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The Concept of the Dialogue by T. Dridze as a Relevant Tool for Cross-Cultural mediation in International Business

THE CONCEPT OF THE DIALOGUE BY T. DRIDZE AS A RELEVANT TOOL FOR CROSS-CULTURAL MEDIATION IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

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Abstract:

This article in memoriam of T. Dridze (1930-2000), a remarkable Russian sociologist, attempts to consider the applicability of the ideas she developed almost thirty years ago about the dialogue as a contact of meanings in relation to the realities of modern international business. To answer this question, the author compares the main provisions of the dialogue formulated by T. Dridze in her works on semiosociopsychology with modern research in the field of dialogue and cross-cultural management, and offers an expanded interpretation of the activities of a mediator-"translator" in such a dialogue from the point of view of cross-cultural mediation. The article also contains examples of practical application of cross-cultural mediation tools in a real business environment. The proposals mentioned in the work can be used to resolve intercultural misunderstandings in international business, namely when conducting international mergers and acquisitions, managing cross-cultural working groups, as well as developing artificial intelligence algorithms for cross-cultural services.

Keywords: cross-cultural mediation, cross-cultural management, organizational behavior, cross-cultural communication, cross-cultural dialogue.

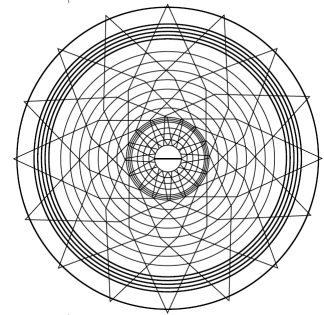
Introduction

The information dynamics of our time has added new impulses to the historical aspiration of the business community to geographical expansion traditionally considered by business as one of the important opportunities for reaching a new level of development. Today, this process is strongly characterized by the unprecedented activation of small and medium-sized businesses in the international arena (Bose, 2016), as well as the significantly increased speed of communication at all stages of such interaction. On the other hand, the diversity of the participants usually not very well prepared to cooperate with the representatives of other cultures, and the lack of ability to maintain an active dialogue, produced a predictable problem: the increasing complication of both forms of communication and variants of interpretation of interlocutors' communicative intentions.

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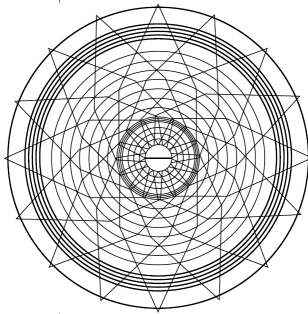
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It would seem that the idea of a dialogue in business being something more than negotiations should have long been the cornerstone of any business interaction when entering the international market. If several decades ago the appeals to pay more attention to the sociocultural aspects of the dialogue in the international business environment (Hall, 1960) seemed too exotic to follow, numerous misunderstandings between the negotiating parties representing various norm-and-axiological spaces (Klad'ko, 1999) made business audience say farewell to the perception of culture as “a luxury item to most managers, a dish on the side” (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2003, pp. 13). In theory, this situation should not come as any surprise to those operating in the global business environment, as all the participants of this process inevitably bear the sociocultural values and stereotypes of their communities (Hofstede, 2011). In practice, to remember about this can become rather challenging, as it requires the companies to be more than adaptable and flexible in dealing with the parties with rather different sociocultural orientations (Dewhurst et al., 2012). The result of all this is an ever-growing number of practical examples of what that T. Dridze interpreted as "pseudo-communication" and "quasi-communication" (Dridze, 1996, p. 147), confirming her idea that reducing the dialogue to a simple exchange of text messages between the parties and neglecting other aspects (including the socio-cultural ones) deprives such interaction of its most important component: mutual understanding of communicative intentions. As a result, today, even those companies that clearly understand the importance of taking into consideration the cultural peculiarities of their foreign partners keep experiencing a certain dialogic discomfort from the inability to handle with such situations in practice. In addition, even the awareness of how important it is does not always result in its adequate practical implementation due to the lack of a clearly formulated algorithm of using appropriate communication tools. In other words, the reason behind continuing misunderstandings in the dialogue in international business are rooted not in the underestimated importance of cultural values and norms, but rather in not enough professional approach in business to solving such problems. Therefore, it is not surprising that, despite all the positive changes in the opinion of companies on this issue, there are still many examples of how cross-cultural misunderstandings continue to negatively affect the dialogue in international business. So, it is no wonder that today companies start paying increased attention to the work of specialists in the field of cross-cultural mediation; in other words, to the activity of those who perfectly fit the characteristics given by T. Dridze who considered specialists in the field of interpretation/translation not only verbal, but also semantic assistants in making such a dialogue successful.

