

The system and its information

An intercultural approach

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In this lecture, I would like to talk about the idea of ‘information’ as it is determined by a system. I am not aiming for strict definitions. I will tell a few intercultural anecdotes instead, to show how information is dependent on the system from which it evolves, or rather to demonstrate its dependency from the observing and the observed system.

I have been living in this country for ten years now, after having lived nearly forty years in Germany. Thus, my examples deal with the comparison between German and Greek culture. Obviously, I have a completely different intercultural concept from, say a Briton or a Chinese.

At first, the residents of this country seemed rather strange to me. Some things were exciting, some things were convenient, and many things were annoying. Why did the Greeks not behave like normal people? Therefore, I started observing them, maybe the way an anthropologist would. Many of the concepts I had brought along failed in Greece, which was a source of quite a few painful experiences. Time passing, I learned to find my way in this society. I knew I had arrived, when the Greeks finally seemed normal to me. Instead, my German visitors became more peculiar each time.

The observing scheme had reversed: First, I had learned about Greece from a German viewpoint; later, I discovered German culture from a somewhat Greek point of view.

I first questioned my trivial idea of information – long before I started treating the subject scientifically – when I was with a young and pretty, Greek woman, and told her about all the amazing discoveries I had made about Greece, discoveries which used to be impressing and charming for Germans. Only, she, after half an hour, replied in a sort of bored manner, “I know all of that!”

Indeed, it is boring to tell a Briton that the cars in England drive on the left lane, that they have a queen and that you pay your bills with pounds. For a Briton, this is not an information. For a foreigner coming to the island for the first time, it might be a matter of survival to know this.

Equally, a Greek must know that in Germany you always stop at a pedestrian crossing in order not to run someone over – which nearly happened to me after several years of absence from Germany. In the same way, a German should know that you never stop abruptly a pedestrian crossing in Greece, because if you do, you risk a rear-end collision. In Greece, pedestrian crossings are no signals.

This is, in the theory of science, not a trivial process.

People learn to move in a system (i.e. in their society) virtually free of information. It is not an information to drive into the city one morning and not have an accident. You don’t even notice. In comparison, a continental European will be full of information after the first morning in London, but those will be relevant to a continental European only.

If I dare a moderately cautious definition of information, I would define information as that, which helps me to not suffer accidents within a given system. This is certainly not a complete definition but reflects the observation of a cybernetic system, which does not seem to move when in equilibrium.

Yet another intercultural example:

I was in a tavern with live music, again in female Greek company. I had ordered a carafe of red wine, but just before the music started and when the waiters became hectic, we were served some white wine. When the waiter passed our table the next time, I mentioned to him in a friendly way, that the red wine here had quite a pale colour. In Germany, this would have been a friendly way to express that

I had not exactly received what I wanted. The waiter could have replied, “You’re right, but we’ve got a darker variety, too.”

Here, in Greece, I was driving on the wrong side of the road, so to say.

The waiter froze. Features rigid and the voice furious, he said to me: “If I made a mistake, tell me I made a mistake, but don’t make a fool of me!”

Luckily, my companion was equally shocked at my behaviour; otherwise, I would have labelled the waiter as silly instead of finding out that I had been the one who misbehaved. I was in a similar situation as the car driver who hears in the traffic news that there is a wrong-way driver on his part of the highway. He shouts out in disbelief: “One? Hundreds!”

Different countries have different traffic rules for “manners”. Yet, these manners are most of the time far from arbitrary, but inherent expression of a completely different self-conception.

Thus, in Germany prevails a concept of human behaviour, which strongly stresses rules and laws. Mistakes are considered “illegal” and are to be avoided. By telling the waiter, “you made a mistake”, he is lowered, his mistake is made obvious and his failure is made public - a very shameful situation – in Germany. The Greeks show a much more relaxed attitude towards themselves: “We’re human. We make mistakes.” Thus, a mistake is called a mistake, because then you know there is one. Then, if necessary, it can be corrected. It is not disgraceful to have flaws.

One patient answered to the question, if she were irritable - in Germany the question alone would be considered indecent – “You bet! If my husband angers me, I slam the doors, and often it is I who is wrong.” She said this without a trace of shame. In Germany, the woman would condemn herself, she would feel guilty because of this illegal trait of character. But she’d prefer to keep this to herself.

You can talk about personal flaws openly in Greece. Moreover, when people want to get to know each other, they ask, “Tell me about your flaws.” Or, as a song title proclaims: “Let’s make a mistake together”.

It is understood that we’re no angels. You’re just the way you are. For the expression “I don’t want to – e. g. to go to the cinema – a Greek could say, "δεν μου έρχεται", ‘it doesn’t come to me’. While the German and the English construction assume an “I” which is in charge, the Greek construction rather implies a reaction to external forces in a state of lenience.

This shows a completely different understanding of what is right and wrong, which is more a result of situations as of fundamental values.

Employing the example “dealing with mistakes”, you could relate an entire history of civilization. Criteria like this one are like threads in a piece of fabric, passing through the complete pattern of social cohesion. Unfortunately, this is not the time or place to follow that thread.

Let me draw some conclusions from this approach.

1. Social knowledge is the predictability of behaviour in a social system. He who possesses this knowledge can easily drive a car, have a conversation or deal with a workman.
2. Information is all of what you need in order to achieve this goal. What you already know or what you already can do, is not an information.
3. Information is always a strategic product. Its relevance can be measured only in regard to the system’s reaction to it.
4. The effect determines the value of an information. This corresponds to Heinz von Foerster's expression “The listener, not the talker, determines the meaning of a sentence.” It is irrelevant what I meant to convey in the tavern, it is important, how the waiter reacted. Otherwise we would have to open the discussion who is right, he or me, Greeks or Germans. Something I would like to call 'the lawyer’s approach'.
5. As a matter of principle, a system in equilibrium is not altered by single influence and is indifferent to all reasoning. This means, according to Bertalanffy's concept of *equifinality* that a system strives towards the same final state, regardless of the initial parameters. When I enter the system as a stranger, it will adopt the usual habits, irrelevant of my contribution to it. An interesting question in this context is, how the *set point* can be altered. Is there a *critical mass* of immigration to a society, is it a question of assertiveness, or is there a desire for change in

any social system when in a state of crisis? The last point is a good distinction of the cybernetic from the systemic approach.

6. Corresponding to Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, a historical uncertainty principle was postulated. You can know how an era was, if you lived in it. But then you cannot describe and categorize it. Or, you can describe an era, but then you don't know how it was. The phenomenon of intercultural awareness is quite similar: You can move within a culture, but then you cannot explain it, or, you can explain it, but then you can't move in it inconspicuously. My conscientious observation of the Greek society happened mostly in the beginning of my time here. Now, I hardly observe anything of informative value. Except when I'm spending time with one of these peculiar and funny-acting West Europeans.