THE ROLE OF LINGUISTICS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Annotation: *This topic explores how linguistic knowledge and analysis contribute to effective communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. It examines the influence of language on cultural identity, the challenges of translation and interpretation, and how linguistic choices shape intercultural dialogue. Through the study of semantics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis, this field seeks to enhance mutual understanding and reduce communication barriers in multicultural settings. The topic is vital in today's globalized world, especially in diplomacy, international business, migration, and education.*

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Our times are often referred to as the 'new world order' with its 'new economy'. What this means is that capitalism has been restructured on a global scale, and people of widely different cultural and linguistic backgrounds have been thrown into contact more than ever before. Cultural and linguistic contact may occur in the flows of information and mass media, as well as in the flows of actual people in migration and tourism. Given the ubiquity of cultural and linguistic contact, mergers and hybrids, it is unsurprising that there should be a strong interest in Intercultural Communication, both outside and inside academia. Linguistics as a discipline makes two key contributions to the study of Intercultural Communication. (i) It is the key contribution of discourse analysis and anthropological linguistics to take culture as empirical and cultural identity, difference and similarity as discursive constructions. (ii) Intercultural Communication by its very nature entails the use of different languages and/or language varieties and sociolinguistics, particularly bilingualism studies, illuminates the differential prestige of languages and language varieties and the differential access that speakers enjoy to them.

The term 'Intercultural Communication' is used in at least three distinct ways in the literature. I follow Scollon and Scollon (2000, 2001) in referring to these as 'cross-cultural communication', 'intercultural communication' and 'interdiscourse communication'. Studies in 'cross-cultural communication' start from an assumption of distinct cultural groups and investigate aspects of their communicative practices comparatively. Studies in 'Intercultural Communication' also start from an assumption of cultural differences between distinct cultural groups but study their communicative practices in interaction with each other. Finally, the 'interdiscourse approach' set[s] aside any a priori notions of group membership and identity and [. . .] ask[s] instead how and under what circumstances concepts such as culture are produced by participants as relevant categories for interpersonal ideological negotiation.

(Scollon and Scollon 2001: 544) Culture is ubiquitous, multidimensional, complex, and pervasive. Because culture is so broad, there is no single definition or central theory of what it is. Definitions range from the all-encompassing ('it is everything') to the narrow ('it is opera, art, and ballet'). For our purposes we define culture as the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, social hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relationships, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving. (Samovar and Porter 2003: 8) This definition is typical in a number of ways: first, it goes to great lengths to stress the complexity of 'culture'; second, it is at pains to acknowledge the diversity of definitions of 'culture'; and third, it links 'culture' to group membership. In a way, such definitions are hard to disagree with: it is obvious that culture is somehow tied to group membership, it is undisputable that culture is complex, and, given that people have been thinking about culture and group membership for millennia, probably since the dawn of time, it is also clear that different thinkers have come up with a great many different understandings. Another pervasive context for the construction of national identity is the range of practices that Billig (1995) has termed 'banal nationalism': The myriad of practices that make the nation ubiquitous, ranging from the daily weather forecast on TV that is presented against a map of our country; The celebration of our nation on a regular basis, such as the daily Pledge of Allegiance in many US schools, or national holidays such as Australia Day in Australia, Independence Day in the USA, or the Day of German Unity in Germany; The use of national symbols in consumer advertising (e.g. chocolate with the Swiss Cross on the packaging), to sports events where national teams compete against each other and which are often reported and viewed as if the whole nation were involved. These examples do not reflect national identity but rather they construct national identity. Given the ubiquity of discourses about national identity, it is thus not surprising that Intercultural Communication Studies have a hard time going beyond these discourses. However, it is unsatisfactory when texts in cross-cultural and intercultural communication studies end up being little more than yet another instantiation of the discursive construction of national identity.

In the following, I will argue the point that cross-cultural and intercultural communication is mistaken in considering 'culture' a key variable in human understanding and misunderstanding in two ways. In the first part of my argument, I will show that some misunderstandings that are considered 'cultural' are in fact linguistic misunderstandings. In the second part of my argument, I will show that some misunderstandings that are considered 'cultural' are in fact based on inequality and taking recourse to 'intercultural communication' can serve to obfuscate relationships of global inequality and injustice. The first argument is based on work in the tradition of interactional sociolinguistics and bilingualism studies, and the second in work that draws inspiration from a combination of critical sociolinguistic ethnography and discourse analysis and related approaches, and is most cogently presented in Blommaert (2005). Both these approaches and arguments are empirical, which in this

context means first and foremost that they do not treat cultural group membership as an a priori assumption.

