situations and ways of communicating. If culture has to be explored as a set of shared habits which organizes social life (we will explore further definitions in the next part of this paper), language also plays a significant part in the way individuals and groups organize their collective thoughts, needs and semantic implications. Therefore, it may be interesting to compare verbal terms of address in both French and English in order to understand how so-called intercultural differences may actually spring from other human phenomena.

- in English, the usual "you" represents the main verbal term of address (old-fashioned "thou" is actually hardly used in everyday interactions);
- in French, both "tu" and "vous" define relationships in terms of address: "tu" may imply a closeness in actual relationships, while "vous" marks distance in case of first meetings, professional relationships or generational and social differences (student/teacher, young person/old person, etc.).

Various linguistic works have explored these differences and the purpose of this work is not to relate to the details of such observations, although they remain ultimately relevant. According to the language, terms of address are declined through different forms: "three in Portuguese, five in Japanese, six in Tamul and Korean; Korean also has multiple terms of address for self-designation, whereas French remains limited to the one and only 'je'" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1996: 73) [v]. In this sense, defining relationships is closely linked to linguistic and grammatical forms, while cultural habits and variables may remain a mere consequence of these grammatical forms. Terms of address (or relationemes) effectively imply social rapport, yet it would be inaccurate to state that culture alone defines social relationships. This position is to be linked to the concept of *languaculture* (Agar 1994) which actually merges cognitive and social effects of both language and culture, because of a "necessary tie between language and culture" (Agar 1994: 60) and their intertwined views of the world. In this perspective, it may even be posited that "culture starts when you realize that you have got a problem with language, and the problem has to do with who you are" (Agar 1994: 20). In this sense, the French "tu" and "vous" may represent an important problem for non-native speakers, since this problem is not really entirely linguistic, but rather essentially cultural.

In this sense, terms of address are not only a matter of language. In Belgium, Switzerland or Québec for instance, the use of "tu" between strangers is more likely to happen than in France, even in everyday interactions. If French people are shopping in Brussels for instance, they may expect to hear a traditional and polite "vous", which is the norm in France when it comes to respect between strangers in a classic customer/seller relation. However, this expectation will be deceived when French customers are suddenly addressed with "tu", which may be perceived as a marker of disrespect and irrelevant familiarity. In this very case, where is language? Where is language use? Where is culture? Where is social rapport? In France as well, depending on the context and the people, the use of "tu" and "vous" is not linear at all. It is also the case between teachers and students at universities: teachers may say "vous" or "tu" to their students, and in some cases, some students even say "tu" to their teachers. We posit that limits and definitions get blurred when it comes to interactional contexts and individual choices. A pragmatic approach of intercultural encounters shows that our behaviors may be closer to a distant culture than to the actual "source-culture" we might be relying on.

The deconstruction of the concept of culture

The comparison between intercultural and intracultural situations shows that the definition of culture may be a relevant problem. If there sometimes is no pragmatic difference between intercultural and intracultural situations, then there must be a need to redefine the concept of "culture" as a set of shared habits and values. In order to produce this new definition, we wish to explore various descriptions of the concept of "culture" as posited by different scholars.

Culture and society

In the middle of the 20:th century, anthropologists and sociologists tried to delimit the concept of "culture" after having analyzed the differences between everyday practices and social organization. In this perspective, one of the first definitions of culture has been proposed by Goodenough (1964: 36):

> *"A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves"*.

Current definitions of this concept are still heavily influenced by Goodenough, Hall or Lévi-Strauss, among others. In this sense, "culture" is perceived as the meaningful link between beliefs and practices, focusing on the need to be recognized by other group members, in order to feel part of a common social project. Yet in Goodenough's definition, the codes of culture seem to be applied almost consciously by individuals, in order to maintain a form of group cooperation. In a certain way, this approach seems to remain utterly functional and does not underline the hidden dimensions of culture, as Edward T. Hall named them. But do individuals really control these beliefs and practices? What does happen when these beliefs and practices change? Does it happen collectively or individually? How do individuals adapt when beliefs and practices do not match certain situations? Furthermore, it is important to add that intracultural differences also do exist; in this sense, beliefs and practices may not always be shared.

