1. Introduction: Relevance and cognition

According to Sperber and Wilson’s (1986/95) relevance theory, human beings have developed an ability to maximise the relevance of the stimuli\(^1\) that they process, both in intracultural and intercultural settings. Since it is utterly impossible to pay attention to all the barrage of information that constantly reaches our minds, we have an evolved capacity to filter and dismiss potentially irrelevant information and to focus our attention on what, in the current situation, is bound to provide some benefit. Besides, it is also essential for us to identify underlying intentions and attitudes in the behaviours (communicative or otherwise) of other people.\(^2\) Finally, as an essential aspect of our cognition we invariably tend to select from context only the information that might be relevant and usually combine new information with information already stored in our brains or which is accessible at the current stage of interpretation in order to derive interesting conclusions. These human abilities are summarised in the so-called cognitive principle of relevance: “human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance”.

This principle is applied to all kinds of processing, including (and especially) linguistic processing. In fact, relevance theory is mainly interested in the information that interlocutors intentionally try to communicate to one another (that is, information communicated ostensively), and there is a specific principle accounting for this, the communicative principle of relevance (“every act of overt communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance”) that we use on order to interpret the speaker’s intended interpretation.\(^3\) But other sources of information also involve relevance judgements. This is the case of our own thoughts, some of which are more likely to be entertained than others at the current stage of a conversation. Additionally, information which is simply conveyed without a prior intentionality can also be relevant. For example, some information may stand out from the environment and draw the person’s attention. Similarly, while we are speaking we are unconsciously giving off information whose processing may be relevant, especially in contexts like business negotiations, as we will comment on below. In these cases, we have to determine whether there is any intention or lack of it in the speaker’s behaviour. Take, for instance, a wink:

\[^1\] A stimulus is any input for mental processing. Stimuli can broadly be divided into verbal stimuli (e.g. an utterance) and nonverbal stimuli (e.g. a gesture). The latter may also play a vital part in the (un)successful outcome of communication.

\[^2\] To do so, the steps are always the same according to relevance theory: (a) follow a path of least effort in computing the interest provided by the utterance (“cognitive effects” in relevance theory terminology). In particular, test interpretive hypotheses in order of accessibility; and (b) stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied (Sperber and Wilson, 2002: 18).

\[^3\] Sperber and Wilson (2002: 14-15) claim that this ability to predict the thoughts and inferential patterns of others is part of the general human tendency to maximise relevance. Specifically, speakers can predict: (a) which stimulus in an individual B’s environment is likely to attract B’s attention (i.e. the most relevant stimulus in that environment); (b) which background information from B’s memory is likely to be retrieved and used in processing this stimulus (i.e. the background information most relevant to processing it); and (c) which inferences B is likely to draw (i.e. those inferences which yield enough cognitive benefits for B’s attentional resources to remain on the stimulus rather than being diverted to alternative potential inputs competing for those resources).
In order to understand why communication is successful or derives in some form of misunderstanding (and, as will be explained below, to understand the specificity of intercultural communication and business negotiations), there are two key terms in relevance theory: cognitive environment and manifestness. What is ‘manifest’ is what one is capable of representing mentally and of accepting its representation as true or probably true (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95: 39), that is, the information that one can access and process in a specific situation even if one has not done so yet. The sum of all the information which is manifest constitutes the person’s cognitive environment, which varies from one context to another. The information which is manifest to both interlocutors constitutes their shared cognitive environment. This, again, changes according to different contextual parameters. When both interlocutors are aware of the fact that some information is manifest to both of them, this constitutes a mutual cognitive environment, made up of “mutually manifest assumptions”. Typically, successful interactions rely on the mutuality of certain information (“a set of assumptions” in relevance-theoretic terminology).

Communication, in short, is a matter of making certain assumptions mutually manifest to both speaker and hearer, and one of the challenges of intercultural communication is to determine what culture-specific information is not only shared by the interlocutors (manifest to both of them), but also mutually manifest (both interlocutors are aware of this mutuality), which helps speakers to communicate the intended interpretation. As Escandell-Vidal (1998) correctly stresses, mutual manifestness is the notion that differentiates merely conveying from actually communicating assumptions about social relationships.

