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# **Cognition in inter(action): the negotiation of stereotypic beliefs in intercultural discourse**

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## **Introduction\***

This paper reports on how we see the process of stereotyping in an intercultural setting with reference to Danes and Latin Americans. Our focus is on the negotiation of stereotypic beliefs on work related issues in Danish companies in Caracas. We use a semi-structured interview specially designed to elicit stereotypes in our interaction with those who participated in this study.

We start from the general assumption that stereotypes provide the basis for social categorization and are, therefore, an important input in any kind of intercultural encounter (Fant, 1997). Those who have defined stereotypes often agree that

*Stereotypes are generalizations reached by individuals. They derive in large measure from or are an instance of, the general cognitive process of categorizing. The main function of the process is to simplify or systematize, for purposes of cognitive and behavioral adaptation, the abundance and complexity of the information received from its environment by the human organism...But such stereotypes can become social only when they are shared by large numbers of people within social groups (Tajfel, 1981:146-147)*

So, the analysis of stereotypic beliefs by an intercultural team as ours posits several problems. First, we need to describe the cognitive process itself, which is complex because the stereotypes are not collected in a natural setting as would be desirable, and therefore the interviewers are mainly responsible for the topics to talk about and the shape of the text created between interviewer and interviewee; second, we need to describe the cultural context in which the interview takes place in order to understand the meanings created. Above all, we need to give attention to the fact that the participants in

this study, apart from belonging to different cultures, are in an asymmetrical power relation because the Danes participate as owners or bosses of the companies while the Latin Americans are all employees in various positions. This means that any analysis of the results obtained will have to take into account a wide net of relations.

We agree that we “cannot not stereotype” (Gudykunst and Kim, 1984) so we need to find out more about the processes of the construction of stereotypic beliefs in social practice, with attention to the ways in which the information is collected, and how this may shape the interaction as well as the description of results.

In intercultural communication studies, there is still an additional problem, which concerns whether these stereotypes are described intraculturally or interculturally. We believe that as it is very difficult to get rid of one’s own stereotypes, the researchers interviewing people from their own culture about people from another culture will tend to cooperate with their own group, while if they interview people from a different culture they will not act exactly in the same manner given that they do not share the same cultural perspective.

In this paper we focus on the semi-structured interview as **text**, conceived as the process and result of an interaction (Brown and Yule, 1985, Bolívar, 1986). For this reason, in our study the interview becomes an aim in itself and not just an instrument to collect data. The aim is not to describe an “objective reality” but rather to see how categories are negotiated, accepted or rejected, and what identities are displayed by the interlocutors. We focus only on the intracultural negotiation of stereotypic beliefs as seen in the interview and we leave the intercultural analysis for further stages of the project.

### **Data and context**

The interviews for this study were collected in Caracas, Venezuela, in two Danish companies where Danes and Latin Americans have worked together for many years; one of the two companies has been in Venezuela for over 45 years while the other is younger and smaller. A Dane interviewed Danes (in

Danish) and a Venezuelan interviewed Latin Americans (in Spanish). A total of 8 interviews of approximately 50 minutes each were analyzed. The interviewees, five Latin Americans (three women and two men) and three Danes (two women and one man), participated voluntarily so the interviews were not planned and spontaneous. They were told that we were professors working on a project related to intercultural communication.

The Latin Americans occupied different positions on the rank scale of their companies, the women worked as secretaries, while the men had positions at an executive level. All the Danes had executive positions.

What follows is a description of the persons that agreed to talk with us. The names of the participants have been changed. We use A for the big company, and B for the small one.

### **Latin Americans**

María: Colombian, 17 years in Venezuela, Secretary to the President of company A.

Rina: Venezuelan, Italian parents, eight years in Company A, Secretary to the Finance Director.

Miguel: Venezuelan, Group manager, two and a half years in company A.

Angel: Cuban, group manager. Over 17 years working with Danes, but only two in company B.

Mitzi : Dominican Republic, Secretary to the President of company B.

### **Danes**

Lars: Top executive, import and export manager in company A; experience in the Spanish speaking world.