The concept of dialogue according to T. M. Dridze and the modern international business environment

Having defined dialogue as "a mode or condition of communication associated with the direction and schedule of communicative and cognitive actions" (Dridze, 2000, p. 25), T. Dridze formulated the following main terms for this process to be successful.



1. A Dialogue is always more than an exchange of text messages, primarily representing a contact of meanings.
2. An Important condition of a dialogue is the aspiration of the interlocutors to the adequate interpretation of the communicative intentions of each other.
3. In a dialogue as a semantic contact, a particularly important role is attributed to the mediator helping the parties to find correct interpretations that go beyond the purely linguistic framework.

When analyzing works published 20-30 years ago and taking into account the dynamics of changes in many areas of activity, one should traditionally ask whether those works remain actual, especially since the international business environment itself is a fairly active and ever-changing substrate. It seems that in this case, modern research on dialogue and international business practices keep constantly confirming the relevance of the ideas expressed by T. Dridze.

To begin with, the interpretation of "a dialogue" as "an interaction" is still dominant among specialists dealing with the problems of dialogue, which can be notably seen in the publications of scientists belonging to the International Association for Dialogue Analysis (IADA). For example, the fact that the problems of cross-cultural interaction are rooted not in language, but in different interpretations of the interlocutors' communicative intentions, is now a common line even in the works of those experts in the field of dialogue who have diametrically opposite views on the nature of dialogue (Harris' theory of Integrationalism and Dialogue as a Mixed Game Model by E. Weigand) (Pable & Hutton, 2015), (Weigand, 2009). On the other hand, numerous business cases also illustrate that a real dialogue has gone far beyond the language component exclusively.

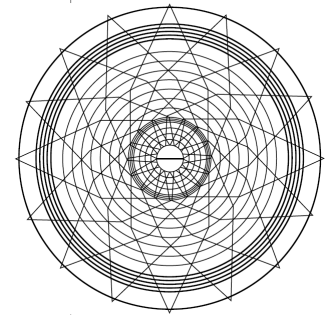
For instance, the author, being in charge of communication activities of the company that was in the process of preparation for the IPO at London Stock Exchange, and communicating with top managers from different countries, regularly faced with the situations during which the interlocutors, perfectly understanding each other both linguistically and professionally, nevertheless failed to achieve the desired results and even began to experience mutual distrust due to the inability (and sometimes even unwillingness) to correctly interpret each other's communicative intentions. In other words, linguistic similarities or geographical proximity do not guarantee the existence of a common business culture for the interlocutors and, in fact, can hide serious obstacles that are invisible on the surface (Molinsky, 2013). Much more surprising is the fact that the interlocutors, even realizing that neglecting clear and understandable wording in such interaction can negatively affect their business (up to conflicts with partners and, as a result, the loss of profitable contracts and opportunities for global business expansion), quite often turn a blind eye to such misunderstandings, and do not bring communication to the level of a real dialogue.

Speaking about the next characteristics of the dialogue according to T. Dridze (understanding the communicative intentions of the interlocutor), it should be noted that the international business environment, despite its apparent mobility and ability to

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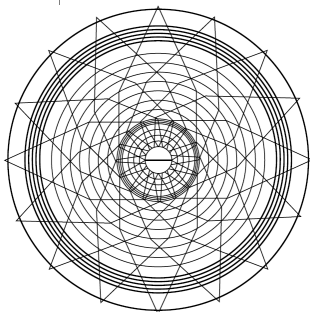
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quickly change, retains its certain conservatism even today, in the era of breakthrough technologies, namely due to the historically developed formalization of business communication. As a result, the parties, even speaking the same language (and being perfectly proficient in English is no surprise here for a long time) and operating with a universally understandable amount of knowledge obtained during training in American and European business schools, continue to misinterpret each other's communicative intentions ("quasi-communication"), or reduce communication to a kind of ritual ("pseudo-communication"). Among the reasons that contribute to the preservation of this psychologically comfortable (although ultimately unsuccessful) form of interaction, we can name the following:

