

Codes as cultural conventions - the role of metaperception.

Micha Strack

Georg-Elias-Müller-Institut für Psychologie, Universität Göttingen

mstrack@uni-goettingen.de

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As I understand the hypothesis of the IASS 2004 conference, we should discuss *if and how cultures have to be made more intelligible to each other*. The point, I want to make, - and my arguments will be of the psychological type as metaperception is a psychological process¹ -, is that the conference thesis itself may be a result of the type of cognition called *False Dissensus*. If the *assumption of a dissensus* is *false*, there would be no need for better intelligibility. *False Dissensus* is consensus - consensus didn't need any treatment.

Some definitions

Cultures endow conventions, conventional codes. Intelligibility gets established by such codes. A *code* is semiotically seen a *rule* concerning the connection between two sets of signs, or in its broader sense, between signs and objects. For the interpretation of a sign, some code must be *known*, known by the sign's individual users, its interpreters.

As I understand Peirce' triadic sign-model, the *interpretant* is a construct of that *rule*, connecting representamen and object. In a mathematical sense, the interpretant, the rule, the code, is a function, mapping both entities onto each other. In order of, moreover, social communication to proceed, the knowledge of the rule, the code, the interpretant must get *socially shared*, the code thereby becomes a cultural convention.

Shared Knowledge

What do we know about cultural conventions? Do (at least) we share, what we are talking about, means: do we share the interpretant for that construct, used in semiotics as well as sociology and psychology, respectively?

Let me give an example. Regarding cultural and socially constructed and shared cognitions, introduced the French social psychologist Serge Moscovici, in the 1960th, *Représentations Sociales*, the construct of Social Representations. Their defining features are that of *shared knowledge* and, second, the social construction of that knowledge (besides, social representations mostly represent beliefs about the way of living in a human society, about cultural goals and values; about the truth, the beauty and the good; Moscovici 1995:273).

Moscovici, like most psychologists, conducts empirical research. Through that research an operational definition of social representations became visible: Social Representations seem to exist if, admittedly simplified, members of a culture utter similar answer to interview questions. Is actual similarity sufficient to define a socially shared interpretant, code or culture?

¹ - and the psychological argumentation should be kindly admitted, as Ferdinand de Saussure appointed semiology to social psychology -

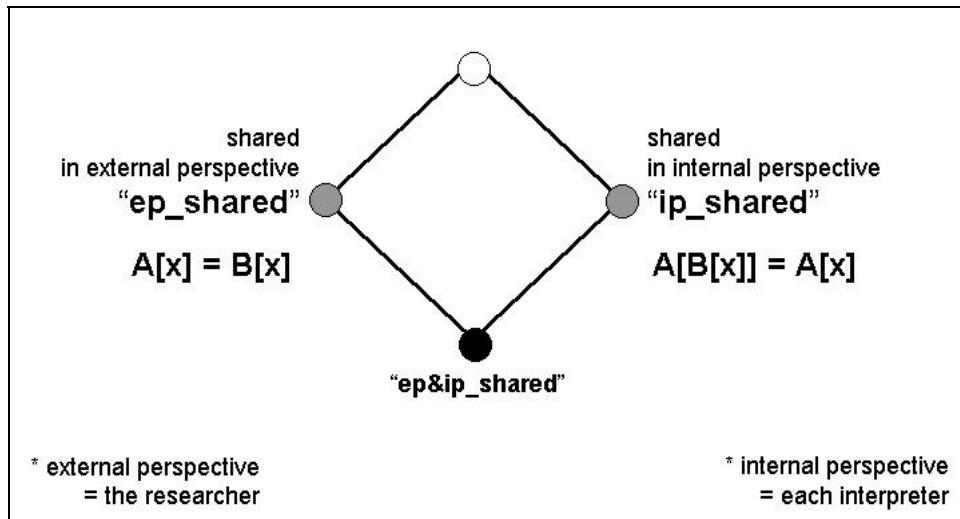


Fig. 1: Concept lattice of shared knowledge

Shared knowledge, as Moscovici and others had defined it, at least by their empirical work, is knowledge >shared in external perspective<, let me call it: > ep_shared<; Fig. 1, *ep* for the *external perspective* of the researcher. Ep_shared knowledge is given if x (for example, the rule, the code, the interpretant) is known by most interpreters of the cultures involved (as externally assessed by the researcher, who compares results of knowledge assessments between a culture A and another culture B, or between two subjects A and B, respectively). Moscovici and most empirical researchers follow that way and feel satisfied with it.