A second definition posited by Knapp and Knapp-Pothoff (1990: 65) defines culture as "a more or less shared core made of images of the world, representations of values, manners of thinking, norms and conventions"[vi]. If we compare Goodenough's work to Knapp and Knapp-Pothoff's definition, two ideas become central when it comes to a definition of culture:

- for Goodenough, it is important to be "acceptable" to other members of a cultural group; thus, what happens when a cultural variable becomes unacceptable to certain members in a certain situation?
- for Knapp and Knapp-Pothoff, culture is "more or less shared", which indicates that there is no golden rule which would define the "core" as a whole.

However, in both definitions, culture seems to appear as a golden cage imprisoning individuals and erasing any possibility of choice. In this sense, it is hard to tell if a person would be able to choose different beliefs, practices, norms or values and still be accepted at the same time. Is culture really a holistic pattern conditioning every movement in our lives, springing from the "more or less shared core" defined by Knapp and Knapp-Pothoff? What is conscious or not in culture and what happens when cultural items change and societies evolve? Unfortunately, Goodenough and Knapp and Knapp-Pothoff seem to describe a rigid conception of culture.

Culture and cognitive semantics

The sociological and anthropological point of view has to be completed by a semantic approach which tends to define culture as a need to define meaning in everyday life. In this perspective, culture does not only organize social life or give basic clues for daily routines; it clearly reveals life as a shared activity. This position is delimited by Carmel Camilleri (1989: 27):

> *"Culture is a more or less tight set of acquired significations, which tend to be the most persistent and most shared for a group; depending on their affiliation, group members will prevalently distribute these significations through environmental and individual stimuli. Thus, attitudes, representations and common behaviors will be inferred according to these stimuli, and group members will tend to reproduce them through non genetic ways"[vii].*

Camilleri presents a situational and semantic approach (relatively close to pragmatic developments) and explores the duality of stimulus and signification inside the very conception of culture. This ecological definition underlines the fact that an environment is needed for the emergence of cultures. Thus, culture is no longer a shared set of habits, but a way of making sense of the world and its collective experiences, which also implies an important cognitive dimension. However, this definition does neither explain the roots of signification, nor the need of reproduction; both functions are mentioned without a clear conceptual integration, leaving individuals or groups to the blind mechanics of cognitivism, insofar as the "black box" metaphor seems to work through the "stimulus/signification" duality; the only explanation of this mechanism would be the pressure of the environment and the sheer existence of cognitive reflexes. In this case, emotions as motivational states (Frijda 2003) are unfortunately left aside, along with situational contexts which are not even mentioned in Camilleri's definition. In his perspective, culture seems to be operating as a fixed and delimited filter, leaving no choice to individuals and trapping them in a mechanical functioning.

Culture and psychology

Intercultural interactions have been explored by psychologists as a social and personal expression of problems linked to the management of differences, individual and collective evolution and the very need to make sense in human life. In this sense, unlike other approaches, psychological works are much more linked to relationships and emotions, even if André Sirota (1998) is still influenced by anthropology:

> *"In an anthropological sense, culture represents the ability to live, think and act and is provided to individuals as an adaptation to their environment, also offering them the ability to creatively transform themselves and the world. Through culture, individuals are provided with a device which allows them to think and imagine society, their place and relation to it, as well as relationships between individuals themselves. Culture allows individuals to communicate with their environment and grants them social integration through shared work and techniques. Human beings seek the other, the group and the society in order to achieve, through cultural construction, the goals which they cannot reach on their own, due to their human incompleteness"[viii].*

Although the author clearly reveals the individual dimension of cultural expression, "culture" as a concept is still represented as a stable entity or "device" which determines everyday life, including every relation emerging between individuals themselves. In this perspective, psychology defines "culture" as an useful tool, which may explain individual symbolism and personal problems, thus simplifying the complexity of humanity. Moreover, culture is not defined through its very rapport towards individuals, although Sirota strongly underlines the need of taking relationships into account when it comes to defining human habits and needs.

Culture as a contextual toolbox

The three previous definitions of "culture" may seem incomplete, as they only depict culture as a sheer device operating between individuals and the world. According to Goodenough, Sirota or Camilleri, this device transforms every relation through signification and meaning, yet without explaining the very need of meaning and showing the complexity of this transformation. Thus, we still do not see what may function inside this "black box", because of these three missing parameters:

- individuals as complex cognitive, emotional and motivated living entities;
- social needs as the expression of life as a complex form of organization;
- contexts of cultural expressions, as necessary fields of emergence.

