Communication across Cultural Boundaries: Learning *From* and *With* Others through Dialogical Semiospheres

Farouk Y. Seif

Antioch University Seattle, Washington (USA)

Abstract

Learning *from* and *with* others is significant for the sustainability of cultures and the effectiveness of global communication. Experiencing different cultural settings is essential for the development of one's cultural understanding. Interacting with other cultures demands courageous navigation through unfamiliar cultural boundaries. Empirical observations of a cross-cultural program in Egypt have stimulated a deep understanding of learning from and with others and augmented the theoretical framework of this paper. Through a dialogical «semiosphere» members of different cultures can reach an interpretative understanding of the differences between their ideological biases and discover high-leverage points for cultural vitality. Communication is perceived not only as a condition for the existence of culture but also as a criterion for recognizing cultural identity. To communicate is to cultivate significance, and to cultivate significance is to communicate — a reciprocity that can be maintained by cross-cultural interaction and the capacity for dialogical semiospheres.

Keywords: Communication, cross-culture, self and others, semiospheres

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PARADOX OF SELF AND OTHERS

To communicate is to live outside oneself. Learning *from* and *with* others is more important than ever for the sustainability of cultural identity and the effectiveness of global communication. And effective global communication is attainable through experiencing different cultural settings, which is also essential for the development of one's cultural understanding and personal growth. For the purpose of clarity, I have identified «Self» and one's own culture as one pole, and «Other» and the culture of others as another pole, in the paradoxical situation of crossing semiotic boundaries. In crossing cultural boundaries, all individuals and cultures inevitably experience the ongoing struggle of preserving self-identity in the face of universality.

One of the characteristics of global communication is the tendency to homogenization, the leveling of differences, which leads to the mutual exclusion of self and others — and consequently, a diminished condition for learning from and with others. Ironically, «the kind of difference necessary for the recognition and assertion of identity is indifferent difference, that is, difference that is indifferent to other difference. Indifferent difference is achieved by sacrificing otherness to various degrees and in varying ways, both one's own otherness and the otherness of others» (Petrilli 2004: 201).

Every culture becomes «universalized before it disappears,» says Jean Baudrillard, and this demise of cultures is not discernible from within; a culture «seems to approach its end only in an asymptotic curve» (Baudrillard 1984: 104-105). We can infer from Baudrillard's statement that paradox is not the death sentence of cultures. In other words, we can argue that experiencing the paradox of cultural change and cultural continuity does not lead cultures to their end; rather it is the insistence on duality of self and others that ushers cultures to the finality of their death. While a person experiences the pressure of social relationships, which may prevent him or her from experiencing any individuality, extreme individualization and specialization hamper all semiotic communication, making people feel more alienated (Lotman 1990). In fact, the general practice of late twentieth-century cultures has sharpened the contradiction between self and others, leading to skewed nationalism or radical provincialism.

Based on systems theory, cultures emerge from and grow out of a complex, nonlinear, dynamic social network through multiple feedback loops (Bateson 1991; Capra 2002; Macy 1991; Maturana & Varela 1980), which not only maintain but also continually modify their ethos. Interestingly, there is an unexplainable need within each individual's life cycle, as well as within society, to transcend the categories of knowing that are provided by existing cultural systems. On a daily basis, individuals and groups of any culture generally experience the tension between the two forces of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the known and the unknown. Depending on the manner in which cultures handle these conflicting forces, changes in existing cultural systems — which consist of sets of interdependent and interacting parts — lead cumulatively to either cultural evolution (Danesi 2007) or cultural regression.

The theory of autopoietic systems (Maturana and Varela 1980) indicates that communication is a mutual causal process of interactions between self and others, and only becomes possible to the degree that the self and the other are homomorphic. In fact, «The other is but a reflection of the self. It is represented within the self before it ever enters the scene» (Nöth 2001: 242). And since the relationship between self and others — one's own culture and the

culture of others — is homomorphic, sundering them is impossible. As Mary Parker Follett argues, the notion of self and others is misleading; there is only of «self-in-and-through-others» — others so deeply rooted in the self and so fruitfully growing there that separating them is impossible (Follett 1998). This homomorphic and inseparable interrelationship between self and others can best be experienced by crossing semiotic boundaries.

