

Application of Dynamic Semiotics: Semiotic and Memetic Approach to the Fusion and Unification of Individualistic and Collectivistic Concepts

Gu Jiazu

Nanjing Normal University, China

Abstract: The author of this paper gives a detailed semiotic analysis to the dynamic change of individualism and collectivism, the main cultural concepts shared by Westerners and Easterners respectively. The author believes that the rise of memetics has contributed immensely to dynamic semiotics and dynamic semiotic analysis, in turn, is made more applicable to many branches of learning in general and to intercultural communication in particular. The author ventures that individualism and collectivism seem opposed to each other, they can be unified and fused as a result of memetic movement including memetic spreading, selection and memetic quality variation. Intercultural communicators can possess at the same time both desirable individualistic and collectivistic concepts in the process of intercultural communication as a result of semiotic production. Such tendency is justified by the existence of androgyny in human character. The author, in the meantime, gives a semiotic analysis to intercultural communicators' cultural structure. The author concludes that intercultural communication is the nature of the cultural structure of intercultural communicators, a semiotic mixture which is different from their home culture or the target culture.

Concepts are the core of a culture which is hidden and, therefore, relatively hard to change as compared with other forms of culture. As different cultures have different concepts, we have to give a brief survey to the classifications of culture before we touch upon the topics of concepts.

1. Main Classifications of Culture

With regard to The classification of culture, like the definition of culture, we can have various ways and sometimes we might have a hard time to say which classification is the best. In spite of the difficulties in doing so, we generally

believe the classification which can cover the widest scope of cultures is to be preferred.

1.1 Standard for cultural classification

The best classification should be the one which can cover all kinds of cultures and which can avoid overlapping in the definitions of different categories.

1.2 The controversial issues in the classification of culture

Some scholars tend to classify culture into two categories: material culture and spiritual culture. We admit that there is some truth in it. However, such classification cannot avoid overlapping in the definitions of the relevant cultural components, as material culture may contain spiritual culture and the vice versa.

1.3 Edward Hall's classification: a classification of culture based on the visibility of cultural components

Among a plenty of cultural classifications we have come across, we have found the one given by Edward Hall seems more scientific just because his classification avoids the possible overlapping in the definitions of different components of a classification.

Edward Hall, the originator of the world intercultural communication studies, classifies culture into two categories: overt culture and covert culture as he describes in the following:

Culture existed on two levels: overt culture, which is visible and easily described, and covert culture, which is not visible and presents difficulties even to the trained observer. (Hall, 1959, p.61)

With regard to the different quantity of overt and covert culture, Hall believes that "culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants". (Hall, 1959, p.29)

The main advantage of Hall's classification lies in the fact that this classification can avoid overlapping in the definitions of different cultural categories and this is what other cultural classifications can hardly do.

Many scholars tend to classify culture into spiritual and material cultures. However, it is pretty hard to define what is spiritual and what is material. A souvenir which is seemingly material turns out to be spiritual. A church, a temple, a museum, a cinema or a theatre, a library, etc. can have both material and spiritual values. The main problem with this classification is that the antonym of material is not necessarily spiritual, it should be non-material and non-material

things can be many: spiritual, social, cultural, etc. So the classification of culture into material and spiritual cultures seem to be logically unacceptable.

On the other hand, Hall's classification of culture into overt and covert cultures is based on visibility and invisibility of the things and overt and covert cultures can include everything as the two words overt and covert are antonyms and therefore, hall's classification of culture proves more logical and inclusive, avoiding the overlapping and confusion concerning the definitions of cultural categories each classification may give rise to.

1.4 Cultural classification based on the concepts of value orientations: individualism and collectivism

Culture can be classified on many other dimensions. Apart from the dimension of cultural visibility as taken by Edward Hall, culture can be classified based on value orientations: individualism and collectivism. The main differences between their value orientations are reflected in the fact that

Individuals' goals are emphasized more than group goals in individualistic cultures. Group goals, in contrast, take precedence over individuals' goals in collectivistic cultures. (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, p.56)

In individualistic cultures, "people are supposed to look after themselves and their immediate family only," while in collectivistic cultures, "people belong to ingroups or collectivities which are supposed to look after them in exchange for loyalty. (Hofstede & Bond, 1984, p.419)

As concepts are the core of any culture, value orientations are reflected in the concepts of many issues such as materialism, success, work and activity, progress, rationality, democracy, humanitarianism, hospitality, generosity, courage, honor, and self-respect. (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, pp.58—59.)

