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Alan Durant and Ifan Shepherd

'CULTURE' AND 'COMMUNICATION' IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Two major influences on contemporary societies dictate that diffusion and hybridisation of communicative norms will be an increasingly significant feature of our communication landscape: transnational population flows; and the impact of mediated communication, including by means of the internet. This paper explores implications of different ways of viewing the 'cultural' and 'communication' dimensions of intercultural communication in such volatile circumstances. It considers the risk of reproducing cultural stereotypes in characterising the speakers engaged in intercultural communication and the types of communication they engage in. It also examines the 'inter' that allows intercultural communication to be something active, with scope for creative fusion, initiative and change. By way of conclusion, we suggest that intercultural communication studies may need to be reconceptualised if the field is to engage adequately with further possible convergence (including communicative convergence) between cultures.

Keywords activity theory; applied linguistics; boundary crossing; communication; cross-cultural; culture; diaspora communities; diversity; hybridisation; multiculturalism; organizational culture; stereotypes

In the Introduction to their succinct and useful textbook *Communication across Cultures: Mutual Understanding in a Global World* (2007), Heather Bowe and Kylie Martin point out that:

An understanding of intercultural communication is crucially related to an understanding of the ways in which the spoken and written word may be interpreted differentially, depending on the context.... Although speakers engaged in intercultural communication typically choose a single language in which to communicate, individuals typically bring their own sociocultural expectations of language to the encounter. Speakers' expectations shape the interpretation of meaning in a variety of ways. To manage intercultural interaction effectively, speakers need to be aware of the inherent norms of their own speech practices, the ways in which norms vary depending on situational factors and the ways in which speakers from other language backgrounds may have different expectations of language usage and behaviour. (Bowe and Martin: 1-2)

In this description of strategic micro-processes involved in communicating and interpreting, Bowe and Martin lay out a distinctive agenda for their linguistic approach to intercultural communication. Their overall interest in 'communication' is narrowed to language, in contrast to other semiotic systems and behaviour (such as kinesics, proxemics, clothing, or gesture). Within 'language', their concern is largely with interaction in a common 'lingua franca' (illustrated mainly in relation to English), although variation in use of this language is largely traced to contrasts *between* languages. The authors highlight speakers' expectations, and so the pragmatic dimensions of their discourse based on 'norms of their own speech practices'.

Characterising the field in this way involves selecting a particular focus within intercultural communication research, rather than offering an overall definition of it. Bowe and Martin's approach does however capture fairly accurately an attitude adopted across an impressive body of work on intercultural communication in applied linguistics (Wierzbicka; Clyne; Bargiela-Chaippini and Harris; Scollon and Scollon).

Bowe and Martin's approach has its inevitable limitations. It obscures a number of nagging problems, for example, in the way that applied linguistics shapes the field of intercultural communication research. Their approach leaves open, for example, the question of how pervasive or stable the 'sociocultural' basis is for expectations that speakers of any given group orientate themselves towards. It also ducks the question of what kind of causation 'culture' is capable. 'Culture', in this context, may be a matter of nationality or regional provenance. Or – not necessarily the same thing – it may be a matter of national language, with variation factored in for pluricentric languages such as English, Arabic or Chinese. Or culture may be something else, relatively stable but socially constructed on the basis of variables such as gender (which is often considered responsible for systematic variation in performance of compliments, apologies, and mitigation of threats or affronts to an interlocutor's face). Alternatively again, especially in ethnography and cultural studies, culture may be viewed as largely a matter of continuously reconstructed identities that range from age-cohort affiliation and sexual orientation, through loyalty to sports teams or involvement in particular interests or hobbies, to participant roles and other situational factors. Each emphasis is a credible interpretation of 'culture', and so of the cultural dimension of intercultural interaction; and each is well attested in fields that investigate culture. The various different approaches all contribute something useful to an analytic toolkit. But they do not necessarily involve the same sense of what intercultural communication is, how it should be researched, or why.

