

SYMBOL AS UNIVERSAL NON-VERBAL MEANS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN THE TIME OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract. *This paper is devoted to the philosophical analysis of the meanings and role of symbols in the international communications among different societies, cultures and civilizations. The main goal is to give the definition of the concept "symbol" in the context of different theoretical approaches to the understanding of the essential nature of this cultural phenomenon and to elaborate on its significance in the present day.*

Key words: *symbol, types of symbols, functions of symbols, intercultural communication*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the time of globalization, the process of intercultural communication among nations, regions and countries is intensifying. The results of intercultural communication are determined by the ability of the participants of interaction to adequately comprehend each other and reach mutual understanding. There are communicative barriers of various kinds, be they linguistic, religious, political, cultural, geographical. These barriers are especially obvious at the inter-regional, inter-national and inter-civilizational levels of intercultural communication. In this situation, the relevance of the meaning of cultural symbols as the oldest means of human communication is increasing.

By using symbols, nations having different languages and cultures can create a common sphere for the achievement of mutual understanding. Intercultural communication is founded on the process of the symbolic interaction among participants as representatives of at least two cultures. The cultural differences among participants in intercultural communication can be recognized in the acts of interpretation of symbols. Therefore one of the most important objectives becomes the necessity of theoretical and methodological analysis of a symbol as a key phenomenon of human culture, research of the meaning and the role of the symbols in intercultural communication.

In the theoretical-methodological aspects the significance of the research is actualized by the necessity to conduct a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of various types of symbols of the Russian culture which are the specific indicators of the large transformation of the system of concepts, norms and values which happened in the Russian society in the Post-Soviet time. Understanding the nature of the process of formation of meaning of a new symbolic system is an important task of Humanities and Social Sciences in Russia. The goal of my research is to give the integrative multidiscipline analysis of symbols in intercultural communication. This task implies the following objectives: to analyze the main conceptual

approaches to understanding symbol and formulate the author's definition of "symbol"; examine the problem of the correlation between esoteric and exoteric sides of symbol in the history of human culture; analyze issues of interpretation of symbol in the process of intercultural communication.

2. HYPOTHESIS

The hypothesis consists in suggesting that symbol is a universal non-verbal means of intercultural communication which plays a role all the more significant one in the epoch of globalization than ever before. Research on symbols need to be conducted on historic-cultural, socio-political, ethno-religious aspects of their functioning in a particular context. If a scholar is able to find, analyze and interpret a symbol he or she can disclose the basis of the functioning of society in a concrete historic period. The participants of intercultural communication can invest different meanings in one and the same symbol. To understand meanings of symbols of different nations in the various historical and cultural contexts, a scholar needs to be involved in the process of intercultural communication. Each symbol has two main sides: esoteric and exoteric. These sides are in dialectic interrelation. This dialectics is realized in the process of perception and understanding of symbol.

3. METHODOLOGY

Theoretical and methodological approaches are grounded in Philosophy, Sociology and Cultural Studies. I offer a multidimensional approach to the understanding of the issues of symbols in intercultural communication.

In theoretical and methodological basis this investigation is founded on the works of B. Berelson, G. Blumer, J.W. Carey, J. M. Charon, R. T. Cogdell, J. C. Condon, K. Deutsch, C.H. Dodd, J. Giles, K. Geerts, E. Goffman, W. Gudykunst P., W. Guardian, E.T. Hall, S. Hall, L. S. Harms, G. Hofstede, Y. Y. Kim, M. H. Prosser, H. C. Triandis, L.A. Samovar, K. S. Sitaram (the issues of intercultural communication and culture); T. Boas, E. Cassirer, H.D. Duncan, E. Durkheim, P. Crowther, C. G. Jung, S. Langer, T. Parsons, D.M. Rasmussen, R. Rosse, B. D. Ruben, J. Skorupski, A. Storr A., T. Thass-Thienemann, J. Waardenburg, L. White, A. Whitehead (the problem of symbol).

