
COGNITIVE DISSONANCE FROM AN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION PERSPECTIVE

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The aim of the paper is to investigate the reasons, types, and effects of cognitive dissonance with regard to intercultural communication. Cognitive dissonance can be caused by the discrepancy between the ways of categorizing and conceptualizing reality through the prism of different languages and cultures. The harmonization of mindsets and the way out of cognitive dissonance are based on the mechanisms of understanding and interaction with representatives of an alien culture in order to overcome communication breakdowns. A high level of intercultural competence requires the ability to identify the reasons for cognitive dissonance and ways to bridge intercultural differences. Interpreters, translators, and intercultural communication specialists should take the possibility of cognitive dissonance into account in their professional activities.

Key words: cognitive dissonance, intercultural communication, linguistic competence, verbal communication, non-verbal communication, understanding.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars define cognitive dissonance as an inner conflict, which occurs because of the discrepancy between two “cognitions”: the old, habitual — and new beliefs contradicting the system of our convictions and values. The aim of this paper is to investigate the reasons, types, and effects of cognitive dissonance with regard to intercultural communication.

The term “cognitive dissonance” was introduced into academic discourse in 1956 by the US scholar Leon Festinger who consequently did a detailed study of this phenomenon in the context of social psychology and wrote the book *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Festinger, 1957). However, O.P. Bibik (2004) asserts that the idea of cognitive dissonance theory goes back to F. Heider’s publications from the 1940s and that even before that, in 1922, the Russian philosopher and psychologist I.I. Lapshin used the term “dissonance” in connection with formal sensations of intellectual order in his book *Philosophy of Invention and Invention in Philosophy*. In particular, he wrote: “Such formal sensations first of all include the feeling of freedom from one’s inner contradiction (*Widerspruchslosigkeit*). The logical contradiction is perceived as a dissonance which should be resolved. Thus, for twelve years Kant could not find peace in order to eliminate the ‘scandalous’ conflict with his own mind” (qtd. in: Bibik, 2004).

The essence of the phenomenon described by L. Festinger and other psychologists is as follows: when, during the cognition process, individuals come across new knowledge which does not agree with the beliefs they hold, they experience an inner conflict, hence the name “cognitive dissonance”. In such situations people feel psychological tension and make efforts to reduce the inconsistency between the two ideas or beliefs

(Festinger, 1957). They try to come to terms with themselves to resolve the inner conflict. The harmonization can be achieved by different means: an attempt to explain the inexplicable (Prasad, 1950), minimize regret connected with irrevocable choices (Knox, Inkster, 1968), justify their own behaviour which goes against their own principles (Mills, 1958), align their perception of other individuals with their own actions towards them (Mussen et. al., 1979, c. 403; Tavris, Elliot, 2008, p. 28—29), etc.

Our observations show that recently the term “cognitive dissonance” has been often used in a non-terminological sense in political, religious, ecological, and other types of discourse as a speculative way to argue the opponent’s point of view — a claim that the other persons’ opinion is unjustified and points to their inadequate perception of reality, e.g.: *the cognitive dissonance of maidan, panic and cognitive dissonance in the Kremlin, the dangers of Obama’s cognitive dissonance*, etc.

In linguistics the study of cognitive dissonance is focused on the ways of its reflection in discourse. In T.V. Drozdova’s work *Cognitive Dissonance as a Linguistic Issue* it is regarded as the result of “inconsistency between the code used and the cognitive and interactional programs of interacting individuals” (Drozdova, 2011: 147). The author indicates that cognitive dissonance can occur on different levels of verbal expression: semantic, cognitive, and pragmatic. It can emerge due to the discordance between the communicators’ conceptual systems, difference in the interpretation of the same conceptual content, and their distribution in the hierarchy of individual perceptions. The author gives special attention to the divergence of background knowledge, implicit meanings, violation in the order of speech interaction, as well as extralinguistic factors, such as gender, age, status, level of intellect, profession, ethnicity, etc. [Ibid].

V.I. Tarmaeva connects the achievement of cognitive harmony as a mechanism of text interpretation with overcoming cognitive dissonance, which occurs when the semantics of a word or a phrase is insufficient (Tarmaeva, 2012: 4—5).

