Between Languages and Cultures.
Intercultural Communication between the Italians and Sudanese

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The Study and Research Methodology

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In this chapter we will present the methodology used in the volume to collect information, handle and process data, and establish a reference sample for the analysis and discussion of data.

1 The Methodology Used in the Volume

Based on the intercultural communication model presented in this volume, we decided to structure a field survey aimed at creating a case study that would provide the data necessary for our research.

To respond to this need, we decided to adopt a qualitative methodology based on the analysis of content analysis, which allowed us to collect both qualitative and quantitative data.

The following sections will discuss the methodological approach of this research, the techniques and the procedure used to gather information and the tools used to analyse the data.

1.1 The Methodological Focus

In line with previous research in the field of intercultural communication (Balboni 2007; Balboni Caon 2015; Cavaliere 2016; Caon, Pavan, Lobasso 2007; Dalla Libera 2017), we decided to conduct a qualitative and empirical study that was exploratory in the first phase and descriptive in the second phase.

During the first phase, we decided to carry out a series of interviews with the Sudanese and Italians that live in Sudan and that have daily relations and exchanges with each other. For example, we referred to

verbal and nonverbal exchanges in the workplace, in hospitals or public healthcare centres, and meetings between friends or colleagues, etc.

The aim was to explore the characteristics of intercultural communication (verbal and nonverbal aspects, core values) in the field during different communicative events in order to classify and detect the communication problems that may arise due to cultural differences.

To gather the necessary information, we used the Balboni and Caon (2015) model of intercultural communication and the observation grid of intercultural communication.

It consists of four sections that are indicated in the below table.[1]

Table 1. Observation Grid of Intercultural Communication (Balboni, Caon 2015)

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1. Communication problems due to cultural values

1.1 Communication problems related to the concept of time
1.2 Communication problems related to the concept of space
1.3 Communication problems related to hierarchy, respect and status
1.4 Communication problems related to the concept of family
1.5 Communication problems related to the concept of honesty, loyalty, fair play
1.6 Communication problems related to the metaphorical world
1.7 Communication problems related to the concept of public and private
1.8 Communication problems related to sexuality
1.9 Communication problems related to the religious sphere
1.10 Communication problems related to other cultural models
1.11 Other cultural peculiarities useful for intercultural communication

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2. Nonverbal Communication Tools

2.1 'Kinesics': communicating with the body
  – head and face
  – arms and legs
  – posture
  – smells and noises of the body
  – other
2.2 'Proxemics': the distance between bodies as a form of communication
2.3 Communicating with objects
  – clothes and uniforms
  – status symbols
  – money
  – food and drink
  – other

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3. Intercultural Problems Related to Language

3.1 Communication problems related to the sound of language
3.2 Communication problems related to word and topic choice
3.3 Communication problems related to grammar
3.4 Communication problems related to text structure

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1 The table can be downloaded online from the LabCom site at `http://www.unive.it/pag/16978`.

3.5 Communication problems of a socio-linguistic nature
3.6 Pragmatic communication problems: communicative moves
3.7 Other

4. Communicative Events

4.1 Dialogue and telephone calls
4.2 Formal meetings and group work
4.3 Cocktail parties, lunch, dinner and barbecues
4.4 Public monologues: conferences and group presentations
4.5 Parties, relaxation and games
4.6 Courtship
Other genres to add according to personal interest

As can be seen from the table, the grid provides a series of elements to be observed during communicative exchanges. Each item, however, can be integrated with other aspects that may be of interest depending on the diverse environments in which communication takes place.

For this volume, we decided to extend the questions and the analysis of communicative events to the following areas:
 – teaching Italian language at institutions or universities;
 – business and entrepreneurship;
 – communications (radio and TV journalists);
 – healthcare (doctors, healthcare and international cooperation and development workers);
 – intercultural diplomacy (Italian Embassy in Khartoum).

For the 'other' category in the grid dedicated to values and communicative events, sections have been added regarding:
 – medical examinations;
 – business meetings;
 – communication about illness;
 – Italian lessons.

In the second, descriptive phase of our research, we reported the information obtained in the field during the explorative phase. What emerged from the research is not generalizable for all communicative situations between the Italians and Sudanese, and it does not claim to be representative, but it is set up as a case study of a given number of participants in a certain context.

The detailed information that was collected is available in the chapters that are to follow.

1.2   The Case Study and Content Analysis

As Neuman (2000) states, the characteristics of qualitative and descriptive research are the following:
–   provides a precise and detailed image of the studied area;
–   finds new data that may contradict that which has previously been collected;
–   creates a set of categories or classifications;
–   documents a process or framework;
–   gives information about a certain context or situation;
–   answer the questions 'what' and 'how'.

In our volume, we decided to follow a explorative methodology during the first phase to understand 'what' characterised communication between the Italians and Sudanese and 'how' it takes place within different communicative events.

Through an exploratory study we tried to build our knowledge using information gathered from the participants and through the observations made during our study.

These are the motivating factors that led us to investigate the communication between some people within certain communicative events by means of a case study.

The choice of using case studies is supported by the need to holistically explore the characteristics of a communicative event. In this regard, Yin (1994, 3) suggests employing case studies as "they enable the researcher to investigation the characteristics of everyday, real events in a holistic and meaningful way".

In line with what was stated by Yin and previously quoted by Neuman, we used the case study in our work as both a descriptive and exploratory methodology of the phenomenon of intercultural communication.