4. SYMBOL IN CULTURE: MAIN APPROACHES TO THIS STUDY

A symbol is one of the most important concepts of Philosophy, Cultural Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Religious Studies, Ethnology, Semiotics, Cultural Studies. A cross-disciplinary analysis offers the opportunity to become aware of the significance of symbol for social and cultural reality and spiritual life.

Among philosophers who studied the problem of the definition of symbol were Plato, Plotinus, Areopagit, I. Kant, G. Hegel, E. Cassirer, S. Langer, E. Hall, S. Hall, C. Levi-Strauss, R. Barth, H. Duncan, D. Rasmussen, L. White, N. Elias, C. G. Jung, E. Fromm, T. Parsons, G. Blumer, H. Mead, J. Baudrillard, G. Deleuze and others; among Russian philosophers, those were N. Berdjajev, P. Florenskiy, E. Trubezkoi, A. Belyi, M. Lotman, A. Losev, S. Averinzev, N. Rubzov.

Humanities and Social Sciences are a source of a variety of scientific approaches to studying nature and essence of symbol. In the history of European thought we can distinguish the following approaches:

1. philosophic-anthropologic approach (symbol as a key to understanding the origin of human consciousness and culture);
2. linguistic approach (language symbolism as the basic of human speech and verbal activities);
3. structural-semiotic approach (symbol as the mechanism of understanding non-verbal texts of culture);
4. aesthetic-artistic approach (symbol as the artistic method of expression of ideas and concepts);
5. religious approach (symbol as the means of interrelation and interaction between human and transcendental worlds);
6. ethnological approach (symbol as the means of ethnic integration and identification of persons);
7. psychological approach (symbol as the function of human psychology, symbol gives us the opportunity to disclose the unconscious elements of human psychology);
8. sociological approach (symbol as the means of social relation and interaction).

Symbol is a unique phenomenon of a deeply dialectic nature which implies interrelation of form and content, the material and the spiritual, the quotient and the general, etc. Symbols belong to the oldest and most basic inventions of human mind and culture. Then, what is a symbol? In the philosophical tradition symbol is treated as a material object representing something immaterial or abstract. Symbol is a bridge connecting the visible with the invisible. Symbol is something associated with something else that it signifies or represents. For example, the white lotus is a symbol of spiritual cleanliness, rebirth and prosperity.

In the solution of the problem of the correlation between the concepts “sign” and “symbols” sign is used as the indicator of the latent nature of things. In the particular cultural context signs are turned into symbols gaining deep relevance. Symbols allow a human being to imagine and perceive a reality beyond the concrete one. For example, a fir symbolizes immortality, owl personifies wisdom, lion embodies strength. Words, sounds, gestures, graphic signs, things, natural and social phenomena, fantastic beings can be all seen as symbols.

As symbols bridge the gap between subjective and objective, they give meaning to the external world. The nature of symbol gives the opportunity to reveal the mechanism of the functioning of human being in culture. The manifestation of the cognitive ability of human being to create and use symbols was determined by an attempt of human adaptation to the environment in the process of creating culture (S. Langer, A. Storr, R. Rosse, T. Thass-Thienemann, C. G. Jung). As symbols interrelate the subjective and objective worlds they contribute to the meanings of phenomena and processes. A symbolic function can be seen as a bridge between psychological energy of the human inner world and the external world of artifacts. So the manifestation of the ability of individual to symbolization became the original stage of the culture formation (Cassirer, White).

In culture, individuals and social groups are connected to each other through a common system of encoding and decoding. A culture consists of a system of meanings (what K. Geertz calls “webs of significance”¹) which govern conduct and understanding of people’s lives. “We are rarely conscious of the hidden cultural programming that influences the way we think, move, and express ourselves verbally and non-verbally”². Culture programs us to interpret verbal and non-verbal signs and symbols by defining their meanings. Symbolic communication is a basis of our socialization which brings about a shared culture, enabling us to for understand each other’s actions, i.e., what we do is meaningful to each other and cooperative group life is made possible.