E.A. Veber (2004) distinguishes three spheres, which can generate cognitive dissonance: 1) the sphere of interpersonal relations (‘subject — subject’ type based on the conflict of interests); 2) the sphere of a person and his/her environment (gnoseological, or ‘subject — object’ type); 3) the sphere of the regulation of people’s activity related to the cultural values they are creating (axiological type). The author believes that the search for retrieving consistency as a way out of cognitive dissonance can serve as a proof of an individual’s communicative competence. According to Veber who focuses her attention on diplomatic discourse, the verbal means reducing cognitive dissonance include: strategies causing deliberate equivocation and uncertainty; use of euphemisms; political correctness; pseudomination; shift of emphasis; silence; and avoidance of response. Non-verbal means are gestures, as well as some provisions of diplomatic protocol and etiquette (Veber, 2004).

DISCUSSION

We will further see how the ideas discussed above can be applied to the analysis of cognitive dissonance from the perspective of intercultural communication. Contacts between representatives of different cultures imply a clash between their worldviews,

which makes cognitive dissonance quite foreseeable. As a starting point, we deem it necessary to make two important remarks.

1. Cognitive dissonance and misunderstanding (or insufficient understanding) of a foreign language and culture are closely connected, but should not be equated. If misunderstanding can result from a lack of knowledge, cognitive dissonance is caused by a clash between incongruent information blocks, points of view, opinions, assumptions and, in many cases, the awareness of a communication breakdown. Individuals experience a mental block when they cannot comprehend the essence of their interlocutors' speech, their behaviour, or assessment of the situation. This can bring about not only short-term communication problems, but also more significant consequences, moral and ideological contradictions, biases and different types of intercultural conflicts. Therefore, the ability to recognize situations of cognitive dissonance, identify their origins, and find ways to overcome them acquires special significance.

2. The worldview largely depends on the way reality is conceptualized and categorized in a certain culture. The mapping of the world is not the same as the world itself. Therefore, a competent approach to intercultural communication implies that people should not be judgmental about other cultures and should avoid such qualifiers as “correct — incorrect”, “clever — stupid”, “right — wrong”, or “(not) as it is in real life”. For example, what is right: to believe that tomatoes are vegetables, as Russians do, or regard them as fruit, as they do in the UK? To celebrate New Year's day on the first of January as in Europe, or according to the solar calendar as in China?

Below we discuss the reasons, which can cause cognitive dissonance, as well as possible ways of harmonizing communication and restoring inner consonance. We will proceed from T.V. Drozdova's classification described above (Drozdova, 2011) and analyse those reasons on three levels: semantic, cognitive, and pragmatic.

The **semantic level** can be investigated on the material of both verbal and non-verbal communication.

As we indicated above, one of the reasons for cognitive dissonance is insufficient knowledge of a foreign language, in particular misunderstanding of polysemy, homonymy, puns, etc. The translation of the English sentence: *I must change* into Russian as: «мне надо перемениться» (I must change myself) instead of «мне надо переодеться» (I need to change my clothes) causes a breakdown in communication. Sometimes the comprehension of a whole situation depends on the understanding of a single phrase.

V.Z. Dem'jankov analyses cognitive dissonance in connection with texts with double meaning (ambiguity) and distinguishes the following modules of their understanding as an instrument for achieving consonance: 1) language proficiency; 2) development and verification of hypotheses about the meaning of the whole text; 3) processing the information; 4) reconstruction of the speaker's intentions; 5) identification of the discrepancy between the listener's inner world and the model world of discourse; 6) comparison of the relationship between the inner world and the model world; 7) establishment of a balance between the model world and the direct perception of reality (by the person who interprets it); 8) the relationship between understanding and the listener's other actions; 9) choice and change of the mode of understanding (Dem'jankov, 2011: 34—39).

The cognitive dissonance mechanism caused by the differences between British and American English is similar to the one described above. In his *British/American Language Dictionary* N. Moss (1991) provides a number of situations, which can be used to show how a communication breakdown happens because of a different perception of objects through the prism of language, e.g.:

dormitory — *Am. hostel, Br. room where people sleep. An American college teacher was speaking to a British teacher and remarked that at his college, male and female undergraduates now sleep in the same dormitory. “Ye gods!” said the Englishman;*

pants {*сokp. om pantaloons*} — *I heard an American student at Cambridge University telling some English friends how he climbed over a locked gate to get into a laboratory building and tore his pants, and one of them asked, “But how could you tear your pants without tearing your trousers?”;*

wash up — *in American English to wash oneself, not the dishes. Philip French recalled in a New Statesman article that he once suggested to his American hostess that he help her wash up, and was met with a startled look.*

Sometimes misunderstandings of this kind can have serious consequences, including high-level political problems. One example is the situation described by W. Churchill in his memoirs about World War II: “The British wanted to raise an urgent matter <...> and told the Americans they wished to ‘table it’ (that is, bring it to the table). But to the Americans, tabling something meant putting it aside. ‘A long and even acrimonious argument ensued,’ Churchill wrote, ‘before both parties realised that they were agreed on the merits and wanted the same thing’” (qtd. in: O’Conner, Kellerman).