But for the existence of conventions, in order of social communication to proceed, ep_sharing - in Fig. 1 on the left, is not sufficient. It must be accompanied by knowledge > shared in internal perspective (ip_shared) <, ip_shared is depicted in Figure 1 at the right hand, and is given if x is known by an interpreter who assumes most others (for example, from other cultures, here the B) to know x, too.

The formula, at the right hand of Fig. 1, expresses that 'A assumes that B assumes x'. Each hook of the left type reads "thinking, representing, expecting, assuming, judging, or perceiving..." (the closing hooks are not to be read aloud). Thus the ep_shared knowledge needs to asses direct perceptions only, A and B are simply representing x. The ip_shared knowledge needs metaperceptions.

People's beliefs in knowledge or perceptions of other people are comprehended in social psychology as *metaperceptions* (Georg Herbert Mead called them 'role taking', Jean Piaget spoke about 'perspective taking'). As metaperceptions are psychological processes within subjects, and because they are based on cognitive operations, a diversity of systematic biases may emerge...

When reading the diagram in Fig. 1, which normally is a concept lattice (= the knot on the bottom is the subordinate construct were ep_ and ip_shared knowledge coincide)²; when reading the diagram as connecting four states in a state-space, Figure 2, it should be expected that knowledge or codes shared exclusively in external perspective, left hand, will pragmatically not result in communications: a subject or culture A in this example will not be motivated to communicate something, as long as A believes, he would not be intelligible for B.

² for concept lattices see Rudolf Wille et al., Darmstadt fzbw.de (german).