Cultures of different times and places have represented themselves in various symbolic forms. Symbols have particular meanings focusing on specific ideas, notions, beliefs, values and norms of a culture in a particular historic period. Several societies and cultures may use the same symbols, but these symbols may have different meanings. This fact is clearly illustrated by a symbol of rose. In the Ancient Greek culture it embodied physical love and beauty. In Rome the rose signified victory and festivities. For the Catholics the rose is a symbol of spiritual love and virtuous beauty. The Orthodox believers consider that a rose with its thorns personifies sin. For the West European secret communities the rose is an emblem of mystery, transcendence of human spirit and the unity of the universe.

Symbol has a conventional nature. Symbols are representative of something else only because people have come to agree to that. There is no natural connection between symbols and their referents: the relationships are arbitrary and vary from culture to culture. In other words, although all cultures use symbols, they usually assign their own meaning to them. Human interpretation of symbolic meanings has differed from place to place and from time to time. For example, the interpretation of the symbol of dragon is fundamentally different in East and West. In the West cultural tradition dragon is a terrible monster personifying evil. For the East civilization it means wisdom, power and greatness. A symbol must be investigated in its immediate socio-cultural context. The decoding of a symbol may be modified according to the socio-cultural experience of an individual based on their knowledge, everyday practice, religion, cultural awareness, aesthetic taste, education.

5. TYPES AND FUNCTIONS OF SYMBOLS

Hereby, I suggest the concept of “symbolic system of culture”. A symbolic system of culture is the collection of symbols embodying ideas, ideals and values which make up a fundamental part of a culture of a society in the particular historical period. A symbolic system of culture includes social, ethnic, mythological, religious, artistic, political and national types of symbols. The criterion for classification of such types of symbols is a different form of human self-realization in the socio-cultural space. Social, ethnic, mythological, religious, artistic, political and national types of symbols are interrelated and interacted. The following types of symbols are described: social, ethnic, mythological, religious, artistic, political, national³.

¹ Geertz C. *Thick descriptions toward an interpretive theory of culture*. in Geertz C. The interpretation of culture. New York: Bane books. 1973. Ch. 1. pp. 3–30.

² Kim Y.Y. *Communication and cross-cultural adaptation: an integrative theory*. Philadelphia. 1988. p. 48.

³ National (state) symbols are created in such case if the society has statehood.

Social symbols are the symbols which express attributive-status signs of individuals belonging to particular social groups in the whole structure of a social system. They reflect ideas and concepts of reasoning about the place and role of the social groups (strata and classes are traditional for a society). Such ideas result from ideology developed by political and intellectual elites imposing their understanding of philosophical issues of the essence and role of a person in the society.

Ethnic symbols are symbols expressing ideas, beliefs, values and standards of living of particular ethnic groups. Ethnic symbols are an important cultural form for the identification of individuals, in particular ethnic groups.

Mythological symbols refer to symbols which are present in mythological and religious systems. They reflect particular ideas and beliefs about the sacred essences of the transcendental. In most contexts such symbols have an archetypical character. For example, Russian eagle is an archetype of father. Eagle is the most popular symbolic figure for the Russian and the North Caucasian people. Mythological symbols live in the contemporary culture suffering ideal-semantic and external-expressive transformations concerning both their form and their content.

Religious symbols are symbols which were created in religion and its evolution. In a sense-perceived aspect, religious symbols imply ideas and beliefs about the essence of human being and the divine world. Religious symbols give the ideas about the nature of human being, his or her role in the society and natural environment, human ties with God. In the moral meaning they regulate relations among people.

Art symbols are symbols which are used in the works of visual culture. The origin of these symbols was determined by the aspirations of their creators to express spiritual or mystical experience of cultural revelation. Art symbols reflect philosophical, religious, moral, legal, political and aesthetical concepts and norms of the social group.

Political symbols are symbols signifying ideas, ideals, notions and values which are widely used by the political actors uniting them in groups and inspiring them to take political actions.

National (state) symbols are official symbols serving for identification of the state or state-administrative units. They are a reflection of the prevailing ideology in a society. They need to embody the national idea of the socio-cultural development which enables to unite the nation sharing the same ideas and values.

Within any symbolic system of culture all the symbol types listed above are interrelated, with some types of symbols being dominant in different times. For example, in the symbolic system of the Post-Soviet Russian culture the state symbols (National Flag and the National coat of arms of Russian Federation) play a dominant role.

