

The Mechanism of Intercultural Communication

— The Process of Cultural Adjustment and Self Development —

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1. Introduction

Because of the growing number of international students and scholars at Japanese universities, there is a need for more studies on intercultural communication. Both theoretical and empirical studies are essential. The purpose of this study is to present symbolic interaction theory, which was formed on the basis of George Herbert Mead's most penetrating analysis of social interaction, as a clear, systematic and practical theory to understand the nature of intercultural communication.

Miller (1987) mentions the most important insight of Mead's symbolic interactionism as follows:

If an organism, by its gesture, calls out in itself the same response that it evokes in another participant in the social process, then that gesture is a significant symbol - which is to say, that gesture is a linguistic gesture and its meaning is shared by both the one who makes it and by the other, to whom it is addressed.

The present author considers that the social process in creating and forming a shared meaning by gestures of the communicators has significant implications for the study of intercultural communication. Therefore, in the following sections, the author will first outline the central place of symbolic interactionism briefly from the communication perspective, and then, discuss the dynamic function of intercultural interaction by employing symbolic interaction theory.

2. Symbolic Interactionism

In the theory of symbolic interactionism, Mead analyzes human gestures in biosocial terms, and accounts for the inception and the development of symbolic communication. He considers gestures as either conscious (significant) or unconscious (non-significant). Non-significant gestures are seen in the instinctive conversation of gestures and in the early stage of the development of symbolic communication. They are seen in attitudes or movements in a dog-fight, boxing, grappling and so forth. According to Mead, in these instances, certain parts of the organism's become a stimulus to the other organism to adjust himself/herself to those parts of the act, and the adjustment in turn becomes a stimulus to the first organism to change his/her own act and start on a different act. In these activities, a series of attitudes goes on until the final social act can be carried out. In other words, in the conversation of gestures, his/her act calls out a certain response in the other, and that in turn changes his/her own

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action. Mead (1934) identifies an unconscious gesture with the beginning of a social act (the beginning of communication) and asserts that “the function of the gesture is to make adjustment possible among the individuals implicated in any given social act” (p. 46).

In symbolic interactionism, while a non-significant gesture is a type of communication, it is not a proper communication yet, because in non-significant conversation of communication, meanings are not yet consciously communicated between the involved organisms.

Mead considers that, when a gesture of the first organism connotes a certain idea behind it and arouses that idea in the other organism, then they have a significant symbol. The symbol stands for the idea in the minds of both of them. They have the particular symbol with a common meaning. When the gesture reaches that situation, it has become language. For Mead, thus, language derives from gestures. Language is a part of conduct and consists of a set of symbols which elicit identical responses in different individuals. The critical importance of significant symbols is that an individual responds to his/her own stimulus in the same way as other people respond (although the same responses evoked by significant symbols in different individuals are, of course, not overt but covert).

This peculiar characteristic of significant symbols makes the individual attentive and conscious of the other's attitude toward the object (including human behavior, its influence, etc.) involved in the given situation. Therefore, significant symbols provide the individual with greater facilities for adjustment and readjustment to the social situation than does the non-significant gesture.

Based upon the discussion on conversation of symbolic gestures, symbolic interactionism recognized meaning as arising in the process of interaction of people. The meaning of an object for an individual emerges out of the process in which the other acts toward the individual with regard to the object. Mead (1934) states that “the response of one organism to the gesture of another in any given social act is the meaning of that gesture, and also in a sense responsible for the appearance or coming into being of the new objects... “(p. 78).

He calls this process the triadic relation of meaning. The process is dialectic; it consists of a gesture of a given individual, the response on the part of the second individual, and the resultant social act which the first gesture initiates and in which both individuals are involved. In other words, the process in the appearance of meaning is a co-operative action of individuals. Symbolic interactionism insists that meanings are social products. They are created and formed through the interaction of people. Thus, symbolic interactionism asserts that things in our world are constituted in terms of meanings which were created and affirmed and modified through our social process of experience and behavior.

From the standpoint of interpersonal communication, the process in and through which meaning arises possesses two important dimensions. The first dimension is that this process contains the mechanism of adjustment for the individuals participating in the situation. When an individual interacts with another individual, the individual acts toward the meaning of an object involved in the social context. The individual does not act directly to the action of the other. Instead, the individual interprets or ascertains the meaning of the action of the other involved in the situation, and then, acts to the situation.