Caroline: Danish parents, born and grown in Venezuela. Sales Department manager in Company A.

Camila: two years in the country, Marketing Department in company B  
(confirmar)

It is worth giving some information on the social and historical context in order to understand the meanings created and the discourse strategies used by the participants. Notice that among the Latin Americans there is only one

Venezuelan. The other participants come from other Latin American countries or have European parents. This is explained because Venezuela received a considerable number of European immigrants from Southern Europe during and after the second world war. Also, during the 70's, when the oil boom made Venezuela a very affluent country, there was another migratory movement that brought Colombians and other Latin Americans to the country. Also, many Cubans left their country after the Cuban revolution in 1957 and chose Venezuela as their new home.

It is then possible to infer from the above that the stereotypic beliefs that these participants share are generalizations about Danes and Latin Americans but also about Venezuelans because they have lived in Caracas for many years. Still there is the possibility that they may want to show that there is a difference between them and Venezuelans.

Something similar happens with the Danes. Two are originally from Denmark but one was born in Venezuela. It is likely that this person will hold a different perspective or, at least, show more understanding of Venezuelan culture.

### **Assumptions:**

1. We assume that the semi-structured interview allows for negotiation because responses are not simply answers to questions but also a reflection of assessment by the participants involved. It is not just what they say but HOW and WHY they say it, and what the EFFECTS may be. This means that, from the point of view of the interview as text, it is a genre that needs further description, beyond the Question plus Answer structure. We assume that we have questions plus accounts, and we define accounts following Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998) as "long uninterrupted stretches of talk that may consist of anecdotes, explanations and stories, and so on.

2. Our second assumption is that the negotiation can be described on two planes: (Sinclair, 1983, Bolívar, 1986, 1994): the autonomous plane, that is,

the one that concerns the record of experience, and the interactive plane that concerns the relationship between the participants in the interaction. In terms of the analysis this means that we have to focus simultaneously on the topics the participants talk about and the acts they perform as they interact. We assume that there is a network of relations to be taken into account: the relations between turn-taking and topic, and exchange structure. The relation between topic and discourse strategy. The relations between evaluation and discourse strategy.

3. We also assume that in their interaction the participants exchange information and views of the world, and that they cooperate to construct a "reality" as well as the structure of the interview itself. The reality they build is influenced partly by their social and cultural background but also by the position they have in the company. Given that the Latin American interviewees are not the owners of the company and occupy positions as employees, it is predictable that cooperation and competition at the workplace may be observed through the interviews. As there are asymmetrical power relations, it is also likely that conflict may also be present.

4. We shall assume that interviewer and interviewee cooperate not just to build the interview as text but also the stereotypic beliefs.

### **The interview**

The interview used in the study was originally designed by Fant (1995?) around topics more than questions. The idea was to use these topics as the starting point for a dialogue in which course stereotypes would be negotiated by interviewer and interviewee. The main topics were:

1. general views on each other
2. politeness
3. social skills /social competence
4. self-confidence

5. argumentation skills
6. competitiveness
7. cooperation
8. trustworthiness
9. personal appearance
10. communication
11. negotiation skills (decision making, agenda, meetings, etc.)
12. what they like best of the other
13. what they dislike most of the other

However, other topics emerged in the interaction, which serve as evidence that in this semi-structured interview both participants cooperated in building the text as far as content. Some of the topics introduced by the Latin American interviewees, for example, were: Skin colour, family life, generation gap, Americans and Germans, poverty in Venezuela, the country's economic situation, historical references, and so on.

### **The description**

While there was interest in finding out what the stereotypic beliefs were (see for example Bolívar, 1999), the description focuses on the psycho-cultural processes in action, that is, the interactive process between individuals and the dynamics at the work setting. The cognitive processes described deal with the generalized perception of the other, the valuation of the other party, inferences concerning underlying factors, defense mechanisms to protect stereotypes against disconfirmation ((Kim & Gudykunst, 1988, Fant & Grinstead, 1995).