1.5 Concepts as the focus of intercultural communication study

As concepts are the main contents in the layer of covert culture, in books on cultural communication such as the authoritative book *Communicating with Strangers* (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997), the authors "focus on the concepts necessary to understand the people from other cultures" (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, p. 2). Intercultural communication study is, therefore, is the study of human concepts and the value orientations are the core of human concepts (Gu, 2002).

1.6 Individualistic and collectivistic concepts as the core of value orientations

Value orientations are reflected in many concepts such as the concepts of human right, work, marriage, development, legality, morality, individualism and collectivism. Of these concepts, individualistic and collectivistic concepts are the core of value orientations and the classification of culture into individualism and collectivism has, therefore, become one of the most important areas in intercultural communication study.

1.7 Limitations in the study of individualistic and collectivistic concepts

We admit that Gudykunst and others have contributed immensely to the study of intercultural communication in general and to the study of individualistic and collectivistic in particular. They have aroused the readers' attention to the differences of concepts between individualistic and collectivistic cultures and we can say that their theory in this perspective only has marked the milestone in the history of intercultural communication studies.

Their theory in this regard, however, has limitations. Their detailed analysis of individualistic and collectivistic concepts is absolutely right from static point of view. Dynamically speaking, however, there are limitations in their study of such concepts for they haven't touched upon the movement of individualism and collectivism. Semiotically speaking, every sign is in motion and ideological signs such as individualism and collectivism are no exceptions. In other words, the difference between individualism and collectivism are relative, not absolute. They are subject to constant changes. Moreover, while we admit that individualism and collectivism are seemingly opposed to each other, they are, however, a unity under certain conditions: members of a certain culture or even a nation can possess at the same time both individualism and collectivism especially with the development of globalization. With individual persons, the fusion of individualistic and collectivistic concepts can become a more obvious and prominent phenomenon than the over-simplified division between individualism and collectivism.

2. The Role of Memetic Movement in the Fusion of Individualistic and Collectivistic Concepts

2.1 Memetic imitation as the internal cause for the adaptation of other nation's behavior and way of thinking

The publication of the *Selfish Gene*, *The meme machine*, *The Selfish meme*, etc., marked the rise of memetics (Gu, 2008). According to memetic theory, imitation or copying is human specific and humans do it naturally:

We do copy each other all the time and we understand what is involved because imitation comes so easily to us. When we copy each other, something, however intangible, is passed on. That something is the meme. And taking a meme's eye view is the foundation of memetics (Blackmore, 1999, p. 52).

In the meantime, memetic theory emphasizes the importance of selection in the process of imitation:

Organic and cultural selection work on the same criterion—that is, inclusive fitness—and are complementary (Blackmore, 1999, p. 35).

The law of imitation can be applied in every aspect of human culture and it is particularly applicable to intercultural communication:

We can hardly say many intercultural communication phenomena such as the adaptation process of enculturation to assimilation through deculturation and acculturation can be achieved without the mimetic process of imitation and selection (Gu, 2008).

In the process of intercultural communication, the participants from different countries have wide contact with each other and through imitation and selection, they tend to adapt themselves step by step for the foreign habits and customs and even foreign ways of thinking.

