AMBIGUITY IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: The focus of this paper is on intercultural communication, on the process of making information cross different cultures and social groups. Taking into account the fact that transmitting information properly across cultures is a challenge even for individuals acting on their own behalf, this process becomes even more difficult for supranational institutions. The starting point is the perspective of Eric Eisenberg on strategic ambiguity, as an important element in successful organizational communication. But to what extent can we regard ambiguity as being constructive or destructive in building inter or cross-cultural interactions and to what extent does communication need to be clear in order to be effective? These are the main aspects that are being analysed in this paper.

Keywords: strategic ambiguity, intercultural communication, discourse, collective identity, institution.

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, intercultural communication has become a more complex process, due to the new technological development and to the borders that it manages to surpass. Supranational institutions have an even more difficult task, when trying to convey messages to a large and diverse audience.

The aspects we are going to discuss in this article are divided into a theoretical and a practical approach: First, we are going to discuss institutional discourse, collective identity, clarity and strategic ambiguity in discourse, and the ethics behind strategic ambiguity. The practical part consists in a short interpretation of the ambiguity used in the European Union institutional discourse. The question we are trying to answer is whether ambiguity in institutional discourse impedes the recipients of the message to be properly informed, or it is a means of addressing a wide audience in an inclusive way.

2. LACK OF CLARITY IN DISCOURSE

Ignacio Ramonet in the paper *La tyrannie de la communication* analyses the role that new information technologies, in general, and the Internet, in particular, have in transmitting information that is more and more diffuse and less and less controlled:

the current concern of the citizens is based on the belief that the informational system in itself is not reliable, that it is faulty, that it gives proof of incompetence and that it can – sometimes without knowledge - present enormous lies as truths[1] (Ramonet, 2001: 42).

Notwithstanding the impact of the Internet, television is considered to be the medium of transmitting information of the greatest impact; it can lead to the amplification in the importance of a particular event or to draw the attention from other important events (Ramonet, 2001:45-52).

Alice Krieg-Planque, in the book *Analyser les discours institutionnels*, points out that democratic life is completely constructed with texts and words, and she gives the example of the election process, a free and independent act, behind which there are a lot of discourse activities meant to lead to persuasion, adhesion, association or support (Krieg-Planque, 2014:15). In discourse analysis, the lack of clarity, the vague, is not considered to be a shortcoming, but a resource that the language offers to its users, as producing or analysing a text does not consist in eliminating ambiguities, but in identifying its multiple points of questionability, of describing the discursive effects, of offering different interpretations (Krieg-Planque, 2014:155). In some institutional and professional situations, the uncertainty and lack of explicitly can be considered as a problem or an obstacle, as there is a tendency to value clarity and the lack of confusion. Hence, part of the lack of clarity is

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[1] author's translation from French

eliminated due to the usage of language in context and the targeted audience would eventually perceive what was meant to be transmitted; ambiguity and polysemy are considered to be acceptable in particular domains such as poetry or advertising. Krieg-Planque considers that the acceptance of ambiguity should not be restrained to some particular domains, as language is considered to be naturally equivocal, and each language has its own points of ambiguity and polysemy that are difficult to be transposed and translated in other languages. In the translation process, some ambiguities are eliminated but, at the same time, new ones are being introduced. The misunderstandings that occur because of ambiguity are not denied, but ambiguity should be regarded also as a multitude of interpretations, as a plurality of possible interpretations, and not only as a source of misinterpretation. The political discourse, for example, or public discourse in general, needs to take into account the diversity of the audience and of the addressees. How else could a message represent a threat and a commitment at the same time, other than being equivocal? The author gives the example of the sentence *Order will be maintained at any cost*, which can be perceived and interpreted in both of the above mentioned ways, by different categories of audience. (Krieg-Planque, 2014: 155-166)

An over neutral tone and register may have the exact opposite effect. Instead of including a large range of the audience, it can make individuals feel that the speech does not address them personally. An over neutral language may not reach the audience, and can be interpreted as lack of involvement. Let us use as example the online marketing campaigns, where the e-mails we receive are personalized. Instead of the more impersonal *dear customer*, using names and, mostly, first names has the purpose of creating a more personal relation, a stronger bond between the one who offers the service and the product, and the potential customer or consumer.

But we cannot always address individuals directly and, in some cases, the purpose is to address them as a group, in order to make them feel that they belong to that particular group. This leads us to the concept of collective identity.

3. COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

The concept of collective identity, an identity that dynamically transcends the individual, is defined by Alberto Melucci as

an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals (or groups at a more complex level) and concerned with the orientations of action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place. (Melucci, 1995: 44)

He also points out that identity is the result of an active process that comprises self-reflection, in spite of the tendency to make it stable. (Melucci, 1995: 45-46).

