

**European Masters  
in InterCultural Communication (EEMIC)**

**Semiotics of cultures  
Culture, language and translation**

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**Semiotics of cultures I :**  
**The notions « social actor » and « culture »**

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## 1) The notion of “social actor”

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➤ **Social actor** : is a group of men (« agents ») that shares

1. common knowledge and values (i.e. a “common culture”);
2. common “activities” (needs and goals): “social practice”;
3. common language(s) and communication means;
4. objects (realizations, products, symbols, ...);
5. a social place (social field, « champ ») ;
6. a common history (traditions, experiences) ;
7. a common relevant context (environnement).

**Two Examples :**

**the 68 generation**

**the farmer (professional culture)**

### Categories of social actors :

- « *formal* » or « *formalized* » **social actors** : family ; social class ; institution ; social organisation ; profession ; ...
  
- *but also (and especially) “un-formal”, “loose”, ... social actors* such as people who share ....
  - Political ideas and convictions, symbols, traditions, activities (= loose political actor but who may become influent ...);
  
  - Metaphysical ideas and convictions, symbols, visions, places, ... (= loose religious community of people ...);
  
  - Any common experiences, habitudes or traditions
  
  - Common language(s).

### Examples:

“student movement”

“daily life culture”

“global culture”

## The society (or community) of social actors

- a social actor by itself may be internally differentiated in groups, members, ... i.e.:
  - the social actor behaves like a constituting **society of social actors**;
  - who share at a **common (global) set of cultural references**.

### Examples:

- the university as a society of social actors (teachers, administration, students, ..);
- the political party as a “society of (formal and loose) social actors”;
- the enterprise as a “society of (formal and loose) social actors”;
- the national state as a society of actors;
- an international community as a society of actors (EC);
- an international organization (UNO, NATO, UNESCO, WTO, ...) as a society of social actors (national states, international communities, companies, “lobbyists”, ...)

## Society of actors: definition

Different actors integrate a society for fulfilling common goals, objectives, needs, for sharing common activities, using (a) common language(s), realizing and exploiting common objects, occupying a common space, referring/building a common history and sharing a common (“external”) environment ...

Some further characteristics for describing and understanding a society of actors:

- integration of actors in a society of actors : based on a kind of “**contract**” between the concerned social actors (cf. the fiction of a “social contract” preceding the constitution of a society );
- a “contract” establishes expectations, duties and rights of each social actor participating in a society of actors;
- different types or forms of “contracts”: formal (juridical) contracts and contract-like engagements such as traditions, manners or customs; obligatory and facultative engagements; negotiable and non-negotiable engagements, exclusive and non-exclusive engagements, etc.
- a specific social actor occupies a specific place and function in a society of actors (= “**social role**” of an actor);

- **one specific type of social actors specialised in the maintenance of the social contract binding a given diversity of social actors in a society of actors (cf. the notion of “governance”);**
- **the distribution between functions, roles and status of social actors constitutes the “social space” (in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu) specific or characteristic for a society of social actors.**

**Note:**

Notions like “national culture”, “global culture”, “ethno-culture”, “scientific culture”, “popular culture”, “mass culture”, “professional culture”, “bureaucratic culture”, ...

- **can always be described and explain with respect to the above mentioned 7 criteria**
- **and in taking into account that a social actor can constitute by himself a society of (functionally more specialised) social actors.**

## **2) The notion of culture: four definitions**

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### **Four definitions (approaches) of what a culture is**

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**Culture is :**

**1) a system of knowledge and values which is supposed to be more or less common to a group of men who constitute with respect to this system a “social actor” (a “community”).**

**2) a set of cognitive strategies and solutions for given needs (problems) relevant for a “social actor.**

**3) a species of capital (a “symbolic capital”) that distributes hierarchical places (produces a “social space”) and opens trajectories within the social space of a social actor (“community”).**

**4) a historical form with an evolutionary dynamics and embedded within a genetic filiation process.**

### 3) Culture as a reference system of knowledge and values

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Culture as a system of knowledge and values which is supposed to be more or less commune to a group of men who constitute with respect to this system a “social actor” (a “community”)

➤ knowledge : « cognitive systems » (*knowing how and knowing that*)

diversity of “species” of cognitive systems; i.e. a social actor may possess, refer to, produce ...