2.2 The role of mimetic imitation and selection in cultural evolution

Intercultural communication, in its final analysis, is a semiotic activity, dealing with sign exchange through sign transmission in a much more complicated dynamic manner than interpersonal communication in an intraculture (Gu, 2008). It is in such a memetic movement that the participants of intercultural communication undergo a process of memetic selection: the participants tend to compare all kinds of foreign cultural phenomena they have encountered with what they have experienced in their home culture and find out what are fit to them. The memetic selection will result in the building of the participants' new cultural framework—interculture. By interculture, we mean the culture between home culture and target culture. The concept of interculture with intercultural communication is different from what is traditionally imagined: Traditionally, accultuation goes side by side with decultuation as described in the following:

When strangers move into a new and unfamiliar culture and interact in it, the process of resocialization, or *acculturation*, occurs. Gradually, strangers begin to detect similarities and differences within the new surroundings. They become acquainted with and adopt some of the norms and values of salient reference groups of the host society. As acculturation takes place, however, some unlearning of old cultural patterns occurs as well, at least in the sense that new responses are adopted in situations that previously would have evoked different ones. This unlearning of the original cultural habits is called *deculturation*. (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, p. 337)

With the appearance of memetic theory, we can look at it from different angles. We admit that deculturation occurs in the process of intercultural communication, deculturation, however, is not limited to intercultural communication only.

Deculturation can also occur in intracultural communication, that is, the communication between the people from the same culture as intracultural communication is likewise related to meme spreading:

Everything that is passed from person to person is a meme. This includes all the words in your vocabulary, the stories you know, the skills you have picked up from others and the games you like to play. It includes the songs you sing and rules you obey. (Blackmore, 1999, p. 7)

Such meme spreading will inevitably cause imitation on the part of communicators and imitation will undergo a process of selection:

There is memetic selection—some memes grab the attention, are faithfully remembered, and passed on to other people, while others fail to be copied at all. (Blackmore, 1999 p. 14)

Such imitation and selection make culture change all the time:

“The whole point of memetic theory of cultural evolution is to treat memes as replicators in their own right. This means that memetic selection drives the evolution of ideas in the interests of replicating the memes, not the genes” (Blackmore, 1999, p. 24).

In the process of such memetic selection, intracultural communication may very likely involve the unlearning of original habits and customs or change in the cultural concepts. In other words, deculturation is not the patent for intercultural communication.

2.3 The role of memetic selection in the fusion of individualistic and collectivistic concepts

Intercultural communication provide its participants with broadest opportunities for imitation. Its participants, however, do not imitate everything blindly. They have to undergo a complicated process of memetic selection; they tend to select the memes which fit them best. In other words, fitness is the main standard for memetic selection. Take individualism and collectivism for example. Both individualism and collectivism have their advantages and disadvantages. The participants tend to adopt what is suitable for them and reject what seem to them unsuitable. In the whole process of acculturation, the participants resort to their cognitive ability and give up some of the original ideas, but will not give up what seem to them essential and reasonable in their home culture. In other words, while the participants from collectivistic culture may adopt some of the individualistic self construals and personality orientations such as idiocentrism. They may also retain their original collectivistic concepts. The participants can select what is good in both individualism and collectivism, forming the cultural framework of what we call *interculture* although we admit some other participants may adopt individualistic concepts at the sacrifice of their original concepts if they choose to.

In short, in the process of acculturation, there are two or more possibilities with regard to retaining or giving up their original ideas in their home culture. Although individualism and collectivism seem opposed to each other, individual persons, however, may possess both qualities. In this sense, individualistic and collectivistic concepts can be unified among intercultural communication participants so that the acquisition of foreign culture will not mean the subtraction of one's home culture. It means productive bi-culturalism in their heads: They have become persons with two or more cultures.

Although we admit that acculturation may sometimes lead to deculturation of one's home culture, acculturation can generally become an addition to one's home culture without making any sacrifice to it. With this view in mind, we are justified to say one can have both individualistic and collectivistic concepts as a result of intercultural communication. Thus, the unification of individualism and collectivism is made theoretically possible.