1. The still quite appealing illusion of a universal character of communication in international business. The desire of the business community to operate with certain standardized methods for the solution of the corresponding problems does not differ from the similar approach in other branches of human activity. A successful company is unthinkable without understanding the laws of business operations, which, like any other laws, are always distinguished by certain "averaging" formulations. Such standardization turns rather useful in solving numerous tasks that contain identical components and, thus, has repeatedly proved its practical importance. Subsequently, to apply the same approach to the issues connected with cross-cultural management looks more than tempting. However, following Trompenaars and Woolliams (2004) in their perception of culture as a context "...within which all transactions take place because it changes the entire landscape that pervades all relationships and behaviors and, importantly, "meaning," it looks too challenging to bring cross-cultural aspects to the common denominator. Moreover, to establish a long-term interaction with foreign partners or inside a cross-cultural team, it is more than essential to take into consideration the so-called culture-specific facts about cultural variability while culture-general information usually turns not sufficient to build up a dialogue with the representatives of other cultures (Gudykunst, 2003). Correspondingly, such a diversity requires special attention to how professionally the parties interpret the textual intentions of each other, while any attempt to standardize the communication here can, with great probability, cause much bigger misunderstandings. Another example of how cross-cultural 'averaging' can hamper global management is a 'benefit makes it all' fallacy often regarded by the parties as the main precondition of a successful communication in global business environment, making them forget about the polysemy of the term 'benefit' in different cultures. In this case, can one be very much surprised that the dialogue between business people belonging to different cultures lasts much longer than it could seem initially and that mutual benefit fades in this situation into insignificance?



2. The Idea that communication in international business requires detailed knowledge of business traditions and customs of the parties. The mutual respect of the parties towards the historically developed business traditions and behavioral patterns of each other remains today applicable and important in establishing successful interaction within the global business environment. Such traditions embodied, among other issues, in the systems of business etiquette, are usually a good tester of the cultural sensitivity of the interlocutors. It is, therefore, no wonder that the parties while preparing for the meetings with their foreign partners pay special interest to certain business rituals to which the opposite party can subconsciously attribute increased attention. The fact is, however, that sometimes the interlocutors pay too much effort in fitting into the image of each other not to cross an invisible border between what Molinsky calls “the zone of appropriateness” and “a comfort zone” (Cliffe, 2015). This finds its reflection, for example, in the excessive (or, better to say, exaggerated) attention to a blow-by-blow observation of the forms of business etiquette typical of the business culture of the interlocutor. In its turn, the exaggerated following of inorganic business etiquette in an attempt to become closer to a foreign counterparty turns not always appropriate or, sometimes, rather annoying. There is no doubt that the knowledge about how to shake hands with the partner from another country or how to take a business card is important; yet, it is much more essential to pay more attention to the correct interpretation of psychological peculiarities of the interlocutor (Rizk, 2014). Moreover, the overconcentration on tiny cultural rituals can overshadow more general, yet much more useful information (for example, about the traditional style of negotiations typical of this or that country).

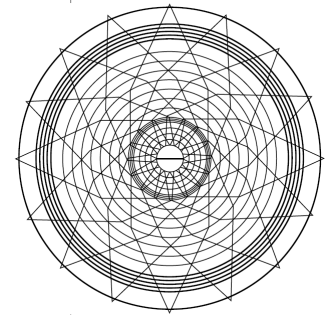
It is possible to provide examples about other factors that, in practice, lead to the situations when business partners from different socio-cultural communities, hear but do not understand each other. It does not look unusual as global business activity is oversaturated with such situations; however, but the price of such quasi-communication/pseudo-communication in the international business environment rather often turns much higher than it is in everyday life.

Finally, in her works, T. Dridze emphasized that effective dialogue often requires a qualified intermediary able to go beyond the exclusively linguistic (translation) framework, helping the parties to find consensus in the interaction and thereby contributing to the transformation of communication into a dialogue. If we extrapolate these terms to the international business environment, it seems that here we can primarily talk about the so-called cross-cultural mediation, which we interpret as *a set of communication techniques used by a specialist with the appropriate skills to facilitate (without personal influence) the dialogue of parties representing different norm-and-axiological spaces to help them find an optimal solution via the correct*

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interpretation of the sociocultural intentions of each other. Essentially, this practice appeared as a response to the real needs of international business.