These definitions do not show the sheer complexity of culture, even if it still plays the crucial part Goodenough, Camilleri and Sirota seem to point out to. Even Jacques Demorgon (2004: 37) keeps a structural approach by defining culture as a "construct which remains diversely coded in order to be shared by members of a same society"[ix].

To sum it up, "culture" is mainly represented as semantic and cognitive program which influences individual behaviours, although individuals do create new behaviours every day; if this was not the case, societies would not have evolved for decades or centuries! It still remains unclear if individuals are able to change the program of culture through systemic retroaction. This mechanical conception of culture stands close to the ultra-cognitivist "black box", insofar as culture permits social unity and the reproduction of shared codes, although no author really describes how culture may precisely function in this perspective. Furthermore, this "black box" permits the classification of human activities and operates by maximizing their identification and strict delimitation. However, our daily experience does not seem to follow the same pattern; do we really feel programmed for our daily interactions and behaviours, may they be individual or collective? Moreover, if we see family as an initial cultural experience, a mechanical and structural definition of "culture" may already show signs of failure. Are codes always shared within the same family? Where lies the meaning which is supposed to guarantee social harmony? Moreover, how are disagreements and conflicts produced within the same family, if the basic role of "culture" is to structure and maintain social signification and order? Furthermore, how do we create new social codes? Speaking from a relativist point of view, Paul Kay (1999: 110) asks similar questions and already produces a critical approach of culture by reappraising the anthropological roots of this very concept:

> *"a culture does not provide its holders with a unified theory of the world – a 'world-view' – any more than a language does. Rather, a culture consists in a large array of schemata for representing events and states in the world. Some of these conflict with others. Yet the conflict causes no problem to the culture's users because people do not believe the items of their culture, they use them as occasions permit and require. Accordingly, a culture is like a conceptual tool box, containing tools for making sense of the world. It is not the sort of thing that is itself supposed to make sense, any more than all the contents of a tool box ned to be usable on each job" (...). Cultures do not have to comprise globally consistent world-views, because people never have to employ all of their culture at once. (...) If anthropologists had not assumed that the peoples they went out to study had 'world-views', would they have found them?"*

As many others (Gumperz & Levinson 1999), Kay believes that the concept of "culture" has to be redefined and even reinvented. In his perspective, anthropological roots of this concept seem to hide interactional, contextual and individual needs.

Meanwhile, individuals as group members are the ambassadors of particular behaviours, speech acts or thought patterns; these ways of life may change, evolve or even disappear through individuals only. As a whole, "culture" is always based on social interactions and embedded in various contexts; it is not a depictable entity but a representation of choices made or suggested through ecological items, which also emerge when comparing intercultural and intracultural situations. In a certain sense, some scholars seem to delimit "culture" as linguists might delimit "language": a fixed and multi-faceted object which serves certain goals, rooted in a grammar which only remains flexible through long periods of time and radical collective choices[x]. There is no explicit, conscious and clearly definable manifestation of culture as an isolated and complete whole: what do exist are needs depending on situations and history, may this history be individual or collective. The concept of "culture" needs a pragmatic approach which would mark a radical departure from the paradigms of anthropology: it should not only happen for research purposes, but also because interculturality in the context of globalization is becoming a core subject for the evolution of the contemporary world, when borders between nations, regional entities and social groups are beginning to blur.

Culture as situational expressions: back to basics

"Being interaction"

Each time an intercultural or intracultural encounter happens, it is safer to go back to the basics of interaction. Individuals do act through numerous influences, behavioural possibilities and variable expressions. These interactional elements may be conditioned or delimited by biological, psychological, sociological, linguistic or educational influences, to name but a few. In other words, any interaction is primarily about individuals meeting in precise contexts. As such, individuals themselves are the ever evolving products of various interactions, adding cognitive and emotional impacts to interactions, using sets of habits, possibilities of action, cognitive processes and emotional reactions. In this perspective, interaction may be considered as the basic key to understand the way individuals experience social encounters, with culture only being a variable linked to an interactional definition of the concept (Wagener 2009: 274):

> "Speakers are therefore continually submitted to change and evolution as long as they are living in a particular culture. In fact, speakers are neither interacting with, nor are they in interaction: they are interaction. An individual could be defined as a common ground where many influences and conditionments meet and converse or even an ever evolving beam made of various parameters: education, professional background, sociocultural history, psychology, even moods or biology define people as individuals. They lead them to want what they want, need what they need, desire what they desire. Being interaction themselves, speakers keep moving in an ever changing universe they keep building with the numerous tools they forge from their conditionments and that their conditionments are forging from them."