2. THE DYNAMICS OF CULTURAL SEMIOSPHERE

Yuri M. Lotman observes, «Every culture begins by dividing the world into 'its own' internal space and 'their' external space» (1990: 131). This division constitutes a semiotic boundary, within which lies the space that Lotman calls a «semiosphere.» Such being the case, «there can be no 'us' if there is no 'them,' culture creates not only its own type of internal organization but also its own type of external 'disorganization.'… No matter whether the given culture sees the 'barbarian' as [savior] or enemy, as a healthy moral influence or a perverted cannibal, it is dealing with a construct made in its own inverted image» (Lotman 1990: 142). In this sense, and according to Lotman, the semiosphere is the consequence and the condition for the development of any culture.

The multiple feedback loops operating within cultural systems that simultaneously maintain cultural identity and modify its systems for development indeed constitute a quandary. However, this is the paradoxical nature of all cultures. As we have seen, all cultures experience the ongoing struggle of preserving self-identity in the face of universality; and since any cultural system is a self-generating and autopoietic network (Capra 2001; Maturana & Varela 1980), cultural identity and the culture of others must be viewed as integral elements of the whole cultural system. To elaborate, while cultural systems maintain coherence, they must rely on both positive and negative feedback loops not only to maintain their coherence but also to adapt to new learning. Through positive feedback loops, a culture must maintain and defend its balance against chaotic, unfamiliar, and ambiguous disturbances operating at the boundary of its semiosphere. At the same time, however, a culture must rely on negative feedback loops to push its semiosphere toward its own growth and renewal. This paradoxical challenge is, as Gregory Bateson (1991) labels it, «double binding.»

The phenomenological necessity is for a culture to experience the polarity of innovative change on one hand and an uninterrupted sense of continuity on the other, to deal with its own inverted image perceived in other cultures. And because of this perception of polarity, no culture can make learning from and with others painless or free of threat of conflict. The paradox of self-preservation and learning from others is important for us to consider, since the struggle between change and continuity, flux and stasis, familiarity and unfamiliarity, progress and stagnation marks the very nature of cultural reality. This is true through the ages in both microcosmic and macrocosmic systems, individuals and societies (Seif 2005). Unfortunately, cultural identity and learning from other cultures are seen as a problematic dualism, rather than a paradoxical polarity. Paradoxes are often viewed as dualistic relationships that must be fixed, favoring one pole in a tensional pair over the other, which makes crossing semiotic boundaries almost impossible.

The systemic relationship between the center of the semiosphere and its boundary is asymmetrical and dynamic, and the further one goes from the center toward the periphery, the more this relationship becomes strained. Equally challenging is the fact that «the periphery of culture moves into the [center], and the [center] is pushed out to the periphery» (Lotman 1990: 141). At the periphery of semiospheres, the situation is even more multifarious due to the intense friction triggered by the extreme differences of cultural systems, which, as we shall see shortly, makes crossing cultural boundaries both utterly challenging and vastly rewarding.

At the boundary of semiosphere, where cultural practice is more revolutionary than at its center (Lotman1990), individuals and cultures generally experience the tension between the two forces of the self and others, which triggers a conflicting situation. However, this conflicting situation is unavoidable for individuals' learning and cultural transformation. In fact, remaining in one's own comfort zone (or one's own cultural semiosphere) for an extended period of time will ultimately lead to personal stagnation and cultural decay. Because cultures rely on feedback loops to maintain coherence and to increase learning, their ability to develop skills for persevering the paradox of self and others — maintaining cultural identity in the face of universality — lies within their interactions with other cultures.

3. COMMUNICATION IN CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTIONS

Before we discuss the experience of cross-cultural interactions, we need not only to highlight the difference between communication and signification but also to bridge the gap between them. The terms *communication* and *signification* are often confused and treated as identical. As John Deely states, «while it is true that all relational phenomena are communicative, it is not conversely true that all communicative events involves signification» (Deely 1986: 101). But communication and signification are not separable in Peirce's semiotics; signification evolves from the existence of the collective community and not from an individual's existence (Peirce 1958).

When Peirce says that «personal existence is an illusion and a practical joke» (quoted in Parret 1983, 34), he means that the criterion of meaning or signification is an open, dynamic, interpretable, collective, and communicative mechanism. This makes the experience of cross-cultural communication interpretable, wholly open, transparent, and lively. In this sense, cross-cultural communication is a manifestation of life. «Communication is not only the condition of life but also the criteria for its identification: a being that is alive is a being that communicates. Life is modeling, communication, semiosis, a process characterized in term of signs, precisely, the 'signs of life.'... the end of communication will involve the end of life» (Petrilli 2004: 199).