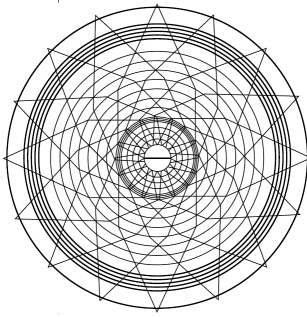
According to the results of the American Express Grow Global Survey, among the main challenges with which the companies going globally need professional assistance are cultural differences/different business practices (65%) and language barriers (59%) (American Express, 2016). These data also indicate that T. Dridze's idea of an intermediary as a translator of meanings (language + culture) retains its practical use in the field of international business today. This interpretation has much in common with the idea of G. Raiffa suggesting that, despite the historical tradition of distinguishing "mediation" and "facilitation", it would be better to use the universal term – an "external helper" (Raiffa, 2007, pp. 311–312). All this is more than appropriate for cross-cultural mediators in international business, who, to make the greatest contribution to the success of the dialogue in the global business environment, not only help the parties understand each other, but also, based on the interlocutors' socio-cultural characteristics, predict the occurrence of possible conflicts and develop a set of measures to prevent them. This is indeed a difficult task, since, unlike traditional areas where mediation relies more on the rules and common sense of the interlocutors, cross-cultural mediation deals with situations where the inconsistency of sociocultural norms and values (as "internalized attitudes and preferences which we cannot easily change or dismiss" (Weigand, 2010, pp. 68–69)) significantly complicates or even completely interrupts interaction.

In addition, the "semantic scissors effect" in international business is implemented not only in negotiations or working with foreign partners: the globalization of business has already resulted in the appearance of hundreds of companies with international staff. As observed by S. Glazer et al. (2014), the success of the international team projects rather often depends on the ability of team members to adjust their behavior to the norms and values of their colleagues and to interact with other cultures. The interaction among the employees can also be subject to certain cross-cultural miscommunication that, in certain cases, can seriously interfere with the further functioning of their organizations. All this highlights the complexity of the tasks the cross-cultural mediator faces in international business, making the latter really the kind of translator of meanings mentioned by T. Dridze.

Cross-cultural mediation: from theory to practical assistance to business dialogue

Reflecting on how a cross-cultural mediator can practically facilitate dialogue in the international business environment, it is, first of all, necessary to mention that, regardless of the direction of activities (conflict resolution, facilitation, forecasting), such a specialist should follow the general principles of work:

- a) to determine whether the differences really have a cross-cultural basis;
- b) to take measures to prevent the growth of such misunderstandings;
- c) to explain to the interlocutors the importance of respecting the values of their foreign colleagues to achieve common goals in their joint work.



All the examples given below are taken from the author's working experience in international companies, where the application of the basics of cross-cultural mediation and the idea of effective dialogue based on the works of T. Dridze helped the parties representing different cultures to find mutually acceptable solutions.

1. Conflict resolutions

This is the primary historically developed function of any mediation activity. It is here that the interaction undergoes serious challenges from the sociocultural stereotypes of the parties which, sometimes, cannot even comprehend the reasons why well-planned negotiations suddenly collapse or a top-management team consisting of professionals from different countries gets stuck in meaningless debates. One more danger here is that sometimes the interlocutors, although admitting the cultural nature of their misunderstandings, do not consider such a reason sufficient to be a key-factor to the conflict.

To assist companies to solve the above-mentioned contradictions, a cross-cultural mediator would propose a series of caucuses, during which the specialist, meeting individually with each of the conflicting parties, not only impartially analyzes the situation from the point of view of its sociocultural perception by the interlocutors, but also, to diffuse any misunderstandings, clarifies to them the peculiarities of the communication perception of each other. At the same time, it is essential to pay attention not only to the quality of the proposed solution (although it keeps its primary importance), but also to the speed of its working out, since any pause in the interaction in international business can mean significant losses (both financial and reputational) for managers representing both sides. For instance, being in need of a new website for the IPO, a Russian holding was negotiating with a web design bureau from the UK. Suddenly the parties got stuck with the contract which initially had been considered a purely technical issue. The British side was unprepared to deal with the Russian business culture which requires verifying every letter of the contract and leaving the final decision solely to the leader. The parties were seriously considering the termination of the negotiations, when it was decided to analyze the conflict from the view of cross-cultural mediation. After working out appropriate solutions, including the recommendations to the Russian team to appoint only one person responsible for the project and to the British company to pay special attention to the amendments proposed by the head of the company, it took the companies only two days to sign the agreement.