In this definition, speakers have to be understood as general language users, which also imply listeners or communication receivers. In this sense, culture may be seen as a social and individual cultivation leading to certain patterns of action and choices. This idea is not new, as few researchers, like Scollon and Wong Scollon (2001: 138) have also posited the need to go back to the roots of interaction before applying the filter of interculture to social encounters. Although Scollon and Wong Scollon do not question the very concept of culture, their work still focuses on the emergence of interactions themselves, as pragmatic and ecological expressions. Individuals may experience communicational difficulties, yet this does not necessarily mean that such difficulties are due to intercultural matters, even if these individuals come from different cultures! The intercultural interpretation may be summoned with hindsight by researchers, but the explanation brought by individuals themselves may be a different one, based on social, emotional or psychological reasons. The interpretation permitted by the concept of culture does not bring any specific change to the rules and principles of social interaction (Lüsebrink 2005; Spencer-Oatey 2008).

Multi-faceted operations of communication

We do not posit that anthropological references have not brought anything to the concept of culture, yet we believe that it may be relevant to redefine it before applying it to studies wich may thus be considered as intellectually devious and needlessly simplified. We state that the use of culture as a total determining entity may represent a dangerous premise based on a lack of notional clarity. If we use culture as a concept defined by Goodenough (1964: 36) or Demorgon (2004: 37), then human behaviour may become cultural only, which completely eludes any individual ability of creativity and expression. The cultural model tends to self-validate itself when applied to practical cases, just because any human action may be interpreted through the filter of "culture". Intercultural analysis should not prevail over interindividual analysis, even if in this perspective, "culture" may therefore not play the role confirmed by many theoretical paradigms. This danger is also underlined by Paul Castella (2005: 63):

> "We may all suggest a posteriori explanations about our behaviours when we have to justify them. But when it comes to actions which have not been learned through formal ways, such as the way we distribute ourselves in space, and that we have to justify this behaviour, we do not explain it; we use emotions, esthetics, morality and philosophy in formulations which have nothing to do with the initial phenomenon" [xi].

We may add that some scientific paradigms may also alter the initial development of interactional situations and that it should be taken seriously, because *a posteriori* explanations always colour the observed situation in a particular way. Castella therefore focuses on the concept of "phenomenon" as a central object of study. In this perspective, it would become useful to study the "interactional phenomenon" as a central aspect of social life, before speaking of any cultural explanations which might already alter our comprehension of the initial phenomenon. Furthermore, this position may also be suggested by an "intercultural" example reported by Heringer (2004: 95):

> "A Pakistani waitress working in a self-service restaurant for executives of London's Heathrow airport sometimes has to ask if her guests do want any more gravy for their food. When asking of it, she only says 'gravy?'. After a short while, some customers are complaining of her behaviour: she is seen as very impolite, which is considered by some customers as typical of Asian immigrants' behaviour in general. This waitress gets informed of these complains. She does not understand this world. She only does her work, as they all do. She does not know what may be seen as impolite in her behaviour. She does not change her behaviour. She still asks the same way if guests would like to have more gravy for their food. More people do complain. The trade union starts to mingle. The consequence of this problem is a tense working atmosphere" [xii].

In a previous analysis of this case (Wagener 2008), it has been noticed that a simple case of paraverbal difference had led the different actors of this conflict to summon social (racism inside the workplace) and political explanations and solutions, while the utter root of this fragile interaction was a difference in the perception of prosody. In this case, the conflict had evolved way beyond its initial context. We may even argue that the social climate in this professional group was already ready to undergo this conflictual evolution in any case, due to a clueless manager, a bold trade union and a fragile waitress. Thus, a simple difference in the perception of prosody is not the only parameter to explore in order to understand the interactional situation as a complex whole, yet a precise analysis of the context of emergence might provide an objective explanation which remains closely linked to the pragmatic reality.

Contextics and ways of life

In this perspective, Castella posits that a new way of studying interactions has to be developed in order to preserve an ecological perspective. According to him, this methodology should be called *contextics* and would focus on the study of context as a whole set of parameters interacting for the evolution of an ongoing situation. This methodology may pave the way to various interpretations, but it should be done by preserving it from any social, psychological or cultural inference (2005: 193):

> "[Contextics] observe complexities as systems which remain stabilized through interactions between their basic elements. This concerns cooperative types of social structures which remain free from any form of hierarchy, because there is no primary authority from this systemic point of view. This model is not causal. It does explain what is happening through interactions between elements of a same system but does not grant them any causality" [xiii].