Cross-cultural interaction is really experiencing the frontier of cultures, the bordering of cultural semiospheres. Undoubtedly, «the hottest spots for semioticizing processes are the boundaries of semiosphere» (Lotman 1990: 136), exemplified in cross-cultural interactions. That being said, we can concur with Edward Hall that «the great gift that the members of the human race have for each other is not exotic experiences but opportunity to achieve awareness of the structure of their *own* system, which can be accomplished only by interacting with

others who do not share that system — members of the opposite sex, different age groups, different ethnic groups, and different cultures — all suffice» (Hall 1976: 44). Interacting with other cultures demands courageous navigation through unfamiliar geographic boundaries and cultural biases.

Empirical observation and reflection on my experience in leading the Cross-Cultural Study Program in Egypt for 14 years have stimulated a deep understanding of the paradoxical polarity of self and others. The approach to cross-cultural learning has been designed to provide sojourners in Egypt with experiences different from those that typically shield tourists from the locals' reality and way of life. Sojourners have been prepared to delve into three scenarios: 1) known skills and values within an unfamiliar culture; 2) unknown skills and values in a familiar culture; and 3) unknown skills and values in an unfamiliar culture.

The boundary of semiosphere is ambivalent; it unites and also separates (Lotman 1990). This ambivalence is evident when examining the behavior of sojourners (mostly Americans), which reveals a paradoxical challenge of *being-at-home-away-from-home*. The physical environment and cultural ethos of the unfamiliar semiosphere challenge sojourners' values and skills, and create a paradoxical situation. For instance, and similar to the observation made by Stewart and Bennett (1991), influenced by their emphasis on material things, sojourners tend to judge the local culture by the American standard of material comfort and welfare. At the same time, however, in experiencing the Egyptian ethos of seamless connections between culture and nature, sojourners become aware of the contradiction between their desire for an ecological ideal and their own prevalent way of living.

For the Egyptians, the concept of «home» is first and foremost associated with the relationship, with their fellow neighbors, more than with their physical environments. Although members of the traveling team usually seem to feel at home with each other, in connecting deeply with the unfamiliar culture, they also experience the yearning for being physically at home with all its modern conveniences. Sojourners seem to experience double binding, expressed in their need to continue on with their familiar way of life back home, and their desire to engage in the undifferentiated Egyptian reality.

The friction between sojourners' values and locals' ethos seems to be the most explicit dynamic of cultural semiospheres. Sojourners' familiar values and known skills seem to be out of place and useless in dealing with the unfamiliar cultural boundary. Sojourners who have been comfortable with rational thinking find it difficult, yet intriguing, to deal with the tendency of the locals to freely express their emotion and exhibit analog thinking. With their preconceived idea about the local social conduct and habitual expectations for efficiency, travelers find it extremely challenging to deal with, for instance, the slow pace of local service exemplified in food establishments. Sojourners often prefer an immediate result over a slow-process outcome.

Perhaps the most challenging cultural difference is the nature of languages. In crossing the boundary of semiospheres, there is a constant search for a common language (Lotman 1990). However, the issue is not really different languages; rather it is the distinction between digital and analog systems of thought expressed through languages. Whereas English-speaking people rely on efficient and precise digital ways of communication (Smith & Berg 1987; Stewart & Bennett 1991), Arabic speakers express more analog thinking. The locals tend to use

the analog mode of communication, which is characterized by continuous and undifferentiated whole experiences.

This distinction between analog and digital modes becomes evident in the way locals favor what Edward Hall (1976) calls «polychromic time» over «monochromic time.» Polychromic time is illustrated in the Egyptian cultural practice where time for leisure and work is an undivided flow. Indeed, the difference between the two modes triggers one of the main cultural conflicts sojourners experience in crossing semiotic boundaries. My experience has shown that through dialogue, integrating these two modes of communication, finding a common metalanguage, sojourners break new ground in cross-cultural understanding.

In experiencing unfamiliar semiospheres and dealing with their own inverted images, both sojourners and locals seem to make assumptions based on each other's behavior. Sojourners frequently make judgments based on their observation of behavioral signs displayed by locals. Locals also make cultural assumptions about the sojourners' behavior, such as signs of infatuation and flirting, which often provoke local behavior not approved by sojourners.