- practical knowledge, skills,
- theoretical knowledge (paradigms, themata, theories, ...)
- tacit and explicit knowledge (topoi; standards, ...)
- specialised and general knowledge,
  
- traditions, costumes,
- idéologies, « Weltanschauungen »,
- mentalities,
  
- belief systems,
- « representations » and stereotypes,
- ....

➤ **value** : *hierarchy of preferences conditioning preferential choices within a social actor*

**culture** is a « preferential », preferentially graded (hierarchical) knowledge for a social actor; i.e. knowledge that is considered – by the social actor - :

- to be true, certain, ... delusive, fallacious, not certain, improbable,
- to be acceptable, non-acceptable,
- to be good, bad, ...
- to be efficient, operational, “working”, superfluous, ...
- to be unquestionable, questionable...
- to be evident,
- to be general, universal, eternal, ...
- to be strange,
- to be horrible, appealing, disgusting, ...
- ...

**unresolved problems:**

- Semantics of cultural preferences
- Typology of cultural preferences

**Remark:**

One of the major functions of culture in the sense of a graded hierarchical set of knowledge is the **justification** and therefore also the **evaluation** and **sanctioning** of the doing and behaviour of the members of a social actor as well as of other social actors (i.e. of people referring to other cultural systems for justifying, evaluating and sanctioning a doing or behaviour).

**Example:** the “political community” (i.e. a political party)

- **Cultural references:** “ideology”, political, philosophical or religious traditions, etc.
- **Justification, evaluation and sanction** of political messages, programmes, “new ideas”, representations, .

**Example:** the “scientific community”

- **Cultural references:** a scientific paradigm (T. Kuhn)
- **Justification, evaluation and sanction** of scientific discoveries, demonstrations, explanations, messages, etc.

## Central distinction of “layers” within the culture of a social actor

There seems to exist always a kind of “**fundamental layer**” of culture characterising a social actor (this “fundamental layer” is called differently the “experiential basis”, the “episteme” of a culture, the “nature” of a culture”, the “unquestionable and unquestioned tradition(s)” of a culture, the “evidential basis” of a culture, etc.).

With reference to this “fundamental” (or “given” or “central”) layer of the cultural realm of a social actor, there exist a diversity of “secondary” elaborations (in the sense of J. Lotman), such as:

- **social representations,**
- **stereotypes,**
- **“indigenous theories”,**
- **fictional or real worlds,**
- **etc.**

These secondary or “derivable” elaborations:

- Show a kind of **self-referentiality** of a cultural system;
- Show that any cultural system possesses something like a “given”, “evident” (“**traditional**”, in the sense of R. Benedikt) set of knowledge and values (i.e. its fundamental layer);
- May fulfil different functions in the “life” of a cultural system: **maintenance** of a cultural system, conservation of a cultural system, reinforcement of specific patterns of it, ... but also **subversion** and progressive change of a given cultural system;

**Example:** the social actor called “linguistic community” (such as the French speaking community, the English speaking community, a bi- or multilingual community, etc.)

The “fundamental layer”: the natural language by itself (“natural language”, “langue naturelle”) –

- The grammatical, lexical and phonetical categories and schemas that constitute the linguistic experience and tradition of a linguistic community and in which a child of the community is born, which a child or any other individual wanting to participate in a given linguistic community has to acquire, to learn;
- The linguistic categories for understanding and living in a social and physical world;
- The roots of “naturalness”, “feeling”, “intuition”, “evidence”, etc. as basic values for the (social) use of a given natural language.

Secondary (“derivable”) elaborations:

- “spontaneous”, “practical” views for explaining aspects of the language and linguistic behaviour ;
- myths, fictional constructions but also linguistic policies, etc. concerning the status of a natural language, its value, its correct uses, its origins, etc.;
- social representations of the “good speaker”, the popular or vulgar use of the natural language, the “good” or “wrong” accent, etc.

## 4) Culture as a problem solving strategy

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**2<sup>nd</sup> definition:**

**Culture constitutes a set of (traditionally experienced, explicitly elaborated, etc.) cognitive strategies and solutions for given needs (problems) relevant for a social actor.**

**A social actor is a group of men that:**

- share a set of common activities, i.e. needs and goals to satisfy;
- occupy a place (social field,...) and lives in a (physical, ecological, social, mental, ...) environment with *limited resources* for satisfying these needs and goals.