What is most important for the individual who is confronting the situation is the meaning of the action of the other.

As human interaction is not mechanical, human behavior is never completely defined. The individual has to interpret the meaning of the object which is the response of the other toward the individual's act throughout the interaction. During the interaction, the individual has to indicate to himself/herself the object that has meaning and interpret the meaning of it. The making of such indications and interpretations is an internalization of the social process in the individual. The individual is able to communicate with himself/herself as significant symbols elicit similar ideas in the minds of both individuals in the situation. Mead (1934) calls this process the "reflexive" process, and states that reflexiveness is the essential within the social process. The reflexive process is therefore a matter of handling meaning.

Since meaning arises and lies in the threefold relationship of gestures, the reflexive process is not a mere monologue on the situation from the individual's standpoint. In order to understand the meaning in the social context, the individual has to look at the situation from the other's standpoint. It is necessary for the individual to get inside the interpreting process of the other. By taking the other's role, the individual examines his/her interpretation of the object. Through this interaction with himself/herself, the individual shifts position to the other's and adjusts actions to that of the other in some way. Significant symbols enable and facilitate the individual to adjust subsequent behavior to the other in the light of the other's attitude. By interpreting and ascertaining the meaning of the other's action, the individual makes adjustment to the situation. Thus, the function of significant symbols includes the mechanism of adjustment between the individuals in the social interaction.

The other important dimension of the triadic relation of meaning is that it is the process out of which the self of a human being arises. Symbolic interactionism insists that social interaction is a formative process. Social interaction is a process that forms human action instead of being merely a place where an individual performs a predetermined act.

As we have seen, when an individual is interacting with the other, the individual has to take the role of the other or attitudes of the other toward himself/herself. The individual has to take account of how the other interprets the action of himself/herself and what the other is about to do after this interpretation. In this process, the individual becomes an object to himself/herself from the standpoint of the other. During this process, the individual experiences himself/herself only indirectly from the standpoint of the other individual. While the individual is responding to himself/herself during the reflexive process, the individual forces himself/herself to control, direct and construct behavior in terms of what the other takes into account in the particular situation. During this process, the other's attitudes become important factors in forming the individual's prospective action. Therefore, this reflexive process is the course out of which the self emerges.

Symbolic interactionism recognizes that the self grows out of communication and exists only in relationships to other selves. Symbolic interactionism does not draw a sharp line between his/her self and the selves of others. However, Mead does not deny that the self has its uniqueness. In Mead's termi-

nology, the self consists of “I” and “me”. The “I” refers to an individual’s original response to the attitudes of the others with whom he/she interacts, and the “me” indicates the organized set of other people’s attitudes in the individual. The “me” corresponds to the individual’s roles or duties related to the roles, whereas the “I” is his/her own action over against the social situations in which he/she has to construct his/her conduct. Thus, a human response always includes unique elements which are congenital or hereditary biological attitudes. The “I” and “me” lie in the process of his/her thinking and constitute the personality.

Moreover, symbolic interactionism considers that for the fullest development of the self, it is not sufficient for an individual to merely take the roles of other individuals toward him/her. Symbolic interactionism thinks that there are two general stages in the full development of the self.

At the first stage the individual is able to take the roles of other individuals toward himself/herself in the specific social situations in which the individual participates. At the second stage, the individual acquires the attitudes of the “generalized other” of the social group(s) or community to which he/she belongs. The term “generalized other” means the broad organized behaviors of any given social whole or the set of attitudes of a whole community. When the individual develops the self to its fullest sense, the individual is able not only to take the role of the others that the individual encounters, but also to make a commitment to the social group(s) that the individual belongs. At the second stage the individual has increased efficiency as a member of the group and can coordinate with other members of the social group.

Thus, symbolic interactionism sees the self as a process in which the conversation of gestures has been internalized within an organic form. For symbolic interactionism, therefore, in so far as the process of relating his/her own organism to the others in the interactions occurs, the self is in the situation of constant change.

In short, according to symbolic interactionism, the function of the gesture is to make adjustment possible between or among individuals in any given social act. Such adjustment is made since an individual acts toward the meaning of the object with which the individual is concerned. Significant symbols afford greater facilities for the adjustment than does the non-significant gestures. Since significant symbols enable a human organism to become an object to himself/herself and to interact with himself/herself, out of communication in significant symbols the self of an individual arises. As an individual’s social experience and activities continue, the self acts and reacts to the given situations and continually modifies itself in the form of an organism.