2. The inferential-social interface from a relevance-theoretic perspective

Communication is a useful means of achieving personal objectives and getting a better overall picture of the world. In the course of any conversation, our cognition is engaged in improving our knowledge by performing two tasks: (1) To turn the speaker’s utterance into a meaningful and relevant interpretation. This is performed by the so-called inferential system of the brain. (2) To use the current interaction as a means for improving and fine-tuning our social or cultural information. This is in charge of the social system of the brain. Relevance theory has mainly centred upon the former, but this theory can also undertake the study of how social information is processed and updated, especially since it plays a major role in the success or failure of intra- and inter-cultural interactions (see heading 3 below).

A recent proposal to account to the inferential and social systems of the brain and to integrate them in a coherent model has been proposed by Escandell-Vidal (2004). She pictures these systems

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4. Comprehension, according to relevance theory, is a mixture of coding (i.e., saying something) and inference (i.e., working out the intended interpretation), but a greater emphasis is laid upon the latter, since the literal meaning of the speaker’s utterance is normally schematic and communicatively useless. The hearer invariably has to enrich it inferentially in order to reach a relevant interpretation, that is, in order to derive both the explicitly and/or the implicitly communicated information (hopefully matching the speaker’s intentions).

5. There is now a general agreement that, at least from a cognitive approach, the terms “social” and “cultural” are almost synonymous.
As summarised in Yus (forthcoming), the modular picture of the brain (as proposed by Fodor, 1983) entails that the mind is made of a central processor and a number of modules which “feed” the central processor with information. Modules are evolved, special-purpose mental mechanisms, typically automatic and informationally encapsulated. One of these modules is the language module, which is only (and automatically) activated by verbal stimuli. Similarly, the inferential system and the social system would only be activated (and automatically so) by the information that they are “designed” to process.

The inferential system is based on principles. These are universal, found in all human beings regardless of the constraints imposed by the language or the places where they live. And the social system is based on norms. As such, this system exhibits a two-fold quality: on the one hand, it is (only) sensitive to social information (age, sex, power relationships, etc.). As such, this system is universal, since everybody is cognitively tuned to updating social behaviour. However, each culture has its own way of conceptualising and putting this social information into the practice of interactions (e.g. choices of utterances, fixed formulas, etc.), and hence the system is also culture-specific. And the tasks that this system performs are also dual: it has a short-term task of analysing and labelling in-coming information and it has a long-term task of storing and updating information on social issues (e.g. socially accepted behaviour) and, in parallel, of extracting generalizations. These generalisations are stored as mental schemas, of prototypical or archetypical quality, and intracultural interlocutors rely on them as default cultural information whose strength is rarely altered. In other words, intracultural interlocutors constantly “transfer” the social information that they have stored as stereotypical schemas (or “mental sets”) to subsequent situations of similar properties. In Jary’s (1998a: 166) words, this information is easy to process, this being what the cognitive system -or, rather, a significant part of it- has been designed for.

In intracultural exchanges, the social (or cultural, see note 5 above) information about the interlocutors or their shared social environment is normally very accessible and stable. Verbal interactions tend to strengthen existing assumptions about the social connotations of the conversation and, as such, this social information may even be unnoticed and not reach any level of conscious awareness in the interlocutors. This is typically the case of what Zegarac (2007) labels central cultural representations, central to the extent that they are efficient across many spheres of social life and which can be used in many contexts and applied to different aspects of social life without risking miscommunication. For him, intracultural communication is often characterised by cultural proximity. In this sense, the cultural information that is used in intracultural exchanges and complies with culturally stabilised norms normally goes unnoticed. However, as Escandell-Vidal

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7. In their double quality, since norms can refer to common practice -normal, usual or habitual behaviour and, on the other hand, they can refer to a set of rules and regulations of socially approved patterns of behaviour. One is the idea of norm as a custom of use; the other is the notion of norm as a convention of use (Escandell-Vidal, 2004: 348).

8. “What we usually call culture is a collection of ways of thinking and behaving that members of a group learn as a result of the process of socialisation and that determine their beliefs and behaviour. Once acquired, they tend to remain stable and are hardly modified, let alone removed, both at the individual and the social level” (Escandell-Vidal, ibid.: 358).