2   Collecting Information

In the following paragraphs we will specify the type of data collected and the moment in which the survey was carried out.

2.1   Participants and Context

There were a total of 49 participants in the case study:
–   workers in international cooperation and development: 6
–   entrepreneurs: 7
–   Italian language students in Sudan: 14

- journalists: 9
- Italian Embassy and expats: 9
- doctors and social-healthcare professionals: 4

Participants were asked questions drawn from the observation grid of intercultural communication (see § 2.1.1) during individual interviews or focus groups.

Both methods of data collection were carried out in Sudan in the city of Khartoum during the periods of May-June 2017 and October-November 2017.

The working group consisted of:
- members of the Italian Embassy;
- researchers at Ca' Foscari University;
- local Italian and Sudanese administrators.

In particular, during the months previously indicated, some researchers from Ca' Foscari University in Venice went on site to share the following with the work group:
- methodology for administering questions;
- types of questions;
- time frame for completing the study.

Therefore, university researchers trained local administrators during the initial phase regarding the methodology and the observation grid of intercultural communication, and in the second phase, administered some questions and supervised the work that was carried out.

During a third phase, local administrators interviewed various informants to gather the necessary information to conduct the study.

2.2 Data Collection Techniques and Tools

Below we will go into detail about the types of interviews and focus groups used to collect data.

2.2.1 Interviews

In our research we decided to use semi-structured interviews, starting from the questions classified in the intercultural communication grid, while also giving informants and administrators the possibility to modify or expand parts of the interview.

Furthermore, the choice of using semi-structured interviews was influenced by:
– the limited time that informants had during the interviews;
– the greater flexibility that semi-structured interviews give to increase or expand upon comments, including those related to other areas but still relevant to the topic of conversation

Both Gilbert (1993) and Flick (2014) highlight the importance of using open questions and being flexible in the overall reorganisation of the previously set interview structure.

Based on this premise, we asked some questions earlier or postponed questions in respect to the established format. However, we always tried to keep in mind the structure of the observation grid of intercultural communication

There were three question types based on Flick (2014):
a.   open questions;
b.   theory-driven, hypotheses-directed questions based on the scientific literature of reference or on some theoretical assumptions of the researcher about a topic. This type of question was used to elicit information, link it to the reference theory and make some aspects of the subject matter explicit;
c.   confrontational questions. These are questions asked by the interviewer to summarise what was said by the respondents to critically review the answers and compare them to each other.

In total, there were about 100 questions administered to each informant. These were connected to the different aspects of intercultural communication and are visible in the following chapters (see §§ 3, 4, 5 and 6).

For the sake of efficiency, we will present only a few examples for each of the three types of interviews listed by Flick:

a.   open questions:

Interviewer:	How is public space structured in Sudan?
Respondent:	It is undoubtedly different. Schools are divided by gender. Schools for men and women…

b.   theory-driven, hypotheses-directed questions:

Interviewer:	For Americans, time is money: one shouldn't waste their time, and they shouldn't waste another's time. This is why an American phone call gets straight to the point, and an Italian phone call invests some time in small talk. For the Sudanese, is time considered elastic, meaning it is flexible?
Respondent:	Yes, the concept of time is different. Life is structured in a different way…

c.   confrontational questions:

Interviewer:	Some of you have said that it is possible and acceptable to arrive late for an appointment. Do you agree?
Respondent:	Yes, generally people arrive late…

Some authors, like Rubin and Rubin (1995, 175), affirm the importance of examining certain cultural elements that come up during an interview. To do this they suggest explicitly asking participants to explain stereotypes by providing illustrative examples, and sharing facts or stories that may have happened to them. On the basis of this theoretical indication, in our research we tried to ask participants to provide us with examples regarding problematic situations that they had to face related to different cultural aspects or stereotypes.

2.2.2   Focus Groups

Rubin and Rubin (1995, 27) define the focus group as "a form of evaluation in which groups of people are gathered to discuss potential challenges or shared opinions".

Gilbert (1993, 143) states that the value of focus groups lies in the fact that they provide the researcher with the possibility of not focusing only on the answers of the individual participants but also on the dynamics and interactions between them.

For these reasons, and in order to collect as much information as possible about a group of informants, two focus groups were set up within two Italian language classes in Sudan. The students, that were between 20 to 40 years old, replied as a group to the questions based on the observational model of intercultural communication.

2.3   Data Analysis

This section is dedicated to the methodology used to analyse the information collected during our research.

2.3.1   Transcription and Data Processing

The interviews and focus groups were recorded with an audio recorder, then transcribed and translated.

The interviews were all anonymous and consent was given by the participants.

As stated by Creswell (2009) and Flick (2014), when collecting information, recording and observing, the researcher can be confronted with a series of ethical problems. For this reason, the confidentiality of the participants in the research project was guaranteed.

The questions were written in Italian and English and then transcribed and translated to complete this volume.

Once the interviews were transcribed, the answers were grouped according to the four items that form the intercultural communication model (Balboni, Caon 2015):

– Verbal aspects;
– Nonverbal aspects;
– Core values;
– Communicative events.

Once the individual answers were grouped for each item, the individual authors proceeded to process the data in the following chapters.

2.3.2   Data Corpus

In summary, the collected data is as follows:

Table 2. Data corpus

Typology	Corresponding Informants
International cooperation and development	6
Entrepreneurs	7
Italian students	14
Journalists	9
Italian Embassy and expats	9
Doctors and social services/healthcare workers	4