3. Intercultural Communication as Symbolic Interaction

From foregoing discussion on Mead’s behavioristic analysis of communication, a noteworthy perspective toward intercultural communication follows. Symbolic interactionism provides a coherent theory in understanding the process of intercultural interaction and basic concepts in the area such as “adjustment,” “acculturation,” “reentry adjustment,” and others.

Symbolic interactionism views human beings as living in a symbolic world as well as a natural environment. It considers that different groups come to develop different symbolic worlds. Meanings of objects are created through the process of social interaction. They are formed in and arise out of the process of interpretation and definition as people relate with others through the medium of communication. The content of the symbolic world is constituted through the relation of social interactions; it is composed through the dialectic relation of meaning. The meaning of anything in a group has been formed, learned and transmitted through a process of social interaction.

Therefore, people in a social group have a shared common meanings of objects, and thus, their culture. Due to these shared meanings, each member is able to guide his/her behavior when the individual interacts with other members of the social group.

From the standpoint of symbolic interactionism, the process of intercultural communication fundamentally possesses the same process of intra-cultural communication. In order to communicate, intercultural communication must use a common language for both parties involved in a given situation. Human communication, in either an intra-cultural or intercultural context, takes place largely through significant symbols. What is essential to communication is that a symbol should arouse in an individual's mind what it arouses in the other's. When both parties have the same meaning, they understand each other. This is a universal principle in any type of interpersonal communication. Intercultural communication is no exception from this cardinal principle.

An intercultural communicator also acts based on the meaning of the object with which the individual is concerned in a given situation. It is necessary for the intercultural communicator to identify and interpret the meaning of the object which the other is about to make or has made. The individual must put himself/herself in the place of the other's attitudes toward the object. The individual must get the other's inner experience in the social situation wherein both individuals interact. By virtue of significant symbols, the intercultural communicator is able to interact with himself/herself. Through such self-interaction, the individual assesses the meaning of the object and may hold, abandon, or revise the prospective act. The individual in a process of intercultural social action is thus continually adjusting himself/herself to the situation in which he/she is involved and reacting back on it.

Blumer (1969), who contributed to the development of empirical methodology in symbolic interactionism, describes the process of a social act in an intra-cultural context as follows:

“...the human individual confronts a world that he must interpret in order to act instead of an environment to which he responds because of his organization. He has to cope with the situations in which he called on act, ascertaining the meaning of the actions of others and mapping out his own line of action in the light of such interpretations. He has to construct and guide his action...”(p. 15).

We can utilize Blumer's illustration on the process of intra-cultural interaction as an example of intercultural communication without any modification. The basic structure of intercultural communication is no different from that of the triadic relation of the behaviors through which the meaning of an object is derived in intra-cultural interaction.

The only difference involved in intercultural communication is that in intercultural interaction, at least one of the parties (in some cases for both parties) must use unfamiliar significant symbols, a new language. And, frequently even the physical environment in the situation is unknown to one of the parties. It is the fact that an intercultural communicator has to interact with others by using a new language in a new physical environment which creates extraordinary misinterpretation, misunderstanding, and discommunication between the parties. Often the language proficiency of an intercultural communicator is not high enough to carry an effective conversation with the other party. Or, frequently even if communicators speak in a common language, an utterance made by an individual cannot bring the same response in the minds of both parties. Connotations of a word often have great discrepancies between the two. They came from different symbolic worlds.

Therefore, it is presumed that role-taking in intercultural communication is more difficult than intra-cultural communication. Role-taking in intercultural communication is probably less accurate because of the lack of familiarity of the role taker with the perspective of the other. It takes a longer time to interpret the action of the other in intercultural settings than in intra-cultural social contexts. The reflexive process with himself/herself may become longer (and may be deeper) in intercultural interaction than in intra-cultural communication. The process of intercultural communication is probably impeded and blocked more frequently than of intra-social interaction is.

Mead (1934) asserts that reflective thought is usually the result of a blocked course of interaction or of an inner conflict as a result of perceiving a novel feature of an object and inhibiting a prospective action. When an individual is confronted with an inner conflict, the individual thinks about alternative ways to resolve the conflict. Mead (1934) mentions that reflection and reconstruction arise from defeat of the act. Therefore, successful adjustment depends upon the individual's ability to put himself/herself in the place of the other's position in the given situation, and then upon his/her sensitivity to the other's attitudes toward himself/herself.