To become aware of their assumptions and mental models, sojourners explore the concept of Chris Argyris' Ladder of Inference (Senge 1994) to examine their own cultural biases and to reflect thoughtfully on the observed behavior of the locals. In cross-cultural settings, transparent and unbiased observation is essential. Certainly, the exploration process of the Ladder of Inference assists sojourners in becoming aware of the importance of diaphanous observation; gaining skills in persevering paradoxical situations, discovering the connection between different boundaries, and finding ways to learn and grow in the midst of challenging semiospheres. Intentionally making the link between opposite cultural forces provides an opportunity for sojourners to discover high-leverage points. Through creative reframing, sojourners have been able to engage in dialogical semiospheres and discover ways of learning that reveal the principle of leverage in dealing with cultural differences.

4. LEARNING THROUGH DIALOGICAL SEMIOSPHERES

As we have seen, crossing cultural boundaries is a necessary activity not only for the survival of semiospheres but also for their renewal. «The extreme edge of the semiosphere is a place of incessant dialogue,» says Lotman (1990, 142); and he goes on to say, «if dialogue without difference is pointless, when the difference is absolute and mutually exclusive dialogue becomes impossible» (Lotman 1990, 143). This particular exclusiveness, demonstrated by self-alienation and cultural stagnation is the unintended consequence of overlooking the potential experience of learning from and with others in dialogical semiospheres. Crossing cultural boundaries, a process characterized by the experience of semiotic differences, is the condition for cross-cultural learning *par excellence*.

Unquestionably, navigating through cultural boundaries triggers all kinds of conflicts. However, «these conflicts inevitably lead to cultural equalization and to the creation of a new semiosphere of more elevated order in which both parties can be included as equals» (Lotman 1990: 142). Although sojourners and locals deal with the challenging semiospheres in different ways, transcending ethnocentrism and reframing differences generate similar significant

outcomes — alternative choices for a higher order of cultural transformation. I have found that in spontaneous activities such as dialoging, laughing triggered by locals' sense of humor, and walking through the desert or countryside, sojourners frequently share with locals some moments of keen awareness or peak experience — a profound sense of well-being and meaningful life that overshadows the preoccupations with contradictory cultural traditions.

Through dialogical semiospheres members of different cultures can reach an interpretative understanding of the differences between ideological biases and can discover high-leverage points for cross-cultural communication. Such an understanding might be the upshot of discourse between self and others, in which each reaches an approximation of the reality of the other (Nöth 2001). And although speaking of love in academic settings is uncommon, as David Bohm (1996) asserts, we cannot approach a dialogue without love; it is a «necessary condition for dialogue,» says Yuri M. Lotman, and it is the «mutual attraction between participants» (1990: 143). This link between love and dialogue should not be a surprise since the roots of our understanding of the nature of love extend back to Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Philosophy as the love of wisdom embodies learning and knowing.

The paradoxical relationship between one's own culture and the culture of others is characterized by the creative tension of the differences and similarities between self and others. While mishandling cultural differences can lead to friction, exaggerating cultural similarities can become monotonous and even trigger repulsiveness. Having said this, we can now recognize without difficulty that the incredible transformative relationship between *self's otherness and other's selfhood* depends on our ability to persevere through the creative tension of their paradox. And by extension, living creatively with this tensional and paradoxical relationship can open up unlimited possibilities for learning from and with others, moving from a limited monological identity to expansive dialogical semiospheres.

The cross-cultural experience reveals that sojourners in Egypt have been able to learn from each other as well as to learn with and from the locals. And by learning from and with others in dialogical semiospheres, sojourners seem to develop a deep understanding and reflect thoughtfully on their own cultural identity, embodying the culture of others in their own culture. To rejoice in our selfhood we need to live outside and beyond ourselves, engaging in the timeless life of humanity. All cultures are parts of the broader culture of humanity, and as Yuri M. Lotman tells us in his *Universe of the Mind,* we are within the single intellectual life of humanity, and all of it is within us. «We are at the same time like *matryoshkas*, and participants in an endless number of dialogues, and the likeness of *everything*, and 'the other' both for other people and for ourselves; we are both a planet in the intellectual galaxy, and the image of its universum» (Lotman1990: 273).