Cognitive dissonance can be also caused by differences in non-verbal communication. We carried out a small experiment in several groups of Russian university students showing them a slide with an image of an African tribe chief dressed in a leopard skin, with a spire and an ivory necklace. We further asked them a question: “Do you think this is an educated person?” The majority of the students replied either: “No, I don’t think so” or “Educated by the standards of his tribe.” In reality, the commentary to the photo of the tribe chief in the magazine said that he had received a good education in one of the prestigious UK universities. This information amazed the student due to the cognitive dissonance between the chief’s appearance and their idea about what an educated person should look like.

During Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to the USA in 1959 his favourite gesture — hands clasped above his head meaning: “peace,” “friendship” — became the reason for cognitive dissonance in Americans because they perceived it as a gesture of victory. In association with the phrase “We’ll bury you” it did not contribute to the Soviet leader’s popularity.

Another illustration is from the experience of a Russian student who was invited to have dinner in the Sri Lanka Embassy in Moscow. She had a culture shock when all the distinguished guests except the Ambassador’s wife started eating with their hands. It was an example of cognitive dissonance produced by the contradiction between the student’s idea of good manners and Sri Lanka traditions.

Possible sources of dissonance on the **cognitive level** may be objects unknown to representatives of a particular culture, their functions, categorization and conceptu-

alization. In his book *In Search of a Sad Baby* V. Aksyonov gives an example from the time when people in the Soviet Union were not yet familiar with avocado: in a Kiev family that immigrated to the US there was a myth about a miraculous avocado nut. When they bought the fruit in a supermarket they peeled it, threw the pulp away, and broke the stone with a hammer to eat the “nut” (Aksyonov, 2000).

Today, due to the globalization processes, we are already used to different ethnic cuisines. However, in order to avoid the clients’ cognitive dissonance, restaurants adapt the taste and look of foreign dishes to the local culinary traditions. Europeans find it difficult to come to terms with the idea that the inhabitants of many Asian countries consider grasshoppers, cockroaches, doves, turtles, frogs, and worms to be delicacies. This is also a manifestation of cognitive dissonance — an idea about what is edible and inedible, which in the context of a different culture “turns upside down”.

For Europeans emotions are concentrated in the heart and soul, and for them the source of cognitive dissonance is the fact that for the Chinese those organs are also complemented by intestines and liver, which is proved by the existence of such idioms as: *to pull the intestines, hang the stomach* — to be anguished at smth. (= to eat one’s heart out); *one hundred knots on soft intestines / soft intestines in small pieces* — lots of anxieties and troubles; *heart and intestines made of iron and stone* — ruthless, cruel (= heart of stone); *the gall is shaking, the heart is frozen* — to be scared to death (= to have one’s heart in one’s mouth); *has neither heart nor liver* — shameless, mean, base, etc.

On the **pragmatic level** cognitive dissonance can be produced by intercultural differences in individuals’ self-perception or their perception by others. One example is the difference in the understanding of beauty. The British scholar V. Swami carried out a research during which respondents from Europe and South Africa were shown a number of silhouettes of female figures and asked to choose the one they liked best. The majority of Europeans chose the same slim figure, whereas respondents from South Africa pointed out a heavier one. V. Swami further provides data proving that respondents from African countries demonstrate a more positive attitude to heavy figures than those from the UK, Malaysia, China, and India (Swami, 2006, pp. 42, 45). It is possible to predict that when people relocate to a different country, those who consider themselves attractive by the standards of their own culture will not necessarily match the local standards of beauty, and this can evoke feelings of perplexity, vexation, or offence.

Such differences can also occur on the level of status, psychological or social identity. E.g. Russian women are used to gender asymmetry and therefore feel ill at ease in the US, where gender differences are smoothed out and men do not feel obliged to open doors for women, help them with their coats, pour them wine at the table, etc. Unfulfilled expectations can cause cognitive dissonance.

A similar effect is produced by differences in rituals, norms of behavior, convictions, values, and political correctness. An American fainted when in Kazakhstan he, as an honorable guest, was offered a ram head and was expected to pick out the eyes and eat them. Situations like this can result in embarrassment or even an identity crisis, accompanied by amazement, indignation, or frustration.