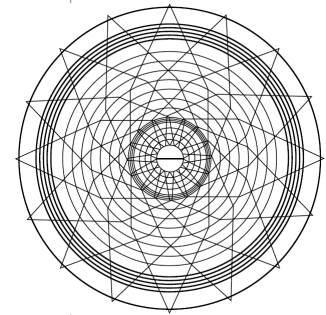
2. Facilitation

A particularly important function of cross-cultural mediation is the assistance to the interlocutors in building up a productive business dialogue during their interaction. In contrast to conflict resolution, facilitation finds its practical implementation in the situations in which the parties take advance care about avoiding possible cultural clashes in terms of their collaboration. During the interaction between the parties representing different norm-and-axiological spaces, a mediator, in case of facilitation,

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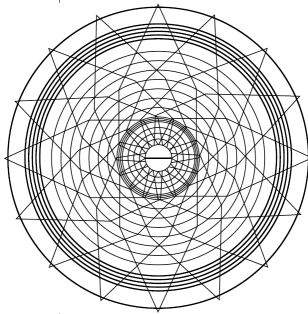
remains a third-party observer not involved directly in the discussions. However, such a specialist, by personally presenting in the negotiations, controls the course of the talks and, in case of necessity, provides the parties with the information regarding the possible sociocultural interpretations of various communication intentions. Moreover, a facilitator is always able to put down quickly any cross-cultural misinterpretation, thus totally meeting the ‘time is money’ expectations of the negotiators.

The author had a good opportunity of seeing how facilitation helped establish a stable dialogue between the representatives of different cultures during the meetings of the Board of Directors of an international real estate holding whose top-managers represented Russia, Belgium, the UK, Cyprus, and the Netherlands. From time to time, the discussions there led to misunderstandings and even certain conflicts caused by the misinterpretation of mutual cultural intentions (all this despite the fact that the absolute majority of the debaters had MBA degrees from leading Western business schools). In such cases, certain managers, equipped with appropriate knowledge, acted as facilitators, which, from the first sight, sounds contradicting to the characteristics of ‘classical’ mediation as the third-party activity. In the meantime, the common goals that the management wanted to achieve and the necessity to solve any cross-cultural conflicts extremely fast allowed the members of the Board to temporarily put such managers ‘beyond’ the standard corporate frames. As a result, the potential conflicts based on cross-cultural misunderstandings were neutralized from gathering momentum, allowing the multicultural team to continue working productively to achieve common goals.

3. Forecasting and planning

The traditional interpretation of mediation does not assume preliminary forecasting for the avoidance of possible conflicts between the parties. On the other hand, a successful activity in the global business environment means a bit more than the observance of codified laws and regulations but takes into consideration how the parties psychologically perceive the culturally-based intentions of each other. Cross-cultural interaction in business means not only collecting and processing of the appropriate information, but also working out solutions aiming at preventing possible cross-cultural conflicts. Here the forecasting work of a cross-cultural mediator with good knowledge of psychology, history, and culture of different countries on the one hand, and, on the other hand, certain skills in business planning, management and marketing can become more than essential to help business activity go smoothly. For example, during one business forum in Singapore the author witnessed how the corporate brochures had not arisen any interest among the potential investors from China. Had there been a cross-cultural facilitator, such nuances as pale colors of the charts, the abundance of figures, and, on top of all, texts in English without any translation into Chinese would have never been ignored while preparing for such an important business event.

The forecasting function of cross-cultural mediation gets its new importance in the light of the interest of the business community to the research in the field of artificial



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intelligence (AI). Today the companies pay increasing attention on how AI can contribute to their interaction with customers and are ready for the serious expenditures to be at the forefront of this tendency. However, such experiments, although based on the latest technological achievements, also remain vulnerable to the “semantic scissors effect” in terms of cultural characteristics, since the AI programs are made by highly skilled professionals who, at the same time, bear their own sociocultural norms and values which can contradict with those of the users. The experiments conducted by a group of researchers from Princeton University revealed that the accurate representation of the culture (including cultural stereotypes) is a typical characteristic of the programs that use the human language as a source of learning (Caliskan et al., 2017). This undoubtedly opens a new prospective for mediators in the field of cross-cultural forecasting. Unfortunately, today business practice has accumulated a fairly large list of examples of cross-cultural contradictions in human interaction with artificial intelligence in various fields (Klad'ko, 2019). This undoubtedly opens new perspectives for mediators in the field of cross-cultural forecasting.