Castella's model is inspired by the basic concepts of systemics (Meunier 2003); the goal of it is to observe ecological phenomena and their very emergence. Social interactions might need this kind of contextic analysis, yet it still needs to be developed as a precise methodology. Still, this approach remains distant from the anthropological concept of 'culture', which would thus remain incomplete in order to analyze the complete environment of interactions between individual beings or social groups. To us, 'culture' too often represents an immutable and fixed construct which remains described as a device used by individuals to live and interact in this world, which hinders any kind of evolution. Moreover, 'culture' often stays defined in a geographical, social or political sphere, which endangers its use as a concept for purposes of separation and confrontation: this may lead to utterly questionable international, national or local decisions. This conception of 'culture' may additionally lead to the dangers of cultural relativism, as mentioned by Kay (Kay 1999). By delimiting cultural spaces, we separate ways of thinking and representing the world, which also hinders the emergence of any holistic humanist approach, despite the fact that these so-called 'cultures' try to provide various answers to the same human questions, such as "how to love and be loved", "how to live together" or "how to make sense of life and death". Cultures should not only be depicted as coexisting entities which may build bridges through the use of interculturality, yet remain separated and perceived through a

relativist viewpoint, although some cultures might indeed harm human dignity in a very basic way. Last but not least, even the European Council and its *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* (European Council 2008) have trouble defining the concept of culture and do not even mention it in their definition of 'intercultural dialogue'! In order to propose a new definition of the concept of culture, we wish to refer to interactional parameters:

- a 'culture' is collective or individual: any individual human being also uses or lives through behaviours and values of their own, insofar as they express the singular emergence of their various personal influences;
- a collective 'culture' does not necessarily need any ethnic, local, political or linguistic limit: a collective 'culture' may be best described as a set of shared behaviours and values owned or used by members of a certain group (family, workplace, association, friends, couple, etc);
- the concept of 'culture' may refer to the representation of expressions blossoming from an interactional loam, insofar as interactions remain the nurturing ground of individual expressions and common objects: a culture thus remains rooted in different parameters, such as education, psychology or social inheritance;
- thus, every human being owns or uses an ever-evolving fusion of individual cultural traits and collective cultural habits and traditions, which would therefore lead to the ontological pluriculturality of every human being, using 'cultural' answers throughout the various possibilities of interactional and environmental contexts.

In order to refine this definition, we wish to mention Heringer's definition of 'culture', which provides an interesting viewpoint of these elements by defining their various functions (2004: 107):

> "*Culture is a lifeform. Culture is a very particular object. Like a language, it represents a human institution based on shared knowledge. Culture has been created and has evolved through common human activity. It has not been wanted. It would be like the production of an invisible hand. It is a potential for common and meaningful activities, yet this potential only appears through performance and execution. Finally, this potential is created through performance*"[xiv].

Although we may disagree with the collective limits of Heringer's conception of 'culture', we wish to point out the fact that the situational and pragmatic dimension of this definition remains close to our suggestion.

Towards a redefinition of culture

According to these suggestions, we believe that a redefinition of culture would be a necessary step for social sciences. We do posit that this redefinition should be enriched by other research fields. Still, in our perspective, a redefinition of culture would need to point a distinction between culture as a potential (or even as a set of environmental adaptations and choices) and culture as a performance, thus following the definition of language in linguistics. Moreover, we posit that a redefinition of culture may use Heringer's distinction, Castella's contextics and Peirce's pragmatic theories (Peirce 1998), therefore leading to a triadic delimitation of culture:

- *bathyculture* (culture in depth) would refer to the stochastic reservoir owned and used by individuals and groups concerning their behaviours and values, which would match Heringer's potential;
- *dramaculture* (culture in action) would refer to individual and collective cultural expressions (values, ritual and behavioural choices, etc), essentially linked to the notion of performance;
- *osmoculture* (culture in diffusion) would refer to Peirce's interpretant or Castella's contextic interpretation: thus, each individual or group would own and use an intimate representation of this culture as an ever-evolving process, which may also lead to a better understanding of artistic expressions.