5. CONCLUSION

There is a reciprocal relationship between the «culture of communication» and the «communication of culture.» Communication is perceived not only as a condition for the existence of a cultural semiosphere, but also a criterion for recognizing cultural identity. To create meaningful life, one must seek nurturing ways to engage with others in dialogical semiospheres. Cultural

reality is the never-ending and diaphanous process between self and others. Only through the intrinsic quality of dialogical semiospheres can cultures experience ongoing renewal, or what Joseph Campbell (1949: 16) calls «*palingenesia*, a continuous recurrence of birth.»

Taking their clues from their particular physical environment, the ancient Egyptians provided us with an inspiring representation of the principle of crossing axes as a sign of life. The hieroglyphic sign of *Ankh,* «The Key of Eternal Life,» represents an imaginative interpretation of the striking axes or frames of reference in which the path of the sun from east to west crosses the running-south-to-north Nile, with the loop on the top representing the Delta. Such an inspiring representation signifies the paradoxical phenomenon of crossing and functions as a mnemonic sign for sojourners in Egypt. Not only can experiences of cross-cultural boundaries create a perfect condition for recognizing the differences that make a difference, they can also increase the potential for transformative learning. This kind of learning is the key to the liveliness of self-in-and-through-others.

A culture maintains its identity and discovers new ways of sustainability through diaphanous perception of other cultures. To communicate is to cultivate significance, and to cultivate significance is to communicate. *«Only through this reciprocal perception and impartation of truth by man and the world can the world become transparent for us»* (Gebser 1985: 261). And this reciprocity can only be maintained by cross-cultural interaction, generosity, gracefulness, and the capacity for dialogical semiospheres. Such efforts at cross-cultural understanding are perhaps the most urgent call of semiotics in the 21st century.

REFERENCES

Bateson, Gregory (1991): *A Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind.* Ed. Rodney E. Donaldson. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Baudrillard, Jean (1994): *The Illusion of the End.* Trans. Chris Turner. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Bohm, David (1996): *On Dialogue.* Ed. Lee Nichol. New York, NY: Routledge.

Campbell, Joseph (1949): *The Hero with a Thousand Faces.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Capra, Fritjof (2002): *The Hidden Connections*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Danesi, Marcel (2007): *The Quest for Meaning: A Guide to Semiotic Theory and Practice.* Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Deely, John (1986): «On the Notion of Phytosemiotics,» in *Frontiers in Semiotics*, Ed. John Deely, Brooke Williams & Felicia E. Kruse. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Follett, Mary Parker (1998): *The New State: Group Organization the Solution of Popular Government.* University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Gebser, Jean (1985): *The Ever-Present Origin.* Trans. from German by Noel Barstad with Algis Mickunas. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

Hall, Edward T. (1976): *Beyond Culture.* Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

Lotman, Yuri M. (1990): *The Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture.* Trans. Ann Shukman. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Maturana, Humberto and Francisco Varela (1980): *The Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living.* Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company.

Macy, Joanna (1991): *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory: The Dharma of Natural Systems.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Nöth, Winfried (2001): «Towards a Semiotics of the Cultural Other,» in *The American Journal of Semiotics, Communication and Culture*, Ed. Richard L. Lanigan. Volume 17. No.2, Summer 2001, 239-251. Carbondale, ILL: Semiotic Society of America.

Parret, Herman (1983): *Semiotics and Pragmatics (Pragmatics & Beyond).* Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins Publishing.

Peirce, Charles S. (1958): *Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings (Values in a Universe of Chance).* Ed. Philip P. Wiener. New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc.

Petrilli, Susan (2004): «Crossing Out Boundaries with Global Communication: The Problem of the Subject,» in *The American Journal of Semiotics, Semiotics and Philosophy: Synchronic and Diachronic Perspectives,* Ed. Joseph Brent. Volume 20. 1-4, 193-209. Washington, DC: Semiotic Society of America.

Seif, Farouk Y. (2005): «Social Change in The 'Aperspectival World': The Paradox of Social Reproduction and Cultural Innovation,» in *TRANS. Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften. No. 16/2005.* http://www.inst.at/trans/16Nr/01_2/seif16.htm.

Senge, Peter M. et al. (1994): *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook.* New York, NY: Doubleday.

Smith, Kenwyn K., and David N. Berg (1987): *Paradoxes of Group Life: Understanding Conflict, Paralysis, and Movement in Group Dynamics.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Stewart, Edward C., and Milton J. Bennett (1991): *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective.* Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, Inc.