Cognitive dissonance can produce two types of conflict: interpersonal (the interlocutors do not understand each other) and intrapersonal (“I don’t understand what’s going on”). An individual involved in an interpersonal conflict has to modify one’s own verbal and non-verbal behavior, communicative strategies and tactics in order to achieve contact with an interlocutor. People who find themselves in a different culture have to compromise in order to survive in a new community, achieve their communicative aims, and effectively interact with the locals. When doing so they do not necessarily believe that this behavior is “correct” or share the same convictions. For example, when following the norms of political correctness at work they may still be biased against representatives of a different race, religion, sexual orientation, etc.

It is more difficult to cope with the intrapersonal conflict, when individuals have to come to terms with themselves. During long stays in a foreign country they cannot help getting into difficult or absurd situations when they ask themselves: “Why should I eat this if I don’t like it?”, “Why am I doing things which contradict my beliefs?” However, in order to effectively function in an alien setting, they have to match their beliefs with those accepted in the community and probably, to a certain extent, change themselves. The ways of self-persuasion are closely connected with the mechanisms of understanding: 1) filtering information — the choice of what coincides with the person’s own convictions, supports and re-inforces them; 2) simplifying information, frequently not along the lines of what is most relevant, but rather what is most favourable for sustaining the already existing biases; 3) association (often erroneous) of unfamiliar objects or phenomena with those from their home country; 4) combining and restructuring information on the basis of logical operations common in their native culture; 5) accentuating the facts and arguments which mainly correspond to their views; 6) filling in blanks with information from their own culture; 7) interpretation of other people’s behavior according to their own beliefs and axiological norms.

Examples include the correction of one’s own mindset due to the unattainability of ones’ desires or wishful thinking about the irreversible choices which have already been made (e.g. when immigrants fail in their careers, live in modest apartments in poor areas, have almost no friends, but are still trying to convince themselves that they are lucky to live abroad and be envied by those left behind in their country of origin). Such psychological moves often prove to be a kind of self-deceit, which does not help to achieve success in an intercultural setting. For a deeper understanding of intercultural differences, it is necessary to address locals for help and explanations. People who stay in an alien setting for an extended period of time can overcome cognitive dissonance gradually, by means of trial and error, asking relatives and friends for help. Those who come to a foreign country for a short time cannot afford such a luxury — they have to cope with their problems quickly, which can be achieved by a negotiation process with the natives, “reading” the signs of misunderstanding, reformulating statements and questions, and other forms of feedback.

A high level of intercultural competence presupposes: 1) readiness for intercultural differences and, consequently, a lower possibility of cognitive dissonance; 2) inclination for self-analysis, desire to find out the reason for communication breakdowns; 3) ability to identify verbal, non-verbal, behavioral, axiological and other reasons for cognitive

dissonance; 4) awareness of the role of feedback and readiness to use it if necessary; 5) ability to do information search concerning intercultural communication problems in order to find out the sources of cognitive dissonance and ways to overcome it; 6) achievement of consonance with the interlocutor or with oneself by means of interpersonal and intrapersonal communication.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The specific character of cognitive dissonance occurring in intercultural communication is caused by the discrepancy between the ways of categorizing and conceptualizing reality through the prism of different languages and cultures.

2. The harmonization of mindsets and the way out of cognitive dissonance is based on the mechanisms of understanding and interaction with representatives of an alien culture in order to overcome communication breakdowns.

3. A high level of intercultural competence requires the ability to identify the reasons for cognitive dissonance and ways to bridge intercultural differences.

4. The possibility of cognitive dissonance should be taken into account by interpreters, translators, and intercultural communication specialists.

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КОГНИТИВНЫЙ ДИССОНАНС С ПОЗИЦИЙ МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНОГО ОБЩЕНИЯ

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В статье рассматриваются причины, виды и проявления когнитивного диссонанса применительно к межкультурной коммуникации. Возникновение когнитивного диссонанса может быть обусловлено различиями в концептуализации и категоризации действительности через призму различных языков и культур. Гармонизация противоречащих друг другу установок и выход из состояния когнитивного диссонанса базируется на механизмах понимания и взаимодействия с носителями лингвокультуры для преодоления коммуникативных сбоев. Высокий уровень межкультурной компетенции предполагает способность идентифицировать причину когнитивного диссонанса и знание способов выхода из него. Закономерности возникновения когнитивного диссонанса должны учитываться в работе переводчиков и иных специалистов в области межкультурной коммуникации.

Ключевые слова: когнитивный диссонанс, межкультурная коммуникация, лингвистическая компетенция, вербальная коммуникация, невербальная коммуникация, понимание.