I distinguish five main functions of a symbol in culture. Cognitive function lies in the fact that any symbol serves as a form of expressing notions possessing different semantic shades for interpretation. That is the reason why decoding the symbol implies that the man perceiving it undertakes some effort at some definite time and ideological context. On the basis of one's personal views of spiritual and ideological concepts of other cultures, a person can move closer to the cognition of a symbol from another culture. In the socializing function symbols are the way of comprehending ideas and values. In this case, symbols have some definite traditions in interpreting their meaning, registered by the systems of science, religion, philosophy, arts, education. Symbols have an adaptive function. They help an individual to cognize and take as basic those notions, values and norms, which are accepted in the society. Symbols prove to be some adaptive scheme of people's acquiring

some definite ways of the world perception and cognition. Being some kind of medium helping people to adapt to the surrounding world and cultural environment, symbol implies such behavior that suits the rhythm of some human group and nature. The essence of identification and integrative function is the following: symbols work as the means of integrating people into social groups and communities, and also the means of individual identification. The symbols fix individual's social status, and help to express social interrelationships. If the recipient is capable of recognizing the symbol and its interpretation, the informative and communicative function of the symbol is actualized.

6. SYMBOLS IN THE CONTEXT OF DIFFERENT CULTURES

6.1. Symbols in the West and East traditions

Culture "inculcates" in the individual patterns of thinking, perception and behavior, accepted among the members of the society this individual belongs to. Culture points out to the individual those notional meanings, which all the things and phenomena of the reality are filled with. Symbols "work" when the information, enclosed in them has a generally accepted value for the members of the society. In every culture all individuals are connected with each other by means of a universal coding and decoding system. Due to successful comprehension of the culture language, individuals can interact according to the social subordination. Whether an individual passes all stages of socialization in comprehending verbal and non-verbal languages effectively influences their efficient functioning in this society.

There are different typological criteria, used for cultural classification. For instance we can distinguish the culture of the West and the culture of the East by the criterion of two large cultural and geographical communities. Culture elaborates some definite methods of admittance to symbols. The Western European tradition defines sensual-imaginative way of perception and conceptual-logical way of symbol cognition. What does that mean? Ideas and concepts should be expressed in a sensual-imaginative way. Thus the world of called things and phenomena can be represented and cognized (recollecting famous interrelation of form and matter in Aristotle's logic). The ancient Greek religious-mythological school of thought undertook the way of searching for some suitable forms of expressing the concept "divine", its essential manifestations in human beings' world. The quintessence of its development became the idea of representing gods anthropomorphically, and their supernatural powers by means of some specific symbols. The medieval thinkers and artists referred to symbols in order to give religious people the idea of some Christian principles and views. The humanists of the Renaissance continued the tendency of representing human vices and virtues in a visually imaginative way. In modern culture symbol is considered to be a sensual perception form, used for conveying ideal content.

In cultures of the East we can observe some other ways of describing and cognizing the world of spiritual and transcendent essence. Such practical and philosophic systems as: meditation, yoga, judo, Tibet healing, feng shui and others, which can be taken as examples. These cultures also entail deep symbolism, but the process of cognition of symbols does not necessarily imply translating them into categories of human language, into a rational-notional form. In the process of research it was discovered that in eastern cultures intuitional reflexive ways of symbol cognition and sensual meditative way of symbol perception are commonly used.

6.2. The issue of interrelation between esoteric and exoteric sides in symbol

In each symbol there are two main sides – esoteric and exoteric. Each culture creates specific symbols and the program of perception and understanding of such symbols which are determined by correlation between esoteric and exoteric sides of symbol. In the history of western culture we can disclose particular dialectic process of the esoteric and exoteric elements in symbol. In pagan cultures symbols had the esoteric (secret) meanings. The ideal content of symbol was hermetic. It could be understood only by a person in the process of initiation.

