

Mental models construction and communicative conflict

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In analyzing the different functions of verbal communication, two main functions have been foregrounded (Mizzau, 1995): a referential one, i.e. the function of transmitting information about the speaker him/herself, the other interlocutor and the world; and a relational function oriented to the interactional regulation. From a cognitive point of view, both these functions lead to the construction of Mental Models, i.e. of integrate knowledge structures (Garnham, Oakhill, 1992).

In verbal communication, participants build the mental model of the current communicative situation together with the mental model of the conversational topic. This process is performed individually, relying upon the general background knowledge, and jointly, through acceptance of cooperation to achieve common goals.

As an efficient verbal communication depends on the adequacy of the process of the mental model construction, so differences and conflicts between mental models can diversely orient – and even hinder – the mutual comprehension process.

We have chosen a Paul Bowles' short story – «A distant episode» (1945) – to analyze the involved communicative functions and processes in a mental model perspective. In particular, we are going to focus on one dialogical excerpt: the analysis will consider the inferential processes (Garnham, 1992), cooperative attitudes (Grice, 1975) and conversational strategies (Mizzau, 1995) adopted and disregarded by the two main characters of the story in their communicative exchange.

The short story is about the journey of a Professor (a linguist). He is visiting a village of the «warm country» near the desert. In a café he encounters a second significant character, a *qaouaji* (a waiter) who will lead him to the edge of the desert and leave him there. Here the Professor will be kidnapped by a desert population (the Reguibat) who cut out the Professor's tongue and transform him into a kind of jester or «sacred fool». The rest of the story goes on to tell of the Professor's eventual return to consciousness of what he was and the consequent tragedy.

The excerpt chosen describes the initial contact and interaction between the two main characters: the Professor and the *qaouaji* (the waiter). The Professor wanted to see the café's owner, Hassan Ramani, who he had met during a short journey ten years before:

The qaouaji came in and wiped off the table.

1) «Does this café still belong to Hassan Ramani?» he asked him in the Moghrebi he had taken four years to learn.

2) The man replied in bad French : «He is deceased».

3) «Deceased?» repeated the Professor, without noticing the absurdity of the word. «Really? When?»

4) «I don't know» said the qaouaji. «One tea?»

5) «Yes. But I don't understand...»

The man was already out of the room, fanning the fire.

1): the Professor chooses to speak the *qaouaji* language. In this way he is trying to achieve three communicative goals:

- a) he expresses the communicative purpose of being equal to his interlocutor. He wants to display a friendly attitude. (symmetric relation)
- b) he tries to gain the *qaouaji*'s confidence.
- c) by showing off his knowledge about that peculiar language, the Professor exhibits his superiority as a man of learning. (asymmetric relation)

The third goal contradicts the other two and unbalances the relationship. Actually, the first and second goals were aimed at establishing a symmetric relationship between the characters while the third goal turned it into an asymmetric one (Watzlavick, Beavin, Jackson, 1967).

The three goals are inferentially stated; they might be regarded as inferences that elaborate the communicative situation.

2): The *qaouaji* fully understands the inferential meanings of the Professor's question and replies in «bad French», i.e. he chooses to answer using what is assumed to be the interlocutor's language. The *qaouaji* refuses to comply with the other's goals; he doesn't cooperate with the Professor. In fact:

- I) he refuses to take part in the symmetric relationship the Professor appeared to offer, presumably friendship.
- II) he maintains the relational distance with the other: he refuses his one-down role in the asymmetric relation inferentially stated.
- III) he restores his «positive face» (Goffman, 1959), that the Professor unaware damaged.

The language switching (Moghrebi-French) highlights that the reciprocal elaborative inferences about the goals and intentions of the participants determine the cognitive representation of the interaction. In other terms, the characters are not merely elaborating the information vehicled by the explicit sentences (the topic of Hassan Ramani and his death) but they are integrating the communicative situation into the basic structure of their individual mental model. On this cognitive ground the explicit contents of the dialogue do receive a relational value, i.e. they become liable to interpretation and negotiation.

Moreover, the different cognitive representation of the relation (cooperative vs uncooperative, symmetric vs asymmetric) leads to the first stage of a potential and silent conflict between the characters, focused on self presentation and role-taking in the monitoring of the interaction.

3) In the first sentence, the Professor shifts the focus of the dialogue from the relational features to the explicit content of the discourse. And in the second sentence he tries to extend the topic, or, in psychological terms, to go along the referential chain.

The expansion of the conversational topic would deserve the *qaouaji*'s cooperation in accepting and applying the Grician maxims (1975). But the *qaouaji*'s reply: «*I don't know*» said the *qaouaji*. «*One tea?*» acts as a sharp refusal. He discharges the Professor's topic and communicative intention, and tries to keep the interaction within the boundaries of a professional relation, i.e. the usual conversational exchange between waiter and customer. (scriptic use of roles)

The Professor by simply saying «yes» seems to comply with the *qaouaji*'s request, but when he adds : «*But I don't understand...*» he tries again to involve the waiter into a relational exchange.

This is what the *qaouaji* seems to dislike most, and as his uncooperative answers or communicative strategies were ineffective in stopping the Professor, he resort to a strong disconfirmative behavior: he leaves the co-speaker (*The man was already out of the room, fanning the fire*).

The following text offers evidence of this disconfirmative effect:

The Professor sat still, feeling lonely, and arguing with himself that to do so was ridiculous. Soon the qaouaji returned with the tea. He paid him and gave him an enormous tip, for which he received a grave bow.

In conclusion, we can say that the communication fails because:

- the co-speakers don't share certain relevant background knowledge (about culture, identity definition and modalities of negotiating the relation);
- they don't cooperate in common goals; the focus of interaction is not the same for both characters at the same stage of interaction: when the Professor focuses on referential contents, the *qaouaji* focuses on relational ones and vice-versa (referential contents focused on by the Professor: Hassan Ramani and his death, camel-udder boxes; referential contents focused by the *qaouaji*: the «tea», the prize of camel-udder boxes).
- the participants never achieve the same cognitive representation of the referential and relational contents of their interaction; in other terms, they never build a common mental model of the communicative situation.

Finally, the two characters appear to apply different modalities for coding and decoding the intentions and communicative functions, and this produces an escalation of strain and conflict throughout their whole interaction.

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