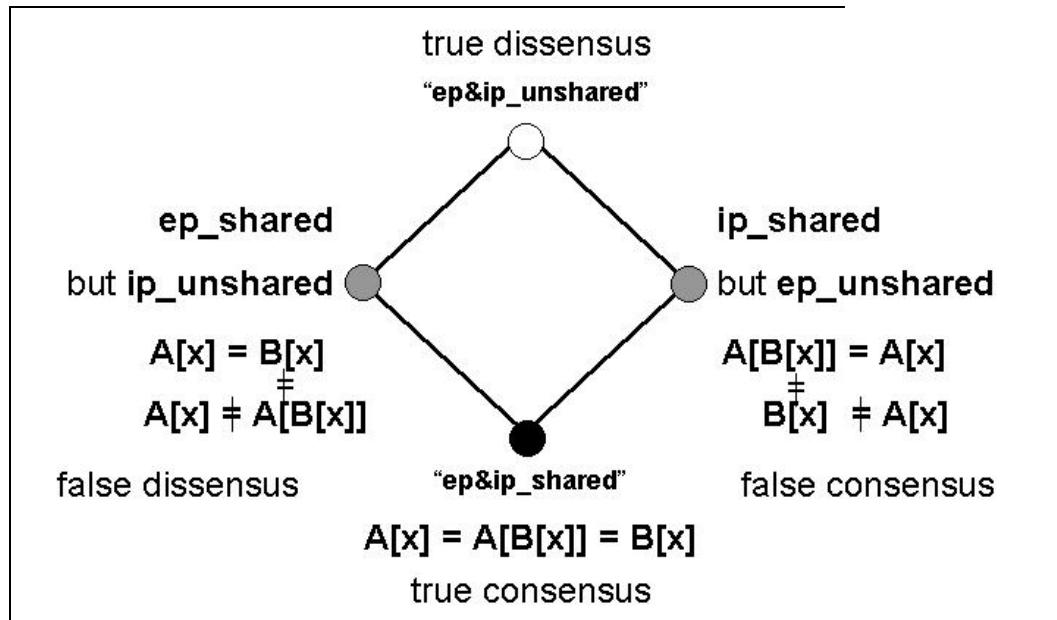


Fig.2: State space of shared knowledge constructs

The knot on the left hand side of Figure 2 is called *false dissensus*, because the dissensus assumed in internal perspective of subject or culture A is not true in external perspective. The knot on the right hand side of Figure 2 is called *false consensus*, because the consensus assumed in internal perspective of subject or culture A is not true in external perspective of the researcher.

The *false consensus*, prominent cause of ethnocentric misunderstandings, is emphasized by the hypothesis of this conference: that *cultures have to be made more intelligible to each other*. But, perhaps, the organizers of the IASS-conference were subject to the False dissensus (left side of Figure 2) themselves.

Types of discrepancies

However, to move one step further, the three cognitions in Figures 1 and 2 given (what A thinks about x, what B thinks about x, and what A assumes B to think about x) allow to be differentiated into more than four states.

The next graph (Fig.3) differentiates the states or types of discrepancies between these three perspectives (additional symbols: the circle signs the own beliefs of culture or subject A, the triangle the metaperception, due to which A assumes B to represent x, to use some code or to be used to some interpretant x, and, finally, the square signs the actual knowledge or representations of subject, or culture B concerning x).