Through the trial and error in interpreting the other's meaning of the object and with occasional failure in choosing an appropriate action in the given situation, an intercultural communicator makes himself/herself adjust to a new social environment. The mechanism of adjustment is embedded in the conversation of gesture. The language competence of the individual in the conversation with people from a different culture facilitates the adjustment to the new cultural environment.

Communicators in intercultural interaction understand each other when a common meaning arises in the minds of both parties. Therefore, the more similar the interpretations of an object the two parties make, the more effective the interaction they can have. The communication becomes smooth, comfortable and effective in the setting.

The process of intercultural communication is also a formative process. The self of a human being is a phenomenon which is generated by internalizing the conversation of significant gestures in the form of a human organism. By virtue of the capacity to use significant symbols, an individual can interpret with himself/herself, anticipate various responses to his/her own behavior of the other, and form his/her future conduct. During the process of the interaction, the individual takes the attitude of the other and acts toward himself/herself as the other acts. In this process, the activities of the other in the given situation enters positive elements in forming the conduct. This means that intercultural communication is the process through which the communicator adapts the cultural behavior that the other party possesses.

Rose (1962) who summarizes Mead's work calls the process of the self emergence "socialization" and contends that socialization continues throughout his/her life. Rose adds that "through adult life, he may change his group affiliations and so continue to be socialized into subcultures, even though he may already be adequately socialized in terms of the general culture"(p. 16).

Moreover, symbolic interactionism considers that the adaptation of new cultural behavior, which results from the co-operative action between the communicators, necessarily arises out of the previous actions of the communicators. This indicates that behavior of a human being is a product of his/her history, of all his/her direct and indirect experiences through communication with others. An intercultural communicator who has interacted with people from different cultures and acquired new cultural meanings and values does not lose his/her own cultural behavior. Rose (1962) mentions that "while 'old' groups' cultural expectations, and personal meanings and values may be dropped, in the sense that they become markedly lower on the reference relationship scale, they are not lost or forgotten" (p. 16).

The intercultural communicator who has gained new cultural behaviors is not a completely new person in terms of his/her cultural behavior. The individual integrated new cultural behaviors with existing ones as a result of intercultural communication. The individual is now a bi-cultural person.

In sum, Mead's insight into the nature of human gestures gives us an accurate picture of intercultural interaction. Mead stresses that an individual is continually acting and reacting back against the situation that the individual encounters and adjusting himself/herself to them. An intercultural communicator is always trying to fit his/her action to that of the others. The individual can make adjustment to a new culture because the individual has the capacity to use significant symbols in the new environment. Fundamentally this is the function of human gestures in any given social environment.

Mead's penetrating analysis as to the nature of social action shows intercultural communication in a profound sense. From the standpoint of symbolic interactionism, intercultural communication is also a process out of which the human self grows. When the communicator not only takes the attitudes of the others with whom he/she interacts directly but also makes a commitment to a social group(s), the communicator has achieved full adjustment to the new culture.

4. Conclusion

Symbolic interactionism gives intercultural communication a new and interesting perspective. Mead analyzes human gestures from the evolutionary standpoint and explains the development of symbolic communication. The utmost feature in Mead's analysis on social interaction is that, by virtue of significant symbols, a human being can act toward himself/herself as he/she might act toward another. This ability of a human being to act toward himself/herself is the central mechanism with which the human being faces and deals with his/her world as well as the surroundings. This mechanism makes the human being possible to take roles of the other, to seek ascertainment on the intention or direction of the other's act, and to adjust himself/herself to the particular situation. This mechanism enables the human being to link himself/herself with the other, and to construct future action. This peculiar mechanism in the form of a human being works even if the human being enters a new cultural environment.

To be empirically valid, however, scientific research in social science must be consistent with the nature of the social action of human beings. For verification of the symbolic interaction theory, research in intercultural communication provides empirical evidence. Results of the research on the acculturation of Korean immigrants conducted by Y. Kim (1977) and J. Kim (1980) show empirical data that communication is the mechanism through which the immigrants integrated the new cultural behaviors. Uehara (1987) also provides empirical evidence that Japanese and American returnees from each other's country acquired some new cultural values and meanings as a result of the extended sojourn in the country. These are only small portions of the research in intercultural communication which offer the proof that Mead's behavioristic analysis of communication is a systematic theory in the area of intercultural communication. (See Gudykunst (1977) "Intercultural Contact and Attitude Change: A Review of Literature and Suggestions for Future Research" for more examples of intercultural communicators' attitudinal changes.)