## **Accounts in interaction**

One of the main features of the interview as an interactive event is the pre-allocated turn-taking system. The interactive roles of interviewer and respondent is to pose questions and produce replies. Even with these restrictions, however, it turns out that the allocation of turns at speaking is not automatically achieved. Sequential organization refers to matters of contiguity. What is said in one utterance sets up expectations about what is to follow afterwards. In an interview, once a question has been raised by the interviewer, the respondents is constrained to reply or at least acknowledge expectations raised in the question. If we compare with the structured interview, where preferred sequential organization is strict question-reply sequences, in the semi-structured interview, the preference is rather question-account sequences.

Conversational negotiation refers to the process by which not only shared understanding are arrived at but also to interactive tasks like those mentioned above (turn-taking sequentiality). Negotiation is achieved indirectly and cooperatively through different speakers' turns as a kind of byproduct of the task of conveying content. In this way, responses are not simply answers to questions but also a reflection of the interviewer's assessment of whether a respondent has said enough for the purpose at hand and the respondent's willingness or ability to add more information.

Recurrent features of interactional organization of the joint construction of accounts between interviewer and respondent will appear from the following examples:

(1)

A: that's very interesting and look what do you think about the argumentation technique they use I mean how do they present their arguments efficiently or not very efficiently

M: yes very direct very direct

A: they are direct



M: yes for sure direct pretty objective in every bit of their presentations that is it's presentations maybe we are emotive and emotional making presentations that will appeal to another type of perception you know maybe we even talk things over and over again, we warm up names and all, but no, they start and all that you know they begin and present their figures results this is the important thing  
A: you mean what is interesting is results achievements  
M: yes, achievements  
A: things done  
M. that's it  
(AB1A)

The first part of A's turn is an assessment that marks that completion of the respondents' response to the prior interview question is accepted. A changes topic asking a new question from the interview schedule (what do you think about the argumentation technique?) and to facilitate M's understanding of the question she reformulates it dichotomized. In this way she invites him to follow a specific line of thoughts, so she is, in fact, putting constraints on his reply scope. M gives a minimal response about the Danes and their argumentation technique. They are very direct. This is repeated. Although A posed a closed question she is not satisfied with the answer, maybe because it's ambiguous, since it's unclear which part of the dichotomized question it refers to, probably because she wants to elicit more information. Anyway, she reformulates the response (they are direct?). This is sufficient to trigger off an account of why A thinks they are direct in their argumentation. What he does in the first place is to make a very broad generalization on different ways of perception. In the second place he categorizes Danes and Venezuelans into different membership groups. Danes are objective and direct. Venezuelans are emotional and beat about the bushes, and are person-oriented. The Danes are concerned with results and figures. He marks completion by stating that what has just been said is the important thing. In a way, he is assessing the quality of his own account and he signals that he is satisfied. The job A is doing next is to verify comprehension. She is constructing a question which is reformulated into a condensed version of the reply (results, achievements, things done), and M confirms that she has understood him right.

Example 2 that follows shows similarities in the Danish data. Notice how the interviewer cooperates with the interviewee in that she evaluates the short narrative presented by L (that's a funny little story) to illustrate the difference between Danes and Venezuelans with respect to their attitudes to hierarchical relations.

(2)

A okey ehm do you think they stick to formalities and:

L yes very much (they do) very much

A how does it reflect itself in daily life then

L yes well especially if they get a little bit er: you could say half a title to show on their back or something like that then: er: I have had some examples down here with a we others were laughing a bit but yes he suddenly was promoted a a a grade and then he should have his own office you know and by god if he did not get into the office to measure it if it was five centimeters smaller than that of his neighbour you know (laughing) so it well we were killing ourselves with laughter but anyway

A that's a funny little story (laughing)

L yes it it was we were damned well on the point of killing ourselves with laughter (laughing) where we don't care if only we have a phone and a computer and a fax you know (yes) and then damn it he should have an office that was exactly the same size as: as that of his neighbour you know and then he went in there to measure it both with a ruler and everything (laughing) so it we must say that they are damned interested in these things in general of course some are worse than others you know (oh yeah) but they are interested in such things

A now you give an example you know (yes yes) we can generalize from that (yes it) you think (yes it generally yes) is it easy to:make friends with them (AG2)

### **Generalized perception and valuations**

The participants in the interview tend to agree on the generalized perception of the other by allocating features and positive or negative evaluations. Also, there may be agreement and or disagreement between interviewers and interviewees.