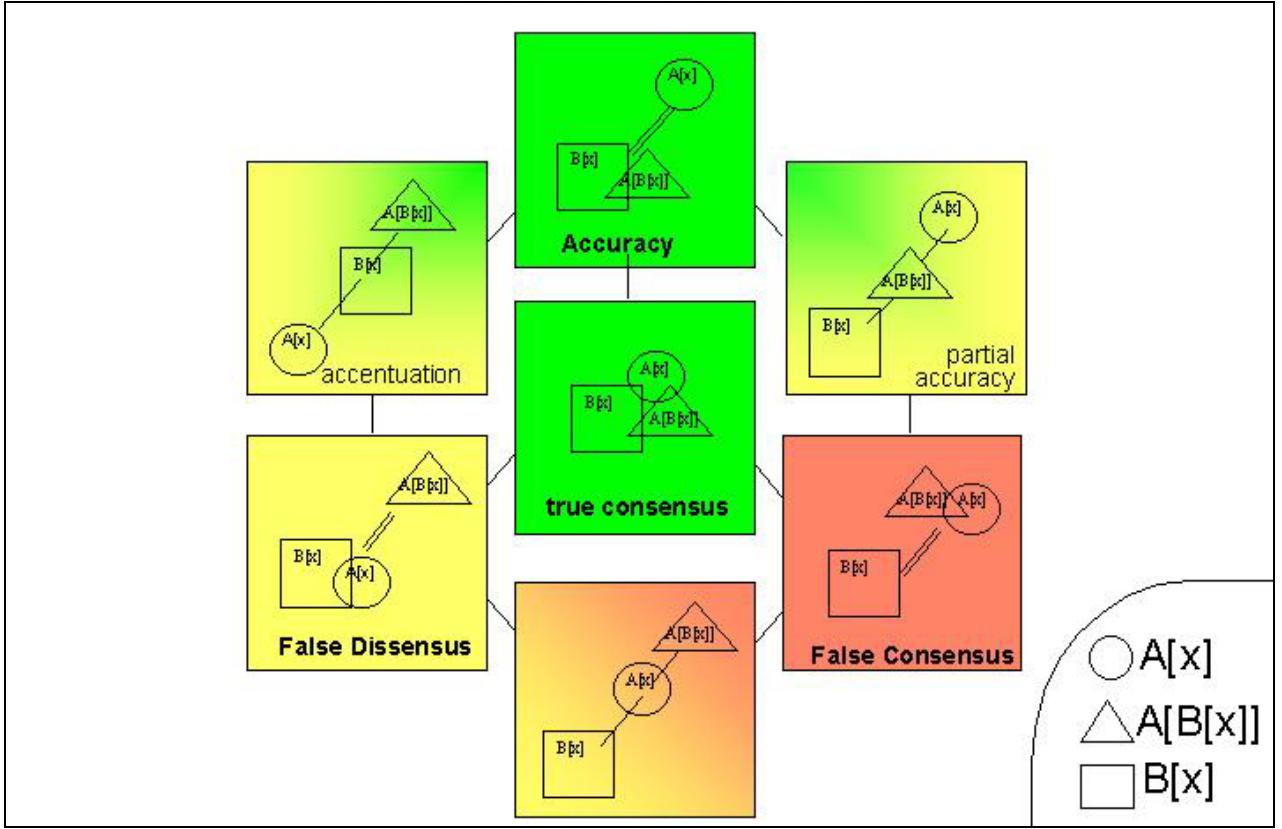


Fig. 3: Seven types of discrepancies.

If the three perspectives all fall together, we have *true consensus* (middle of Fig.3), shared knowledge in the external perspective of the researcher as well as in the internal perspective of the focus-subject or culture A. Given this type, codes are ep-ip-shared, no treatment in direction of mutual intelligibility is needed.

The conference thesis, however, states the type of *false consensus*, where ep_dissensus is given, but ip_consensus is assumed by interpreters. The colours in Fig. 3 use the conventional traffic-lights interpretant and sign desirability of the types.

Alternative, *false dissensus* is the type where ep_shared consensus exists, but ip_dissensus is falsely assumed by interpreters themselves. Interestingly, in the topologic metric chosen in the graph of types of Fig.3, one step only is enough to move towards the attractor. But, another type connects false consensus and the false dissensus state (bottom of Fig.3), which was not visible in the former simple graph. It bears no name yet. It's something like an accentuated false dissensus, intelligibility will be missed, but we can expect, that, because subject A assumes dissensus, communication will be aversive to her or to him. However, an additional interesting part of the graph of types (the upper part of Fig.3) still has to be discovered: What is to do if true dissensus between two cultures is given? (- as the conference thesis implicitly assumes -, dissensus in external perspective, respectively?)

The psychological process of metaperception just fulfills its capacity, if it bridges the gap between cultures by correctly anticipating or simulating the codes, interpretants or conventions of the respective others. The type at the top of the diagram in Fig.3 overcomes the dissensus in external perspective by correctly, or *accurately* simulating the codes of others (or, as the Americans say: by walking in the shoes of the other culture's member). The green color here is given if subject A accurately assumes B, B will be intelligible for A.

In order to complete the diagram, two types have to be added, connecting the accuracy in perspective taking on the top of the graph with each of our focused problems of false dissensus or false consensus between cultures. Irrespective the aesthetics of that diagram (Fig.3; seven edges of a cube - the hidden edge does not exist,

if I didn't wrong ...), we are now enough equipped, to investigate the question of the conference - *need cultures to be made more intelligible to each other ?!* - by the means of empirical methods.

An empirical example

Studies on the accuracy of metaperceptions were conducted in different sub disciplines of psychology, for brevity's sake, I will give only one simple example: Members of two cultures A and B, two nations within Europe, were asked about their own representation of a national symbol, - not the flags, not the football or soccer teams, but car brands. National brands, we expect, may function as signs connecting national membership with pride on success. In that study 121 Italians, and 111 Germans participated, more than half were male, mean age 34 in both samples (Strack 2004:88ff). They answered a questionnaire, giving their own representation of three car brands on rating-questions. And they additionally assumed the attitudes of members of the comparison culture: So Germans anticipated the answers of Italians, and Italians anticipated the answers of Germans, respectively. Accuracy of that anticipations or metaperceptions will point to mutual intelligibility (if, let's say, communication about cars proceed). One out of the car-brands, they had to judge in our questionnaire, was the national one: it was Volkswagen for the Germans, and Fiat for the Italians. They also had to judge the brands of the other nationality and a third brand from a third nation. So, the Germans had to judge Volkswagen, Fiat and Renault, the Italians Fiat, Volkswagen and Renault, respectively (French subjects – regrettably – did not participate in the study).