**2) A culture, in this sense**

- is composed by a set of *strategies* (plans, schemata, ...) for satisfying given needs and goals;
- constitutes itself – for a person, a social actor or a society of social actors – a *species of resource* (a *cognitive resource*) for satisfying given needs and goals (activities).

**Note: cf. the first approach of culture as a cognitive system of valued and graded knowledge ...**

### **Needs and goals: high diversity of types or kinds of activities ...**

- **“basic” (biological) activities: nurture, sexual reproduction, security, ...**
  
- **activities concerning the internal organisation of a social actor (cf. the notion of “governance”), the social field and time occupied by the actor, ... as well as the relationships with its relevant environment;**
  
- **more peculiar “cultural” (graded cognitive) activities of a social actor;**
  
- **etc.**

**Culture as a set of plans, schemata, ... for such activities can be :**

- biologically pre-determined schemata (cf. ethology of behaviour);
- culturally transmitted schemata (“**traditions**”, “**customs**”, “**manners**”, ...);
- conventional schemata (“**laws**”, “**rules**”, “**standards**”, ...);
- highly differentiated and formalised schemata (“**institutions**”).

**Remember:** Culture as a cognitive strategy (schema): is basically –

1. a cognitive resource (knowledge of how to do);
2. that ought to be selected, used (applied, ...)
3. given a specific type of needs or goals (i.e. of activities).

**Note:**

Specific cultural patterns and practices such as “national culture”, “ethno-culture”, “media culture”, “global culture”, “popular culture” ... can therefore be described from two very complementary view points:

- Either as a more or less complex, internally differentiated cognitive system of graded knowledge;
- Or as a set of cognitive strategies or schemata for solving given needs and goals (“activities”).

## 5) Culture as a symbolic capital

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Culture is a species of **capital** (a “**symbolic capital**”) that distributes hierarchical places (in a “**social space**”) and opens **trajectories** within the social space of a social actor (“**community**”).

A social actor (cf. Bourdieu) lives in a:

- structured and structuring **social space** (i.e. in a society of social actors) ;
- where he occupies a set of «**social fields** » (“**champs**”) corresponding to his « **symbolic (economic, ...) capital** » with respect to the global symbolic (economic, ...) capital and its distribution over the other social actors within the constituting society;
- and where he can perform, following “**internal**” changes in his symbolic capital, **social trajectories** leading him from one social position to another one.

Example :

- social field (« **champ** ») of the actor “**academic world**” (P. Bourdieu)
- social field (“**champ**”) of a modern urban society such as Paris (P. Bourdieu),
- social field (“**champ**”) of journalism (P. Bourdieu)

**Principal notions implied here :**

- **Social space;**
- **Social field (“champ social”);**
  
- **“Habitus of reproduction”;**
- **Symbolic capital and power;**
- **Distribution of symbolic capital;**
  
- **Relationship of conflict and domination between actors belonging to one society of actors, between two or more societies of actors;**
  
- 
- **Appropriation/expropriation of symbolic capital;**
- ...

## **6) Culture as a historical form**

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Culture is a historical form with an **evolutionary dynamics** and embedded within a **genetic filiation** process.

- **Historicity of cultural forms;**
- **Evolutionary dynamics of a cultural form (life cycles of a cultural form and capacity to transform itself)**
- **Heritage of a cultural form/cultural forms.**

**Culture as a graded knowledge, cognitive resource and symbolic power:**

- **Has a certain life span;**
- **Is involved itself in an evolutionary process;**
- **Inherits from preceding cultures, cultural forms.**

## Conclusion

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Following the four discussed approaches, culture is – for a social actor :

- A graded or graduable knowledge;
- A cognitive resource for solving needs and goals;
- A means of power (i.e. – in the sense of Greimas – a potestive resource) for maintaining or changing a given social position;
- A “historical” resource.

It constitutes, in this sense a **reference for a social actor** – a **reference** of which the **status** is conditioned by the four above mentioned parameters.

In order to speak with Schütz, such references are themes or **thematic configurations** that constitute die “Wissenswelt” of a social actor.