When Latin Americans talk about Danes, they tend to assign them positive features with respect to their professional activity, they say that they are "good professionally", "they plan well in advance"; "they are good at business",, but tend to see them negatively as persons in that they find them "cold", "dry", and "don't dress well". However, Latin Americans do not reach an

agreement on whether they are good or bad at arguing or whether they are authoritarian or not. On the other hand, when Danes talk about Latin Americans, they perceive them as bad professionals, "they talk too much", "you can't trust them", "they have no sense of time". But they see them as "polite" and "family minded", which in fact might be a negative feature as this last one is associated with being old fashioned. Danes do not reach an agreement on whether Latin Americans are good at arguing or not.

It is interesting to notice that when Latin Americans talk about the Danes they also talk about themselves, mainly to show the differences. However, the Danes tend to answer the questions in a more direct way and talk less about themselves. When the valuations were quantified, it was found that the two women in the Latin American group gave more positive evaluations about the Danes than about the Latin Americans. María gave 30 positive versus 5 negative to the Danes, and 1 positive feature against four negative to the Latin Americans. Rina gave 26 positive versus 8 negative, and exactly as María to the Latin Americans. However, the men gave more negative features to the Danes than to the Latins. Miguel gave the Danes 14 positive and 17 negative, while Angel gave them 12 positive versus 22 negative. Also, they gave more positive evaluations to the Latin Americans than the women did.

As for the Danes, the only man in the group gave the Latin American a total of 21 positive evaluations against 68 negative. The two women had different attitudes, one was more inclined to positive evaluations (39 against 25) and the other to negative evaluations (19 positive versus 35 negative).

Although this a very short account on how they perceive and evaluate each other, there seems to be some evidence to sustain our assumption that the power relations affect the interaction and the perception they have of each other. The Latin Americans are secretaries and, as is obvious, show respect and loyalty to their bosses, while the two men show competition with their colleagues and also conflict derived from differences in conceiving their professionalism. (see examples below). Two of the men, in particular, give indications in that there is a confrontation between what has been called

“assumed superiority” (Rall, 1999) and the reaction that comes from those described as inferior. We see this in Lars and Angel, where Angel uses a destructive technique to build a negative identity of the Danes (De Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak, 1999).

The examples that follow illustrate the topics discussed as well as the cooperation between interviewer and interviewee.

(3)

In this example the interviewer (a Dane) reformulates what has been said by the interviewee (a Dane) in the previous answer; he carries on with his perception of what hierarchical means and she closes the topic with agreement and the initiation of a new question. This is an IR F/I exchange, where the Follow up may well be interpreted as agreement in that there is no further discussion on the part of the interviewer. The example is taken from Lars’ interview. Notice that he uses only negative evaluations and makes reference to his view of the political and historical circumstances in order to justify his attributions.

A           so what you are saying is that: the organizations are built up hierarchically and those at the top understand how to make others fetch and carry

L           I don’t know if they understand how to make others fetch and carry in fact this is in principle what they should do isn’t it but if you take all latin countries then one of the reasons why they time and again are used to the fact that there’ve been dictatorial and military dictatorship it’s typical you know that the latin you really have got to give them a push all the time for if not they just do exactly what they want (really) they they’re really very opposite to us in that sense they’re very individualistic and: if you ‘re not standing there with a stick to give them a prod all day long telling them where to go and what to do then then they’ll follow totally different routes that you’ve expected (h’m) and that’s probably why you see that all latin America is built up hierarchically

A           okey yes they are good at arguing for something I mean if there’s some kind of problem you know between yourself and: some Venezuelan staff are they good the at arguing for their cause

(AGL)

(4)

In this example, A tries to get information about the Latin Americans’ meeting culture, and while there is a positive evaluation at the start this changes to a more negative one, but ends with an interruption in which A introduces her own opinion “but you have to take that haven’t you”, which introduces the topic that it is a matter of difference. L agrees with her, and A reinforces this response before moving to the next question, but her next

question is a reformulation of the negative evaluation already given by L. So this seems to be a case of apparent accommodation. (Please check!)