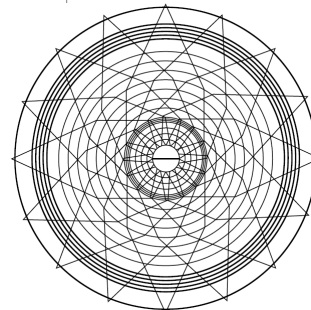
Conclusion

It should be recognized that, today, the business community, realizing the importance of taking cultural factors into account when building long-term relationships in the international business environment, is still in no hurry to unanimously recognize cross-cultural mediation as an important tool in working with foreign partners, preferring to use such services almost exclusively in cases when cross-cultural misunderstandings have not only arisen, but have already had the most negative impact on interaction. Prior to this, the parties representing different norm-and-axiological spaces often try not even to think about inviting relevant specialists to facilitate interaction. In this case, it is still difficult to call cross-cultural mediation an integral part of a successful strategy of companies for their global development. However, more and more specialists are accumulating a portfolio of successful cross-cultural mediation practices in global business, and more and more companies worldwide are beginning to offer their expertise in this area to their clients. This trend clearly indicates that cross-cultural mediation has already received certain recognition in the global business community as an effective tool that helps establish dialogic unity to achieve the desired business goals. On the other hand, it should be noted that it is still very early to talk about the existence of common approaches and methods within cross-cultural mediation, which, after many years of successful application, would be fully recognized both in scientific circles and in business. Only in such a case all mediation options can be recognized as effective tools in cross-cultural management for establishing a productive dialogue in global business, turning from an "emergency assistance tool" to an important element of "preventive assistance" (pre-planning successful business expansion abroad). And T. Dridze's research on dialogue seems to provide for this a remarkable methodological basis proven by both scientific theory and practice.

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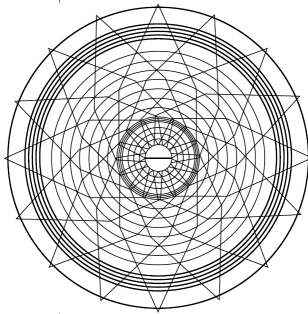
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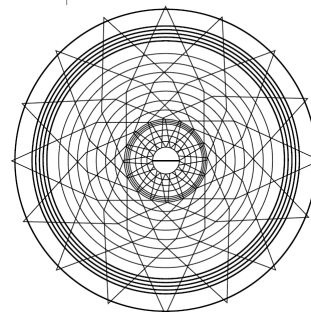
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КОНЦЕПЦИЯ ДИАЛОГА ПО Т. М. ДРИДЗЕ: АКТУАЛЬНЫЙ ИНСТРУМЕНТ КРОСС-КУЛЬТУРНОЙ МЕДИАЦИИ В МЕЖДУНАРОДНОМ БИЗНЕСЕ

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Аннотация:

В настоящей статье, посвященной памяти замечательного российского ученого Т. М. Дридзе, предпринимается попытка проанализировать озвученные ею почти тридцать лет назад идеи о диалоге как контакте смыслов в отношении их применимости к реалиям современного международного бизнеса. Для ответа на поставленный вопрос автор сопоставляет основные положения успешного диалога, сформулированные Т. М. Дридзе в ее работах по семиосоциопсихологии, с современными исследованиями в области диалога и кросс-культурного менеджмента, а также предлагает расширенную интерпретацию деятельности посредника-«переводчика» в подобном диалоге с точки зрения кросс-культурной медиации. Статья также содержит примеры практической апробации инструментов кросс-культурной медиации в реальной бизнес-среде, при этом описываемые кейсы во многом подтверждают практическую применимость исследований Т. М. Дридзе в области диалога. Упоминаемые в работе предложения могут применяться для урегулирования межкультурных недопониманий в международном бизнесе, в частности при проведении международных сделок по слиянию и поглощению, управлению кросс-культурными рабочими группами, а также разработке алгоритмов искусственного интеллекта для кросс-культурных сервисов.

Ключевые слова: кросс-культурная медиация, кросс-культурный менеджмент, организационное поведение, межкультурная коммуникация, межкультурный диалог.