

A theory of cross-cultural communication



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A Theory of Cross-cultural Communication Anthony Pym 2003 Intercultural Studies Group Universitat Rovira i Virgili Tarragona, Spain* Pre-print version

3. 3 The following is a series of propositions designed to connect a few ideas about translation as a mode of cross-cultural communication. The ideas are drawn from a multiplicity of existing theories; the aim is not particularly to be original. The propositions are instead intended to link up three endeavors: an abstract conception of cross-cultural communication, a description of the specificities of translation, and an attempt to envisage the future of such communication in a globalizing age.

The various points at which the propositions draw on or diverge from previous theories are indicated in a series of notes. On cross-cultural communication in general Cross-cultural communication involves the perceived crossing of a point of contact between cultures. Cultures here are minimally seen as large-scale systems of assumed shared references, linguistic or otherwise, used for the purposes of reducing complexity. 2 Cultures themselves may idealize one or several centers, where the shared references are felt to be so dense that communication would be without any need for reductions of complexities.

Away from such ideals, cultures have peripheries, where references are sparse, or sparsely shared, or mixed with references shared by other cultures. The terms "center" and "periphery" are not to be understood geopolitically. (cf. Even-Zohar 1990, Toury 1995) The differences between centers and peripheries are operative fictions rather than primary empirical facts. The very belief that one is in a central position may be enough to curtail complexity, just as the false impression that one is lacking in context

may increase complexity. (Pym 1998) The difference between center and periphery may also be characterized in terms of effort.

When shared references are believed to be dense (all else being equal), the reduction of complexity requires less effort than when the references are believed to be sparse. Effort here is understood as being on both the sending and receiving sides of messages, as well as in any mediating position or investment in the channel. A text sent and received near a perceived center will thus require less investment of effort than the same text sent from a center to a periphery (assuming that the reduction of complexity is to be to a similar degree in both cases).

And further supplementary effort will be needed if the text is to be received in another culture. (Pym 1995) 1. 6. The lines between cultures are marked as cross-over points where the communication act receives supplementary effort of a mediating and discontinuous nature. Such points are usually where translations are carried out. (Pym 2001 a) Cross-cultural will not join up the points to form any kind of line. (Pym 1998, 2001 a, cf. Chatwin 1987)

On complexity and its reduction Texts are inscribed objects that can be interpreted in different ways and for different functions, quite independently of any original intentions. The plurality of possible interpretations is what we are calling complexity. The reduction of complexity does not imply any discerning of a true or primal meaning. For example, a reader at this point might interpret the term "reduction of complexity" as "understanding", but such a reading will hopefully be deviated by the following paragraphs. In this sense, the reduction of complexity does not entail an act of understanding in any idealist sense. Nor must effort be expended only to reduce complexity.