9. Two or more individuals/groups are culturally close to the extent that they share a large set of cultural representations which includes a large sub-set of central cultural representations (Zegarac, ibid.).
(2004: 361) correctly states, “if the utterance does not satisfy the expectations, it triggers some extra computation cycles and adds new representations until an interpretation fulfilling the expected level of relevance is obtained. In a sense, norms act as filters: they make salient everything that does not conform to them”. A typical example would be the choice of polite strategies in both intra- and inter-cultural scenarios. These strategies are only relevant when they do not match the interlocutor’s expectations from stored social schemas (see Jary, 1998a, b; Escandell-Vidal, 1998).

3. The specificity of intercultural communication

In the course of an intracultural interaction, the interlocutors’ cognitive systems engage in the aforementioned dual cognitive task. On the one hand, they use their inferential system to obtain the intended interpretation from what the interlocutor has said; on the other hand, they use their social system to categorise, label and store social information that is used as default in the interaction and is further strengthened or fine-tuned during the interaction. As pointed out above, social information in intracultural exchanges is usually shared (and mutually manifest) and hence it normally does not reach a level of cognitive awareness unless it is, for some reason, contradicted. However, there can be some exceptions to this apparent homogeneity, especially among individuals whose cognitive environments have been constructed from the overlap of several languages and cultures or from frequent intercultural interactions. These people have access to a multifaceted intracultural cognitive system which integrates elements from other cultures. This is not rare to find, in the context of intercultural business negotiations, local negotiators who may have been “contaminated” by previous negotiations with interlocutors from other cultures and adopted a broader intercultural perspective. Therefore, we should not forget that modern business negotiation has gone global and, consequently, it is advisable not to approach this issue only with fixed communicative schemas and consider variations in the inferential-social interface where necessary in the different business settings.

But leaving aside these specific cases, in intercultural interactions there is no guarantee that the social information that both interlocutors store is shared, let alone “mutually manifest”, and hence this kind of information reaches a much more conscious level of accessibility and assessment; it is not simply strengthened or reinforced, but is constantly tested in a scenario where social norms are explicitly learned by the interlocutors, rather than simply stored and updated by the social system. Watts (1989, quoted in Jary, 1998b: 7) calls politic social behaviour the “socio-cultural determined behaviour directed towards the goal of establishing and/or maintaining in a state of equilibrium the personal relationships between the individuals of a social group, whether opened or closed, during the ongoing process of interaction”. In intercultural settings, interlocutors are much more willing to assess the extent of this politic social behaviour. Specifically, in business interactions a lack of command of this politic social behaviour may lead to a failure in the outcome of a negotiation (see next heading). A clear example is the strategic use of politeness, which does not reach a conscious level of processing if it fits the intracultural expectations. In intercultural settings, though, speakers carefully and consciously choose polite formulas that will hopefully aid in the fulfilment of the speaker’s intentions during the interaction. Another clear example is the use of phatic utterances: “when non-native speakers use phatic utterances or sequences that do not have an equivalent in the target culture, or when those utterances or sequences are missing, they could make manifest to their addressees an unwanted set of assumptions and, consequently, addressees could recover unintended implicatures. This happens because a different mental frame or schema has been activated” (Padilla Cruz, 2001: 207).

Consequently, there is a layer of specificity in the way social information is brought to bear in intra- and inter-cultural interactions, the latter involving a much more conscious and strategic use. As mentioned above, the social system of the brain exhibits a dual (and apparently contradictory)
quality: it is universal, but also culture-specific, and a great deal of effort has to be devoted to fitting the norms and schemas governing the qualities of the interlocutor’s social group in an intercultural setting. A problem that can arise in this situation is that the interlocutors may transfer their intracultural social information to the intercultural situation in which they are interacting, which leads to miscommunication. “Transfer” refers to the influence of one’s social knowledge when one faces a new situation. By default, humans have a tendency to apply their own mental frames and schemas to any new situation, but these are culture-specific and consequently there may be problems if these mental sets are applied to a different culture. Zegarac and Pennington (2000) illustrate this with the act of offering coffee: in some cultures, if the host offers coffee after a meal is generally recognised as a polite way to indicate to the guests that they ought to leave soon if they do not wish to outstay their welcome. In other cultures, an offer of coffee on a similar occasion is just an act kindness (or even an invitation to the guests to stay a little bit longer than they had intended).