2.4 Androgyny as psychological evidences for the shaping of bi-cultural persons

Humans have broad prospects for the development of character. To be bi-cultural persons with both individualistic and collectivistic concepts is only one perspective in intercultural communicators' character and personality. Such flexibility is reflected in other perspectives of human character and personality such as androgyny:

“Androgyny is an ancient word taken from the Greek andro (male) and gyn (female) and defines a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes and the human impulses expressed by men and women are not rigidly assigned”. The duality of the nature of the individual has been recognized by the Greek Pythagorean myth of creation, in which people sought their other halves to reunite in mating and find a sense of wholeness. (Richmond—Abbott, 1992, p. 100)

The duality of the nature of the individual is reflected in persons who possess both masculine and feminine features:

“Androgynous individual is one who identifies with both desirable masculine and desirable feminine characteristics and is freed from... gender role limitations and is able to more comfortably engage in both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ behavior across a variety of social situations.” (Richmond-Abbott, 1992, p. 11)

Similarly, bi-cultural or multi-cultural individual is one who identifies with both desirable individualistic and collectivistic cultural concepts and the shaping of such persons is made psychologically possible by the flexibility and duality of human character and is made realistic by memetic movement in intercultural communication.

3. Conclusion

3.1 The famous Chinese linguist Liu Runqing's saying about bi-cultural and multi-cultural persons

The famous Chinese linguist and thinker Liu Runqing (2000) spoke very highly of Chinese foreign language teaching and learning community who have become bi-lingual and bi-cultural:

The world lacks “bi-lingual”, “bi-cultural”, or “multi-lingual” and “multi-cultural” persons (2000). The bi-linguals like us seem to be more “foreign” than foreigners, more “Chinese” than Chinese nationals. This is because we possess

bi-cultural wisdom and sight. We understand foreign culture more thoroughly than uni-lingual Chinese and we understand Chinese culture better than Chinese compatriots who do not know any foreign languages.

3.2 Acculturation can take place automatically as a result of memetic movement

With the further development of globalization, more and more people will become bi-cultural or multi-cultural. We do not deny completely the existence of Deculturation, but we believe deculturation generally occurs with what we call “peripheral culture” or “overt culture”, seldom occurs with central culture or covert culture:

As the dynamic interplay of acculturation and deculturation continues, newcomers gradually undergo a cross-cultural adoption process. Of course, a change in their basic values is extremely difficult, slow and rare. Brim (in Brim & Wheeler, 1966) suggests that more common adaptive change in strangers take place in more superficial areas such as over role behavior. A person can be pressed to conform to requirements in social interactions but cannot be forced to accept and appreciate the underlying values.

(Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, p.337)

It is believed, therefore, acculturation can take place automatically in the process of intercultural communication as a result of memetic movement and the occurrence of such acculturation is not conditioned by deculturation although the latter might occur with the former from time to time.

3.3 Productive bi-culturalism leading to the fusion and unification of individualistic and collectivistic concepts

From the above analysis, we can conclude that intercultural communicators experience a process of productive bi-culturalism, not subtractive bi-culturalism. In other words, intercultural communicators will not lose anything in their home culture. The communicators from collectivistic culture can likewise acquire individualistic concepts without losing anything in their home culture, and the vice versa. And this is especially true with adult intercultural communicators. In this sense, individualistic and collectivistic concepts can be unified and fused so far as intercultural communication participants are concerned.

References

- Blackmore, S. (1999). *The Meme Machine*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brim, O. & Wheeler, S. (1966). *Socialization through the Life Circle*. New York: Wiley.
- Gu, Jiazu. (2002). The Emphasis and knotty points of intercultural communication studies as seen from cultural structures. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 2002 (1), 45—48.
- Gu, Jiazu. (2008). Theoretical framework of dynamic semiotics as seen from the rise of memetics. *Foreign Language Research*, 2008(1), 118—121.
- Gu, Jiazu. (2008). Theorizing about intercultural communication: dynamic semiotic and memetic approach to intercultural communication (A commentary). *China Media Research*, April 2008, Vol.4, No.2.
- Gudykunst, W. B. & Kim, Y. Y. (1997). *Communicating with Strangers*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.
- Hall, E. T. (1959, 1984). *The Silent Languages*. New York: Anchor Books, Double Day.
- Hofstede, G. & Bond, M. (1984). Hofstede's cultural dimensions. *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, (15) 417—433.
- Liu, R. (2000). Preface to *Intercultural Communication: Covert Culture in Foreign Languages and Literature*. Gu, J. (2000). Nanjing: Nanjing Normal University Press.
- Richmond-Abbott, M. (1992). *Masculine and Feminine*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.