These three dimensions work within an interdynamic cultural triad and clearly focus on action and a cognitive and emotional memory of habits, values and behaviours learned and shared in interaction with other human beings.
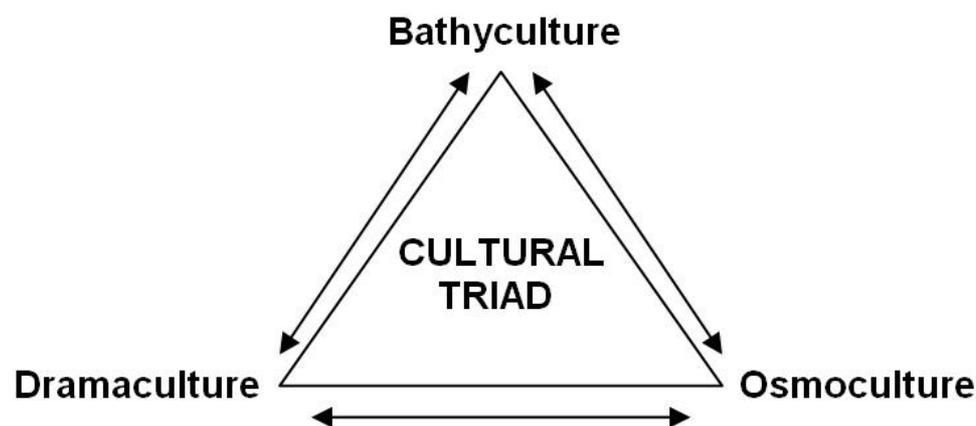

Fig. 1: Cultural triad.

In this perspective, individual choices are made within the context of social and individual encounters. Thus, culture is not defined as a fixed delimiting device, but as a flexible matrix adapting to the demands and possibilities of context, as a playground for individual and collective expressions, choices and influences. Culture thus diffuses and embodies meaning within a dynamic process of communication, which remains bound to the basic principles of life, defined as a need to exchange information: in this sense, the cultural triad is an ontological proposal for the metaphor of human life. Culture in itself represents a form of life evolving in a given environment through the choices of human beings themselves. This cultural triad emerges as a lifeform of answers to basic human questions and needs, through a constant interaction between environments and individuals or groups.

The contextic approach remains useful when it comes to acquiring an objectivity which would be sufficient enough to study interactions as complex patterns of choices and behaviours, linked to values and various influences. If researchers look at interactions through the cultural viewpoint only, they may reproduce the same trap already embedded in immutable social classes or delimited psychological profiles; thus, the observation of actions and expressions would already be submitted to the model that authors wish to justify. If models of analysis do help to formalize and categorize elements, social scholars should not put a comfortable yet theoretical mechanization before the subtleties and complexities of human relations; this choice may therefore lead to the dangerous temptation of scientific reductionism. The study of interactions and human behaviours and values is the study of lifeforms in action, which means that any satisfactory explanation should not depend on simplified categorizations. The variety and singularity of interindividual or intergroupal communications have to be taken into account, which even leads us to an extreme observation: in order to describe and study these expressions, the very concept of culture may even not be necessary at all.

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[i] « Les femmes se plaignent des services et les hommes s'en plaignent par solidarité avec leur épouse. 'Les techniciens et les livreurs ne précisent pas l'heure, ni même parfois le jour. Nous y sommes habitués et nous ne sommes plus impatients, mais c'était très difficile pour ma femme au début'. (…) Une seule chose continue de les choquer : le fait que l'interlocuteur ne s'excuse pas. Alors ce comportement est qualifié d'incroyable et d'incompréhensible. Ce n'est donc pas tant le retard qui est source de frustrations, mais le manque de respect exprimé par cette attitude. En effet, au Japon encore davantage qu'ailleurs, la ponctualité est révélatrice de la considération accordée à la personne. Or, s'il existe un pays où le client est roi, c'est en tout premier lieu au Japon. (…) Pour les femmes japonaises, le lieu des achats est un des domaines où elles dominent et où elles ont le pouvoir. Se voir refuser cette prérogative, c'est tout simplement avoir l'impression de ne plus compter. Ce manque de respect est particulièrement blessant, car il touche à leur identité. Certaines femmes expatriées japonaises (…) ont affirmé avoir tout simplement perdu leurs moyens et fondu en larmes au cours d'un de ces malentendus », our translation.

[ii] In our University (Université Catholique de l'Ouest), a Centre for French Studies (CIDEF) welcomes students from all over the world (mostly Asia and America) and especially Japanese students who remain keen to participate in any kind of social activity and answer questions for research purposes.