In this sense, two types of transfer can lead to miscommunication in intercultural interactions. Firstly, speakers can mistakenly use a negative transfer of their own social information to the intercultural situation, for instance when one uses polite formulas which are commonly used in the speaker’s culture but nonexistent in the interlocutor’s culture. Secondly, speakers may try to adapt themselves to the interlocutor’s culture by using positive transfer, that is, by adapting themselves to the subtleties of the interlocutor’s culture. In this case, the interlocutor may value positively the fact that the speaker is making an effort to fit a different culture, but this fact inevitably brings social information to an unusual level of consciousness or awareness and hence the speaker’s social adaptation may affect the outcome of the interaction by forcing the interlocutor to wonder why the speaker is trying to fit his/her own culture in the first place. In cases of business negotiations, this fact may generate unwanted or unexpected effects.

4. Intercultural business interactions from an inferential-social perspective

Business interactions are different from normal everyday interactions in the sense that they are normally goal-oriented, or as Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson (2002: 274) put it: “business discourse (is) a web of negotiated textualizations, constructed by social actors as they go about their daily activities in pursuit of organizational and personal goals”. Indeed, a speaker in a business interaction will try to achieve his/her goals without risking miscommunication. At every stage of the interaction, speakers will try to choose utterances which fulfill the underlying intentions and are not detrimental to the achievement of their aims. Using Jary’s (1998b: 11) terminology, the speakers will try to avoid detrimental implications (assumptions that would be detrimental the communicator’s aims). Conversely, the interlocutors in a business interaction will try to obtain as many beneficial implications (assumptions that further the achievement of the speaker’s aims) as possible. But this achievement is impossible without the adjustment of the information that is stored on social aspects of the interlocutors’ cultures, which can only be predicted to a greater or lesser extent.

Needless to say, business interactions take place in both intra- and inter-cultural settings, but

10. Zegarac (2007) makes an interesting application of the notions of cognitive environment and manifestness to the study of cultural information. All speakers have a cultural environment (the set of cultural representations which are manifest to an individual at a given time). Besides, in the course of an interaction, interlocutors also share a mutual cultural environment (which is shared by two or more individuals and in which it is manifest to those individuals that they share it). Problems of miscommunication inevitably arise when (a) the speaker is not aware of the interlocutor’s cultural environment, (b) the speaker mistakenly transfers his/her own cultural environment to a new scenario (negative transfer); or (c) the speaker tries to adapt to the interlocutor’s cultural environment (positive transfer) but, by turning this environment into a mutual cultural environment, his/her adaptation may raise doubts or questions about the underlying intentionality and hence generate unwanted consequences for the interaction.
Let us summarize in that respect Jeswald W. Salacuse’s paper “Negotiating: The top ten ways that culture can affect your negotiation” where the author gives cultural clues to succeed in business negotiations. In a nutshell, he recommends negotiators to consider the following aspects:

1. Negotiating goal: Contract or relationship? Some cultures need to establish a personal relationship before entering any type of negotiation.
2. Negotiating attitude: Win-Lose or Win-Win? Should all parts benefit or is it like a war with only one winner?
3. Personal style: Informal or formal? That depends on cultures.
4. Communication: Direct or indirect? Beware of inconvenient ways of addressing, incorrect use of politeness, etc.
5. Sensitivity to time: High or low? The importance of time varies in different cultures. The German or the British are more time bound than the Spanish or the Japanese.
6. Emotionalism: High or low? Should negotiators show their feelings or hide them in order to achieve their goals?
7. Form of agreement: General or specific? Sometimes a too-detailed agreement is considered in some cultures as a sign of lacking confidence.
8. Building an agreement: Bottom up or top down? Going from general issues to specific or detailed ones or vice versa.
9. Team organization: One leader or group consensus? Different cultures, different ways of organizing negotiations. Some prefer a leader in the group, others a more cooperative team work; and
10. Risk taking: High or low? Some cultures like to take risks while