LANGUAGE IN 'INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION'

For a linguist, a large part of the Intercultural Communication literature makes surprising reading. Part of the surprise results from the limited to nonexistent attention to language and languages, as if language and languages were a negligible or at best minor aspect of communication. Some of the most widely read textbooks in Intercultural Communication have their disciplinary bases in Business Studies, Communication Studies, Management Studies and Psychology (e.g. Rogers and Steinfatt 1999; Harris and Moran 2000; Gudykunst and Mody 2001; Hofstede 2001; Martin et al. 2001; Martin and Nakayama 2003; Chaney and Martin 2004; Jandt 2004, 2006; Reynolds and Valentine 2004; Ting-Toomey and Chung 2004; Lustig and Koester 2005; Varner and Beamer 2005). These texts tend to give short shrift to language and languages (usually one chapter out of around twelve). Now, a linguist would consider natural language the most important aspect of human communication, and I cannot help feeling that this may be more than professional prejudice. The neglect is such that it has even been started to be noticed in these disciplines themselves. Vaara et al. (2005: 59), for instance, observe that '[n]atural languages have received very little attention in organization and management studies.' What is more, the content of what little consideration there is of language issues can be of the 'weird and wonderful' kind. Typically, 'the language chapter' invokes the 'Sapir–Whorf Hypothesis' and the concept of linguistic relativity, stating that our language influences the way we see the world, and that our language makes different aspects of reality salient to us. I will provide a detailed example although I do not wish to single out these particular authors for criticism because I consider the example to be fairly typical. Chaney and Martin (2004: 96) provide a table that matches 'verbal style' with 'ethnic group'. For 'Germans' they offer the following entry: 'In the German language, the verb often comes at the end of the sentence. In oral communication, Germans do not immediately get to the point.' This entry suggests that having the verb at the end of the sentence says something about when 'the point' is being made. However, such a claim conflates syntax and pragmatics. The position of the verb in German is purely a matter of syntax: the verb is the second constituent in a main clause and the last one in a subordinate clause. In contrast, the position of 'the point' is a matter of pragmatic choice and may be located anywhere in a sentence and across syntactic boundaries. Another example comes from the entry for 'Japanese': 'The word "yes" has many different meanings.' The implication of such an entry is that such polysemy and poly-functionality are special to Japanese, while they are in fact a characteristic of all natural languages (Harris 1998). Just like in Japanese and any other language, English words, too, can be used to mean the exact opposite of their 'real' (i.e. their core or dictionary) meaning: think of the 'start-button' many of us need to press to shut down – that is,'end' – our Microsoft Windows computers; or think of the many rape cases where a woman's 'no' is said to have been heard as a 'yes' (Kulick 2003).

The relativity of linguistic structure is obvious to anyone who knows more than one language. Whether such structural differences also point to cognitive differences – for instance, do we see the world differently depending on the position of the verb in our main language or languages? – is a matter of debate. However, the focus on formal relativity in much of the cross-cultural and intercultural communication literature tends to obscure a much more fundamental relativity, namely that of function: we do different things with language, as the following example nicely illustrates:

"Community differences extend to the role of languages in naming the worlds they help to shape or constitute. In central Oregon, for example, English speakers typically go up a level in taxonomy when asked to name a plant for which they lack a term: 'some kind of bush'; Sahaptin speakers analogize: 'sort of an A', or 'between an A or a B' (A and B being specific plants); Wasco speakers demur: 'No, no name for that,' in keeping with a cultural preference for precision and certainty of reference. (Hymes 1996: 45)"

Conclusion

Intercultural Communication is a vibrant field of study that is based in widely circulating discourses about culture and cultural difference. The frequent overlap between the voice of the researcher and the discourses in which it is embedded also make it a deeply problematic field. Linguistics can make at least two contributions to this field: from the perspective of interactional sociolinguistics and bilingualism studies, we need to insist that natural language is the prime mode in which 'Intercultural Communication' takes place. The analysis of linguistic interaction, particularly between speakers with different kinds of linguistic trajectories and resources, always involves a consideration of the resources available to those speakers and the actual verbal and nonverbal detail of their interactions. Research in interactional sociolinguistics has shown that, when misunderstandings arise, 'culture' is not even particularly likely to be implicated. At the same time, 'culture' is so ubiquitous that interactants may very well be orienting towards it, even if they never mention it. Discourse analysis has an important contribution to make to retrace these 'forgotten contexts' (Blommaert 2005) of 'culture' by identifying discourses where 'culture' is indeed important, whether explicitly or more implicitly, and to ask by whom, for whom, in which contexts, for which purposes. The key question of Intercultural Communication must shift from reified and inescapable notions of cultural difference to a focus on discourses where 'culture' is actually made relevant and used as a communicative resource.

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