In the period of foundation and development of major religious groups (so called "axial age"⁴), the situation with the definition of place and role of symbol greatly changed. This was caused by the need of the adherents of newly founded religions to expand their religious ideas on new territories. In terms of those religious systems some definite conceptual and imaginative ideas, together with "recommendations" for both the external side of symbol expression and its content side, were discovered. Nevertheless, symbols continued performing a sacral role in the human society. But the access to their cognition was allowed to all people (ready for some religious sacraments), despite of their nationality, gender, social status or political views.

The Christian religious thought developed inventing symbols as sense-perceived forms for expressing concepts about the transcendental. In the period of the Renaissance, symbol gained the status of cognitive and aesthetic phenomenon. Since then, the esoteric side of symbol has been falling. In the period of the Enlightenment (when the ideal of rationality (the Latin term "ratio" became a dominant principle of the European culture)) in symbol the exoteric side became prevailing: symbol was seen as a cognitive method for the expression of meaning. The aim (the Ancient Greek term "telos") of this period was the Enlightenment of the people. It became the point of birth of the tradition of creation of dictionaries on information about meanings of symbols of different ethnic cultures and religions. This idea is based on the fact that symbol in a mass culture becomes a meaningless form which can be interpreted in accordance with the context of the symbol functioning. The process of the profanation of symbol began.

In XX–XXI centuries, the development of mass-culture has been promoted so that in symbol there prevailed the exoteric interpretation. For example, if in Christian culture in the esoteric sense a red rose signifies the idea of Christ's love for human, in modern advertisement a red rose personifies the idea of love and beauty. Thus in the context of advertisements the symbols are revealed as an "empty" form for any kind of interpretations. The process of profanation of a symbol is caused by the increasing of "ontological nihilism" (F. Nietzsche, M. Heidegger) and forming of "rational subjectivism" (Y. Habermas).

Nowadays the attitude towards symbol is being changed: it is losing its culturally acquired sets of meanings and is becoming an open form that can be filled with new meanings, depending on a particular context of its function. However, the esoteric component of a symbol remains hidden, while the exoteric one is revealed in some definite meaning. In contemporary culture the process of profanation of the meaningful content of the symbol is further aggravated. That is caused by the general crisis of spiritual values, reconsidering of social, political, moral norms and the formation of new aesthetic concepts.

⁴ Ясперс К. Смысл и назначение истории. М.: Республика, 1994.

7. SYMBOLS AS A NONVERBAL MEANS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION ILLUSTRATIONS

Culture is defined, shaped, transmitted and learned through communication. "Culture is communication and communication is culture"⁵. Culture deals with matters that influence communication. The heart of culture involves language, religion, values, norms, traditions and customs. Learning about culture can therefore be awakening as you give meaning to your actions and the actions of others.

Intercultural communication is the circumstance in which people of various cultural backgrounds are engaged in communication. Intercultural communication is at once cultural and individual, personal and contextual, characterized by differences and similarities, being static and dynamic, oriented to the present, past or future.

The structural elements of intercultural communication are a source (transmitter), a receiver (recipient), a canal (medium), a code, a message. In the most general sense, intercultural communication occurs when a member of one culture produces a message for a member of another culture.

These are the levels of intercultural communication:

1) regional communication (occurs when the source and receiver are from one region); 2) national communication (refers to situations in which the participants are the same nation⁶); 3) communication between civilizations (members of communication are from different civilization).

Intercultural communication is an important link of intercultural interaction, which helps the process of transmission and exchange of special significant messages between cultural subjects. A message is presented as text which can be read by a representative of any other culture only by means of adequate comprehension of the text content.

The application of the non-verbal method is used only in those situations when cultural differences between participants of communication are too substantial to use the verbal method. For our purpose, culture is defined as the complex system of symbols. Intercultural communication can be seen as a process of exchanging symbols among cultures. There are three main elements of intercultural communication: 1) a person who communicates; 2) the symbols by which it is communicated; 3) a person who interprets the symbols.

Symbol is a universally important means of non-verbal intercultural communication. Communication is sorting, selecting, forming and transmitting symbols among people to create meaning. Symbols have meanings to both the user and to others with whom the user communicates. To be able to interpret a symbol one has to know the conventional system within which the symbols have their meanings. Studying symbols can offer insights into a culture's world view regarding such matters as education, art, religion, law, etc.