Collective identity does not refer only to the recipients of the message, but also to the sender of the message, to the collective sender or enunciator. Dominique Maingueneau makes a distinction between *locuteurs individuels* and *locuteurs collectifs*, identifying the discourse of institutions as a discourse of collective locutors/enunciators, a discourse that not only creates, but also reinforces the identity of the institutions (Maingueneau, 2014: 75).

The bond between language and identity is very strong as, language is not just a means of expressing identity, but also a means of creating identity, or of identities, as we can belong to different types of groups, whether they are small or large, supranational ones, and we can migrate from one group to the other. (Ferréol, Jucquois, 2005: 159).

4. STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY AND ETHICS

The notion of „strategic ambiguity" was introduced by Eric Eisenberg in an article published in 1984, *Ambiguity as strategy in organizational communication* (Eisenberg, 2007: 3-24). According to Eisenberg, the concept of an idyllic message is clearly deceiving, as clarity is not a characteristic of messages, but it is a relational variable, influenced by a series of factors such as the source, the message and the recipient of the message. In an attempt of being clear, individuals take into consideration the possible interpretative contexts of the recipient and the possibility of restraining the area of possible interpretations. However, in certain contexts, it is more convenient to omit certain contextual aspects and to make room for multiple interpretations by the recipients.

Discussing the way strategic ambiguity is being used within the organizations, Eisenberg considers that it encompasses multiple points of view, and its usage is common in the organizational missions, scopes or plans. Using strategic ambiguity is considered to be a political necessity, so that different composing groups can give different interpretations to the utilized symbols. This type of discourse can also be used in the case of group documents, promoting in this

manner a unified diversity. Even though the perspectives of the group members can be somewhat different, this is a manner in which the group can express one single voice (Eisenberg, 2007: 8-9).

According to Eisenberg, strategic ambiguity can contribute to the development of interpersonal relations within organizations, creating certain personal bonds between the people that perceive messages in a similar way. To support this statement, Eisenberg gives the example of using jargon and nicknames. For those outside the organization, a speech that uses these elements may seem ambiguous and bizarre, but for those within, who understand the real meaning of the message, it is a reaffirmation of their belonging to that particular group. (Eisenberg, 2007: 12).

Another aspect that should be taken into consideration when discussing strategic ambiguity is ethics. Eisenberg considers that ambiguity is ethical or not depending on the scope that it is being used for:

> The use of more or less ambiguity is in itself not good or bad, effective or ineffective; whether a strategy is ethical depends upon the ends to which it is used, and whether it is effective depends upon the goals of the individual communicators (Eisenberg, 2007: 18).

However, in some cases, the unethical use of strategic ambiguity is evident, and greater attention should be paid to the line between ambiguity and deception (Sim, Fernando, 2010: 19).

Similarly to the awareness of cultural specificity, when communication surpasses the limits of a certain discursive system the people involved are more aware of the communicational process. In order to improve professional communication, in the case of different discursive systems, we could consider a thorough research regarding the people that we interact with, whether this research envisages culture, gender, age, individual specificities, and accepting the fact that discrepancies in common understanding are a constant of intercultural or inter-discursive communication, that should be accepted.

The use of strategic ambiguity is an instrument of expressing a diversity of views or interpretations and promotes *inclusiveness and unity in its diversity*. (Sim, Fernando, 2010: 4). And since *unity in diversity* is also a motto of the European Union, next, we are going to focus on a favourable interpretation of ambiguity, on its usage in a type on non-conflictual discourse, namely the EU discourse in official documents and speeches.

5. AMBIGUITY IN THE EU INSTITUTIONAL DISCOURSE

We have chosen this type of institutional discourse due to the complexity and diversity of the recipients and to the wide impact that it has in the public sphere. We are going to present three categories of discursive ambiguity, in terms of three main purposes that we have identified: ambiguity to avoid assigning blame or responsibility; ambiguity to draw cautious conclusions and make cautions predictions; ambiguity for inclusion and to encourage participation.

5.1 Ambiguity to avoid assigning blame or responsibility. In order to exemplify this role of subtle accountability, we are going to use a press release of the *European Commission on Giving Citizens a Say: Commission Report on European Citizens' Initiatives:*

> The fact that two Citizens' Initiatives have gone through the full process shows that the Regulation establishing the ECI has been fully implemented. However, the report acknowledges that *there is still room to improve* the process and identifies *a number of possible issues* for further discussion with stakeholders and institutions.[…] Statements of support have been received from citizens in all 28 EU Member States. However, *there are situations where some citizens* have not been able to support Initiatives due to diverging Member States' requirements. The Commission is involved in constructive discussions with the Member States concerned to address these issues and *has adopted measures* today *to facilitate a resolution*. (European Commission, 31 March 2015)

The speech seems to be more precise when it expresses the positive outcomes, but more ambiguous when tackling less positive outcomes. The fact that *there is still room to improve the process* has the aim of highlighting what has been accomplished, instead of what was not implemented. The purpose of the speech is not only of transmitting information, but also of generating action. The aim could be to make the persons or institutions that are in charge of these aspects to solve some of the problems that occurred, without clarify assigning responsibilities. Hence, ambiguity is not only strategic, but we can consider it to be inevitable, as the purpose is not to particularize but to generalize, in order to present a report on a situation. The measures to facilitate resolution, though not clearly stated at this point, are presented as potential generators of win-win

situations, where all member states are responsible and where all can benefit from the outcomes.