whereas in the former there is confidence in the fact that there are many central cultural representations which are mutually manifest in their cultural environment (see note 10 above), in intercultural interactions these cultural assumptions may be radically altered and will demand an increased awareness in their assessment and expectations of cultural adequacy. Therefore, communication in intercultural business contexts is not sustained by a mutually manifest cultural awareness but by the contextual knowledge necessary to achieve the right inferences and therefore understand the communicative intentions of their interlocutors. Take the following case cited in Moeschler (2004): In a workshop, on commercial interaction, an expert on international negotiation told the following story: diplomats had difficulty in obtaining minimal positive results in negotiations with Iranian partners. The expert analysed the situation in the following way: in ordinary negotiations, speakers tend to obtain an agreement at the optimal level located between the minimal stage (floor) and the maximal stage (ceiling), with the main purpose of the negotiations being the adjustment of the negotiators’ reciprocal goals. The shared presupposition is that an optimal negotiation process is beneficial for both negotiators. Our expert observed that in negotiations with Iranians this presupposition was not shared. On the contrary, ordinary Persian negotiations are driven by the necessity to triumph over the partner, which means that the foreign negotiator’s optimal intended stage cannot be reached and should be lowered. The main point of this short story is that as soon as a non-Persian negotiator begins the negotiation process with a Persian partner, he must, in order to gain his optimal intended stage: (i) claim a higher optimal stage than the intended one, and (ii) manifest his disappointment to his partner at the end of the negotiation.

In the example, the explanation offered by Moeschler stresses the need that negotiators have to adapt to their addressee’s expectations in most cultural settings if they want to reach their intended goals. They cannot expect local negotiators to play their game. In other words, they must be able to access different cognitive environments, adapt to new social layouts and fine-tune their cultural expectations. As we said above, in intracultural settings, participants entertain a common cultural environment that allows them to know the rules beforehand, but in most intercultural contexts, the visiting party must find the “cultural adequacy” that will make it possible for them to adapt to their interlocutors’ world and alter, sometimes deeply, their cultural attitudes if they want to have a chance to succeed.

We would like to stress that by “cultural adequacy” we are not referring to fitting the typical stereotypes that people commonly use to characterise people from a different culture: the German obstinacy, the Hispanic superficiality, etc. Instead, we are referring to those mental sets, schemas and central representations that are taken for granted inside a culture and which are important in intercultural business negotiations and even influence the choice of utterances (as in polite formulas, excuses, etc). Besides, certain negotiating styles, rituals, attitudes and expectations may be isolated in every culture, conditioned by cultural legacy. Normally, the interlocutors of an intracultural
negotiation will engage in similar communicative patterns (many of which will not reach a level of conscious awareness) and will face less challenges to determine the interlocutor’s underlying intentions. One of these challenges is facilitated by the interlocutor’s experience in previous business negotiations, but the mutuality of cultural information will not generate an additional layer of mental activity. On the contrary, intercultural business negotiations constantly require assessments, choices and estimations of adequacy related to the interlocutors’ cultural backgrounds, and these constrain the choice of utterances in these negotiations. This can also be extended to the choice of nonverbal behaviours fitting the cultural requirements of the interlocutor’s culture, most of which are not given off unintentionally, but are performed intentionally and require previous training.

It is interesting to underline the importance of notions such as time or space and sociopragmatic etiquette like politeness or forms of addressing interlocutors in business exchanges. For instance, *time is gold* is a well-known American aphorism that works well in intracultural anglosaxon business settings but which is viewed as impolite or culturally unacceptable in others: Some Eastern cultures appreciate spending time to build a personal relationship between the negotiators so confidence can be established once they get to know one another. Their intention seems to achieve a *mutual cognitive environment*, made up of those “mutually manifest assumptions” that one can only achieve after repeated contact. It is famous the case of Enron, the USA electric company, which lost an important contract in India because local negotiators felt Enron was going too fast. Proxemics is also an important feature in many cultures, for example, the stepping back of a British negotiator when his Arab interlocutor tries to touch his arm is inferred as a signal of rejection. And politeness is another important issue that may cause cultural inadequacies. Let us consider the amount of verbal politeness formulas used in languages like English compared to the relatively small number used in Spanish but which are supplemented by gestures, smiles and other nonverbal behaviors to reach the intended meaning. Similarly, the strict ceremonial formalities of Japanese negotiators are worth stressing. In that respect, it would be interesting to contrast the different politeness mechanisms used in different cultures (which typically belong to the shared cultural environment of intracultural interlocutors) in order to analyse the right and wrong inferences and misunderstandings caused in multicultural business contexts. Let’s see the following example:

In Riyadh an American exporter once went to see a Saudi Arabian official. After entering the office he sat in a chair and crossed his legs. With the sole of his shoe exposed to the Saudi host, an insult had been delivered. Then he passed the documents to the host using his left hand, which Muslim consider unclean. Lastly he refused when offered coffee, suggesting criticism of the Saudi’s hospitality. The price for these cultural miscues was the loss of a $10 million contract (Kösal, 2000).

In this example, the American interlocutor has clearly, although unintentionally, conveyed to his partner a kind of paralinguistic and verbal information that seriously contravenes fundamental social rules in the target culture. This illustration proves that very often, what is nonverbally communicated in social (and specifically intercultural) settings can be more relevant to the addressee that the actual words uttered. As we said above, as we speak, our listeners try to interpret not only our speech but also any other information (conscious or unconscious) that we make manifest so they can have a whole picture of our intentions and therefore produce the right inferences. In fact, it seems that very often, in communicative exchanges, nonverbal manifestations take priority over linguistic ones in

others prefer to be more conservative.
many contexts and enrich the inferences that the interlocutors derive from the verbal stimulus. In the example quoted above, a double unfortunate misunderstanding takes place: the American negotiator is not aware of how impolite his gestures and actions result in the target culture (that is, he has not undertaken the necessary positive transfer to the interlocutor’s culture) while the local interlocutor ignores that these gestures are devoid of any intended meaning in the foreign culture. This double failure to make this cultural information part of their mutual cognitive environment leads the local addressee to entertain a wrong set of assumptions. Misinterpretation results then from the culturally biased behaviours of both negotiators who wrongly interpret the underlying motivations of their demeanor and reach the incorrect inferences that lead to the failure of their business goals.

Although this seems to be a rather common situation in intercultural situations, we are not suggesting that intracultural negotiations are devoid of misunderstandings, but these do not normally arise from the interlocutors’ access to stored social information, but from an incorrect use of the inferential system when obtaining explicitly communicated information, when accessing implicated premises or conclusions, and when using contextual information in order to obtain the intended interpretation.

In some cultures, people are more challenging than others when choosing utterances to convey their thoughts. For example, in business negotiations Spanish and Italian speakers often expect their interlocutors to interpret them by deriving implicatures (implicitly communicated assumptions); British speakers often demand a great deal of inference in order to access the right amount of contextual information which is necessary to turn their utterances into meaningful interpretations; and American speakers are normally very literal in the way they convey their thoughts.

In short, this is a challenge posited to the inferential system of interlocutors and not centred upon their social system, as it usually happens in intercultural business interactions. Additionally, the communicative challenge of these intercultural interactions may be enhanced not only by the lack of command of the language in which the negotiation is taking place, but also by not being able “to read between the lines”, as in the following example:

At a meeting recently held in Japan, an American was discussing two alternative proposals with his colleagues, all of whom were native speakers of Japanese. The American was well schooled in the Japanese language and was, indeed, often called ‘fluent’ by those around him. At this meeting, proposal A was contrasted to proposal B, and a consensus was reached about future action, and the meeting then dismissed. Upon leaving the room the American commented, ‘I think the group made a wise choice in accepting proposal A’. A Japanese colleague, however, noted, ‘But proposal B was the group’s choice.’ The American continued: ‘But I heard people say that proposal A was better’. The Japanese colleague concluded, ‘Ah, you listened to the words but not to the pauses between the words’ (Brislin 1978: 205, quoted in Gutt, 2000: 78).