A but now let's imagine that the meeting that they did come and the meeting starts (yes) um:how how is their meeting culture then do you understand what I mean (no)um what about how is do they respect that another is speaking and you are quiet until the other has finished and finally when you're allowed to give an answer the it's also relevant for what the other just said and so on and so on

L I will say no this is because ha um: the meetings I've been to here actually people have generally been good enough at keeping quiet but on the contrary it has been bloody difficult to get those who were supposed to shut up you know (laughing) and this in turn means that if some questions are raised to somebody who is speaking well it means that they speak for an hour without interruption well then it's bloody difficult because it afterwards suddenly forty-seven questions (laughing) well then you've damn well forgotten what they were talking about an hour ago you know so in this case it's of little interest at that moment spend a hell of a lot of time in this way you could rather stay in the conference room all overnight you know but well it isn't (yes **but you have to take that haven't** you) that's the way it is that's the way it is **it is different**

A **it's different** um: so you think it's what could we say time-consuming to go to a meeting  
(AGL)

(5)

In this example, Miguel, one of the Latin American men, shows his resistance to committing himself to a straight answer and uses humour to reply. Humour though serves the purpose of indicating the difference from the start. Also, notice how the interviewer, also a Latin American, laughs with him about the joke and finally agrees with his general perception. Miguel uses a more constructive strategy than Lars in that he gives more positive evaluations and focuses on the difference.

A Look the question I have here is what do you think in general about Danes, in general terms about danes

M danes? Well loo:k they are white.....(laughing)

A (also laughing) but that is a description...what I want is an opinion

M they are white....Nordic.....they come from Denmark (yes) (both laughing) look I see them as human beings the same as us this is obviously they do have marked differences particularly...in their way of looking at life we here have...that sort of peed for taking things ahead so sometimes we can leave them for the last minute which gives us some advantage to REACT quickly with great speed to the problems that may come up and they take things very calmly with a great deal of anticipation they plan very well mmm

that is the main difference that is I see..there are cultural differences at the personal level eh..obviously for example: things such as when they reach a certain age they leave home and leave their parents and start living on their own eh: I don't know perhaps the fact that they are unmarried women that of course but seen from another angle another crystal and certain types of developments are faster than here

A yes of course in Europe in general

(6)

In this example, A shows her surprise at C's reply (both Latin Americans), but in the end she reinforces his view by giving an explanation and agrees with him so that the Danes appear as impolite. In this case the interviewee is Angel, the Cuban, who is very categorical about his negative perceptions. Notice the uses A makes of the pronoun "we", the first time she is talking about herself and the other interviewer (the Dane), but in the second she means Latin Americans.

A and do you think they are polite or not very polite?

C I would say that are not very polite

A yes?

C yes

A not very polite....and how do you understand politeness because that is something **we** are very interested in

C politeness is....well when all of sudden they invite you to a meeting where there are three of them and two Venezuelans and they start speaking in Danish that I think is impolite

A that is speak in their own language of course

C exactly where one does not understand and then when they want they switch language then they start speaking Spanish or

A sure

C that is not correct

A Yes we see it as bad manners that is we are taught that since we are kids

C that's correct

A it's true yes

The study also shows that in the interaction between interviewer and interviewee different types of exchanges are created, although the IR sequence seems to be the commonest. IRF are common as well mainly when there is evaluation on the side of the interviewer. The examples above show some of these cases and also IRF/I.

## Conclusion

We have argued that the semi-structured interview serves the purpose of helping us observe the cognitive processes as well as the interactive process of text building. We have seen that the participants express their perceptions and evaluations of the other in a cooperative way and that what we obtain is not an "objective reality" in terms of list of features only but we also have a picture on how this is done. It is interesting to see how interviewer and interviewee often share the same views in spite of the attempts at stating the contrary. It is now fundamental to continue research on the intracultural interviews to see how interviewees and interviewers from different cultures negotiate their stereotypic beliefs about themselves and about the others.

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