[iii] « l'observateur participe à la création de ce qu'il observe », our translation.

[iv] Institut de Recherche sur l'Implication de la langue des Signes française.

[v] « trois en portugais, cinq en japonais, six en tamoul ou en coréen – cette langue possédant également plusieurs formes pour l'autodésignation, qui est en français condamnée au seul 'je' », our translation.

[vi] « einen mehr oder weniger gemeinsamen Kern an Weltbildern, Wertvorstellungen, Denkweisen, Normen und Konventionen », our translation.

[vii] « La culture est l'ensemble plus ou moins fortement lié des significations acquises les plus persistantes et les plus partagées que les membres d'un groupe, de par leur affiliation à ce groupe, sont amenés à distribuer de façon prévalente sur les stimuli provenant de leur environnement et d'eux-mêmes, induisant vis-à-vis de ces stimuli des attitudes, des représentations et des comportements communs valorisés, dont ils tendent à assurer la reproduction par des voies non génétiques », our translation.

[viii] « La culture, au sens anthropologique, désigne ce qui équipe les individus de capacités de vivre, de penser et d'agir de façon adaptée au monde qui les environne et qui leur donne des capacités de transformation créatrice d'eux-mêmes et du monde. Par la culture, l'individu est doté d'un appareil à penser et se représenter la société, sa place et son rapport à celle-ci, ainsi que les relations des individus entre eux. La culture donne à l'individu la capacité de communication avec son environnement, et, par un travail et des techniques partagés avec d'autres, elle lui permet une intégration sociale. L'être humain cherche l'autre, le groupe, la société pour réaliser, par construction culturelle, ce qu'il ne peut produire seul étant donné son incomplétude, fondatrice de l'humanité », our translation. Through the expression « non genetic ways », Camilleri does mean a reproduction which is not a simple duplication, but a real reformulation which might be subject to contextual variables.

[ix] « construit, diversement codé, pour être partagé entre les membres d'une même société », our translation.

[x] This may at least be the case for structuralist linguistics or even cognitive linguistics.

[xi] « Nous pouvons tous fournir après coup des explications à propos de nos conduites lorsqu'on nous demande de les justifier. Mais lorsqu'il s'agit d'actes que nous n'avons pas appris de manière formelle, comme la manière de nous distribuer dans l'espace, et qu'on nous demande de justifier notre conduite, nous ne l'expliquons pas, mais nous faisons intervenir l'émotion, l'esthétique, la morale, la philosophie, dans des formulations qui n'ont rien à voir avec le phénomène », our translation.

[xii] « Une serveuse pakistanaise, qui travaille au restaurant self-service pour hauts employés de l'aéroport Heathrow à Londres, doit pour certains plats demander si les invités souhaitent avoir plus de sauce. Pour ce faire, elle dit simplement 'sauce'. Peu de temps après déjà, certains clients se plaignent à propos de la serveuse, qui serait tout à fait impolie – ce qui serait typique pour ces immigrés venus d'Asie. Ces plaintes sont transmises à la serveuse. Elle ne comprend pas ce qui se passe. Elle fait son travail comme tous les autres. Elle ne sait pas ce que son comportement aurait d'impoli. Elle ne change pas son comportement. Elle continue de demander de la même façon si les invités souhaitent avoir encore de la sauce pour leur repas. Les plaintes recommencent. Le syndicat s'en mêle. S'ensuit un climat de travail tendu », our translation.

[xiii] « [La contextique] regarde les complexités comme des systèmes en équilibre relativement aux interactions des éléments qui le composent. Il correspond à des structures sociales de type coopératif, sans hiérarchie, puisque, de ce point de vue, il n'y a pas d'instance première. Ce modèle n'est pas causaliste. Il explique ce qui se passe par les interactions entre les éléments du système, sans leur attribuer de cause », our translation.

[xiv] « Eine Kultur ist eine Lebensform. Kultur ist ein Objekt besonderer Art. Wie Sprache ist sie eine menschliche Institution, die auf gemeinsamem Wissen basiert. Kultur ist enstanden, sie ist geworden in gemeinsamem menschlichen Handeln. Nicht, dass sie gewollt wurde. Sie ist vielmehr ein Produkt der Unsichtbaren Hand. Sie ist ein Potenzial für gemeinsames sinnträchtiges Handeln. Aber das Potenzial zeigt sich nur in der Performanz, im Vollzug. Und es ist enstanden über Performanz », our translation.

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