What Mead emphasizes in the theory of symbolic interaction are the prior existence of the social process to a self-conscious individual and a mutual influence between the individual and the society in which the individual lives. Mead asserts that the mechanism of adjustment is built in any social interaction, and any adjustment includes some kind of change in the individual and the social environment. He mentions:

“As a man adjusts himself to a certain environment he becomes a different individual; but in becoming a different individual he has affected the community in which he lives. It may be a slight effect, but in so far as he has adjusted himself, the adjustments have changed the type of the environment to which he can respond and the world is accordingly a different world. There is always a mutual relationship of the individual and the community in which the individual lives.

.....

... The change may be desirable or it may be undesirable, but it inevitably takes place“(pp.

215-216).

Cassirer (1944) states that speech is an antinomy; it can unite people and it can also divide and separate them. We do not know what kind of consequences the process of intercultural communication is producing in the world. The process of intelligent conduct refers essentially to “a process of selection from among various alternatives” (Mead, 1934, p. 99). It, thus, appears that the nature of intercultural interaction implies a significant meaning for our time.

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異文化コミュニケーションのメカニズム

—異文化適応と自我形成の過程—

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日本の大学に外国人留学生や学者の数が増えて、今日異文化コミュニケーションの理論的、実践的研究が以前にも増して求められている。それ故、この小論では一文化内における人間行動をコミュニケーションの視座より研究したジョージ・ミードの象徴相互作用論を概括し、それをを用いて異文化コミュニケーションの理論的分析を試みる。

進化論の影響を受けたジョージ・ミード（1934年）の象徴相互作用論は、生命体のジェスチャアの分析により展開され、その理論の中核は社会的相互作用において、一ジェスチャアが自己と相手の内面に同じ意味を喚起した時に Significant Symbol、即ち言語が誕生し、そのジェスチャアの意味がその相互作用の参与者間に生成共有されるというプロセスにある。ミードはこの社会的相互作用中に共有の意味が生成される過程を“Triadic relation of meaning”と呼ぶ。それは意味というものが、個人の恣意により創られるのではなく、相互作用中に個人が相手にある行為を行うと、相手はその個人に直接に反応せずに、その個人の行為を解釈して、その解釈にもとづいて自らの行為を構成して個人に応答するが、この相手の応答として行った行為が、個人の最初の行為の意味であるということである。換言すれば、意味というものは、個人の行為と相手のその解釈、そしてそれにもとづく新たな行為の三行動により弁証法的に決定されることを意味している。人間の相互作用はこの三つの行動の連続より成っているのである。

対人関係コミュニケーションの視座よりこの“Triadic relation of meaning”を分析すると、このプロセスは人間行動を状況に適応させる契機を含み、自我の形成発展の場であるという二大特徴を有する。ある個人の行為に反応するために、相手はその行為を解釈し、そして自らの行為を構成するのであるが、その行為の構成には状況に適応するものが選択されるのであり、個人はまた応答されてきた相手の行為により、新しく変化した状況に適応する行為を選択構成せねばならない。このプロセスをできるだけ円滑に進めるために、他者の立場を正確に把握すること（role-taking）が重要になる。他者の立場に自らを置いて自らの内面を考察し、自らの行動を修正あるいは矯正して構成する。このように自らの行動の構築に他者の視点、意向が介入して重要な要素として働くのである。この適応の過程は自らの行為を選択し、構成していく過程であるが、それは同時に社会的な諸般の意味や価値観を獲得して自我を発展させてゆく過程でもある。ミードの象徴相互作用論によれば、個人の自我の発展は、他者と意味を生成共有するという人間の相互作用に内在するメカニズムによる。

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筆者はこのミードの象徴相互作用論をもとに、異文化行為を分析するが、異文化相互作用も一文化内相互作用と同様に、人間の相互作用に含まれる二つの特徴を有することを議論する。議論の中では、異文化相互作用にも参加者が状況に適応するためのメカニズムが内在していること、またその相互作用は自我の発展過程に異文化要素が入り、自文化要素との統合がなされて、“bi-cultural person”が生み出される過程でもあることが述べられる。さらに、一文化内コミュニケーションと異文化コミュニケーションの違いや言語能力が異文化適応に果たす役割などについても触れられる。