In this case, fluency in Japanese was not enough to interpret correctly the other stimuli produced by local interlocutors, so the American negotiator made wrong inferences and generated a set of detrimental implications. Although understanding the right intonation or the silences between the words uttered seemed to be crucial, the foreign negotiator did not consider them relevant. As these verbal and nonverbal behaviours are not very significant in his own culture (i.e., they are not central cultural representations), he failed to realize that, by contrast, in Japanese they convey an intentional load that cannot be ignored.

The importance of language command must also be stressed in business settings. Since most international business negotiations are carried out in English, the ability to negotiate in this language is often used as the key means to reach the goals intended. The value of language control in
intercultural settings allows its holder a fundamental advantage over those who are not in such control. Language command allows its users to express or disguise intentions better, play with meanings, a better control of possible inferences and understanding of cultural contexts. Cognitively speaking, information is better processed and stored and ideas are delivered more efficiently. All these aspects are fundamental in business negotiations as the following example proves:

During the process of an international joint venture known as GlobalOne, the triumvirate of Deutsche Telekom, France Télécom and Sprint negotiations were plagued by misunderstandings on the fundamental level of language. No member of the top DT management spoke or understood French beyond what is needed to order a meal in a restaurant. Their knowledge of English was better, but in only one case truly adequate so dealing in English was as much of a problem for FT as for DT. And yet, all the negotiations with Sprint and all the transaction documents with Sprint were in English. Sprint exploited the language advantage to the hilt. This wonderfully effective technique consisted of Bill Esrey, as chairman, insisting that he would negotiate points of crucial importance only in private with the chairmen of his two European partners. Financial and legal advisers were excluded. That meant that the chairmen of FT and DT negotiated in a language they possessed incompletely on a subject. He was also the master of the most recent Wall Street jargon. For the management, and most members of the negotiating teams, at FT and DT, he might as well have been speaking Chinese (Begley, 2003).

Obviously, this advantage was crucial to get the company’s objectives, so we should not underestimate the importance of language command in intercultural settings.

As we anticipated above, the traditional business context where a seller (from a different country, language and culture) tries to sell something to a potential buyer (who is alien to the seller’s original culture) in no longer the only one. Other situations are rapidly gaining importance. The present world is a global one where things and people are more and more interconnected. The local company going to other countries to sell its products is progressively replaced by large multinational companies which have headquarters all over the world. For them, negotiating in any country does not seem to bring particular problems because their staff is made up of people from different countries and cultures. Perhaps the problem lays now inside the same company where different languages and cultures dwell together and are constantly influencing each other. That is, they are constantly shaping and checking the extent of their shared cultural environment. The communicative relationship inside these companies even if they all speak the same language (fluently or otherwise) is marked by the cognitive and cultural layout of their members, along with their different skills and academic backgrounds. We believe it is inside these multinational business settings where an intracultural analysis is not sufficient. Interculturality is now dominant inside many companies where other cognitive mechanisms play a fundamental role in the basic communicative processes carried out by its members and where intentions and inferences are constantly tested in the search for relevance. Despite being intercultural, these business settings are not a mirror image of more traditional multicultural ones. People share large amounts of information which allow them to work together, but on the other hand they keep their idiosyncratic differences which make misunderstandings a common outcome in their daily interactions. These new instances of interculturality could also be studied considering the inferential-social interface that we have been anticipating in the previous pages from a relevance-theoretic perspective.

Finally, and continuing with the same argument, it may be interesting to consider the point that some authors from other research perspectives (Sarangi, 1994; Meewins, 1994; Asante & Gudykunst, 1989; Poncini, 2002) sustain when they believe that an excessive emphasis has been given to the cultural aspects (e.g. politeness or social etiquette) as the main problems to construct the right inferences when communicating in the business world (Mateo, 2007). The reasons,
according to those authors, should be also looked for in settings such as the institutional contexts (company organization), the educational (experience and knowledge) and even the individual and the organizational (ability of negotiators or their rank and position inside the company). They believe that business values are often more important than particular cultural norms and expectations. We think that, although these topics should be taken into consideration, it is also crucial to understand the cognitive mechanisms that affect this kind of professional language especially in intercultural scenarios where assumptions from the interlocutors’ inferential and social systems play a fundamental role.

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