If you expect the participants to prefer their own national brand, it would result in an ep_dissensus, dissensus in external perspective. The results (white bars in fig.4), however, show no preference in the mean judgment within each sample, in fig. 4 they are already lumped together (the Renault, white bar right hand in fig.4, was a little less liked by both samples).

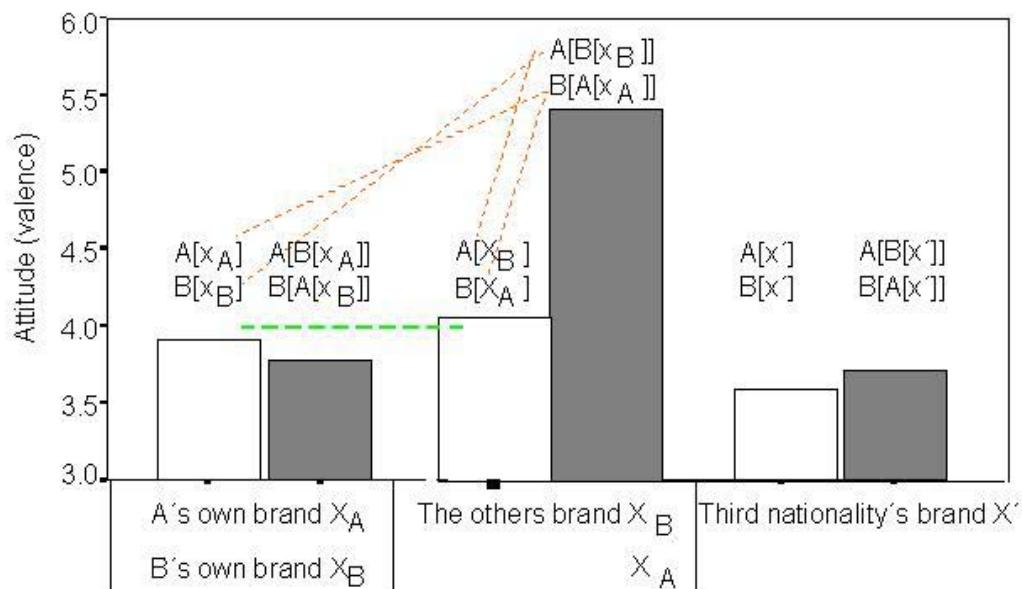


Fig.4: results of the empirical study

The gray bars in Fig.4 give all the metaperceptions we asked for. Members in both samples act in the same way: they expect the others to differentiate between their own and the foreign brands: The Germans assume the Italians to prefer their Fiat, The Italians assume the Germans to prefer their Volkswagen. Both hold false beliefs about the attitudes of the others: both expect dissensus between themselves and the other culture, Dissensus in internal perspective, besides consensus in my, the researcher's,

external perspective (as I am exclusively able to compare actual judgments between both groups). The false dissensus exhibited in the study is – in my eyes - a typical case of prejudices, pluralistic ignorance or false uniqueness, that means false dissensus as I called this type (fig. 3, left). False dissensus, because A believes that B differs in the representation of his national brand, and uses an ingroup-biased-code. But, in the external perspective they did not differ in their direct judgments, the internal-perspective-dissensus is *false*.

Taken together, false dissensus may be, in the end, the more common problem going along with intercultural communication. And, false dissensus, although it may inhibit motivation to communicate, is not as bad as the naïve, red colored false consensus for intelligibility between cultures.

So let me finish by ascerting the important role metaperception may play, an enlargement of epistemic capacities of human interpreters (top of fig.3), in the discourse about the conference's question.

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Correspondence address:
PD Dr. Micha Strack
Georg-Elias-Mueller-Institut für Psychologie
Gosslerstr. 14
D-37073 Goettingen, Germany
mstrack@uni-goettingen.de



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