Each culture creates a particular system of non-verbal communication. Studying non-verbal behavior can lead to the discovery of a culture's underlying concepts, beliefs, attitudes, norms and values. Symbol can be considered a universal way in which people of different societies and cultures relate to each other, and the means by which one generation relates to those that come before and after it. Within the broad field of human communication symbols play a very significant role. My thesis is that symbols play the most important role in the whole system of nonverbal means of culture. The main role in

⁵ Hall E.T. Hidden differences. Studies in international communication. Tokyo, 1987. p.16.

⁶ Nation includes different ethnic groups.

the communication process belongs to the verbal means. Nevertheless, it is not enough for the participants of the intercultural communication to know grammatical and lexical structure of a language. Symbols are capable of communication and expression of meaningful information. Information received from nonverbal resources, helps to interpret verbal messages more clearly and fully.

Symbol is one of the effective ways to promote mutual understanding between different nations because it cuts across the barrier of language. But in this moment we come across the following problem. Symbols have meanings to both the user and others with whom the user communicates. Through symbols we are able to communicate to others and interpret other's meaning. If the message is not correctly interpreted misunderstanding occurs. Intercultural communication is "the act of understanding and being understood by, an audience of another culture"⁷.

Intercultural communication is a communication process in which the communicator's patterns of verbal and non-verbal encoding and decoding differ markedly from one another as a result of cultural differences. The problem of realization of cultural differences of participants of intercultural communication consists in their abilities to interpret the symbol of the foreign culture in an adaptive form. If participation in intercultural communication has a few cultural differences, variants of interpretation of symbol are insignificant. In the latter case the method of analogy is used for transmitting cultural meaning. This method is the attempt to find such a symbol in the culture-donor which can be associated with the symbol from the foreign culture. The important result of intercultural communication is borrowing by culture-recipient the symbol of the culture-donor.

For example in the West Christian culture (first of all American tradition), the symbol "Santa Claus" is widely known. In the Post-Soviet time in the situation of global expansion of American culture, Santa Claus was identified with the ancient Russian symbol "Ded Moroz" (the English term "Father Frost"). So symbol from one culture is borrowed by another culture and becomes open for new interpretations.

Translation and interpretation are two important means of communicating across language differences. The role of the interpretation is portrayed by various specialists (G. Gadamer, K. Geertz, P. Ricouer, M. Lotmun, S. Averinzev). Translation generally refers to the process of producing a written text that refers to something said or written in another language. Interpretation refers to the process of expressing what is said or written in another language. Human interpretation of symbolic meaning has differed from place to place and from time to time. Factors that can contribute to the incorrect interpretation of the message are differences in language and culture between the transmitter and the receiver.

Symbol has different meanings in different contexts. Symbol can mean different things to different people. In the process of intercultural communication the fact becomes obvious that its participants can enclose different meanings into the same symbol. It causes the problem of cultural misinterpretations of the symbol due to cultural differences. Very close cultures (maximum similarities and minimum differences) and very remote cultures (maximum differences and minimum similarities) will be polar opposites. The differences can be interpreted as the differences of verbal and non-verbal codes in communication context. The process of understanding the other culture can be presented as the process of cognition and decipherment of symbols, transforming them into "one's own".

⁷ Sitaram K.S., Cogdell R.T. Foundations of intercultural communication. Columbus, 1976. P. 26.

8. CONCLUSION

In the contemporary Humanities and Social Sciences there is a variety of scientific approaches to studying the nature and essence of symbol. Hereby, I suggest the following definition of the concept "symbol". Symbol is a universal means of culture. It is a sense-perceived form for expressing ideas, ideals and spiritual values of a culture. It preserves and transmits elements of culture just listed in- and inter-communicative processes. Symbol is a mechanism of intercultural communication among different participants in historic-cultural and spatial dimensions. Symbol signifies that each socio-cultural issue, phenomenon or process has the latent sense which is needed in the philosophical and cultural analysis. Therefore each symbol needs to be interpreted in particular (cultural, political, religious, historical) contexts.

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