5.2 Ambiguity to draw cautious conclusions and make cautions predictions. Let us examine part of a report provided by Policy Department A for the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, which summarises the results of the project *Wage Dispersion in the European Union*:

> Although this share has been *rather* stable in the years before 2010, it *may* have increased due to the adverse economic developments caused by the Euro area debt crisis, as fiscal consolidation programmes launched in several countries are *likely* to have limited employment opportunities in the short and medium run […] Finally, the gender dimension *may* be among the driving forces of inequality. […] Gender-based inequalities are further enforced by the fact that women are more often engaged in part time work than men. In this regard, the creation of more full-time work opportunities for females *might* act as an instrument to reduce the difference between *certain* percentiles of monthly earnings. […] Wage setting institutions *may* affect wage inequality, but *probably* not instantaneously (Dreger *et al.*, 2015:14-45).

We can notice in the text above the use of modifiers such as *rather*, *likely*, *probably*, or of modal verbs of possibility, such as *may*, that express cautiousness when making predictions or when making affirmations about the factors that led to complex social, political or economic consequences. As the report tackles sensitive topics such as inequality, incomes and gender, it is not advisable to make clear cause-effect affirmations, and a slight ambiguity is not only a strategy, but also advisable and realistic.

2.4.3 Ambiguity for inclusion and to encourage participation. In order to illustrate the inclusive usage of ambiguity, we can observe parts of a speech given by Neven Mimica, commissioner in charge of International cooperation and Development, at the Conference European Responsibility in a Global World:

> We stand before a unique opportunity to shape the development agenda for generations to come and to re-define the way the global community works together. The European Union - both the European institutions and the EU Member States - have a great responsibility in making this opportunity a success.[…] I consider it essential that politicians and citizens use this momentum to hold informed discussions on what more Europe can do to make the world a fairer place, ensure social justice and eradicate poverty. (European Commission, 26 March 2015)

The notion of fairness can be considered to be ambiguous, as it is perceived differently, and how a group or an individual perceives fairness will justify their actions, regardless of how they may impact others. Let us take the example of similar wages for similar positions. For some employees, this could seem like a fair treatment, but to others, that feel they put more effort and they contribute more to the welfare of the institution of company that they work for, the same algorithm can be perceived as unfair. Nevertheless, concepts such as *fairness* or *social justice* are often included in speeches, as they have a positive connotation, even if they are interpreted differently.

The commissioner ads that:

> We stand at a critical point in the process, with the post-2015 negotiations intensifying. The EU will play an invaluable bridge-building role. (European Commission, 26 March 2015)

This role of building bridges is again slightly ambiguous, and can be interpreted as building bridges between member-states, between citizens, between member and non-member states, building economic, cultural or political bridges.

She also states that:

> The Union's clear message is that financing for development […] needs to ensure mobilisation and effective use of domestic resources. This includes responsible public finance management, preventing tax avoidance and evasion, fight against illicit financial outflows, introducing financial transactions tax and other innovative taxation. But we must not only ask others in the developing world to improve tax fairness and transparency. We must start with that at home in Europe. (European Commission, 26 March 2015)

This part of the speech encourages participation. It is interesting to see how taxation, which is normally perceived in a negative way, is associated with the term *innovative*, in order to give it a positive connotation, as financing has e development purpose, without clearly specifying what taxation or what development is to be expected. Also, how domestic resources are being used effectively is again an aspect that is perceived and quantified differently.

6. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, ambiguity should be regarded more than as a lack of conveying a singular, clear message, as a capacity of producing multiple understandings, a way of reconciling the diversity

of individuals and the institutions envisaged. Ethical aspects are, in many cases, difficult to be established, as they depend on the intention of the author, but strategic ambiguity should not be associated with unethical behaviour, as even a very clear message can have unethical intentions behind it.

Similar perceptions of ambiguous messages give individuals the feeling of belonging or confirm the belonging to a group. Hence, the ambiguity used in institutional discourse is a valuable tactic and, even though we do not encourage lack of clarity, we are aware of the fact that, in some cases, ambiguity is a feature of intercultural communication.

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