In this paper, we explore some implications of different ways of viewing the 'cultural' and 'communication' dimensions of intercultural communication. In particular, we consider the risk of researchers creating or reproducing cultural stereotypes in characterising the speakers engaged in intercultural communication and the types of communication they engage in. We also look at the 'inter' that makes intercultural communication something different from, or more than, cross-cultural communication: something interactive, with scope for creative fusion, initiative and change. By way of conclusion, we speculate about how far intercultural communication may need to be reconceptualised if it is adequately to reflect discourse communities characterised by substantial cultural diversity in membership. Such reconceptualisation, we suggest, may be needed in order to reflect people's increased exposure to what have traditionally been thought of as distinct 'cultures' and to investigate possible convergence (including communicative convergence) between those cultures.

From mistakes to hybridisation

The research agenda implicit in Bowe and Martin appears, in key respects, a traditional ‘applied linguistics’ one, even as the book struggles to move beyond earlier orthodoxies of that field. Why does it appear that way?

Intercultural communication research, at least in linguistics, emerged as a distinct sub-discipline during the 1980s and 1990s, largely out of contrastive analysis, error analysis, and interlanguage studies (Clyne; Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007). The field brings together a vocational, sometimes prescriptive strand with descriptive and explanatory approaches. The main starting point for projects has nevertheless remained rather like that of error analysis. Descriptive work identifies moments of breakdown or misunderstanding in contact encounters, then investigates co-variation in a given corpus between cultural characteristics and patterns of language use. Cross-cultural regularities are drawn out either as a basis for training more appropriate communicative behaviour (as judged against some accepted norm for a given cultural setting), or in order to foster greater awareness, and therefore increased mutual tolerance, among those communicating in intercultural situations.

Communication in intercultural settings often takes place on a somewhat unequal footing, however. So research topics often examine interaction between immigrants and members of an indigenous population in societies with an acknowledged standard national language, or communication among workers in multinational companies which have adopted a corporate ‘lingua franca’ (usually English). In such cases, the language adopted for intercultural communication is effectively owned by one or other party in any interchange. Language use can be referred back to authoritative, standard forms and patterns. Reflecting this, intercultural communication studies are especially favoured in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), in vocational business communication training, and in acculturation programmes for minorities and refugees. The frame imposed on the concept of intercultural communication by this sphere of influence is effectively that of a problem to be addressed, rather than that of a neutral social phenomenon to be investigated, or even that of a possible source of creativity and communicative innovation to be encouraged.

Traditional questions raised about intercultural communication in applied linguistics should be linked, in our view, to wider questions. Relevant issues extend well beyond how people interact with each other interculturally in situations defined in the relatively clear-cut ways outlined above (e.g. in conventional cases where a delegation of Chinese businessmen conduct a meeting with Italian colleagues, suppliers or clients). Wider questions include the challenges faced by groups that are established for a common purpose or activity and whose membership involves multi-dimensional cultural diversity (e.g. of age, gender, national background, ethnic or cultural inheritance, and degree of experience of travel or of working internationally). Also interesting are questions about how people interact in contact encounters where assumed ownership of any presumed, target discourse is unclear. Such questions arise especially where the criteria for success in a given interaction will be measured in terms of outcomes from collaborative practice or production, or the quality of a delivered service, rather than as a function of the ‘content’ of the communication itself.

Emphasis on the kind of cultural diversity we are drawing attention to might suggest a disproportionate interest in broad questions of citizenship and multiculturalism, by comparison with more narrowly ‘communication’ issues. Such a view is not justified, in our view, either historically or as a basis for contemporary

analysis. Throughout history we find cases of cultural hybridisation brought about by trading exchanges (e.g. throughout the Levant), or by conquest (cf. the phrase ‘Roman-British’ used by archaeologists to signify intermarrying versions of originally separate cultures in post-conquest Britain). Similar examples are suggested by the frequent development, throughout the world, of pidgins and creoles during experiences of colonial contact. Contemporary global trends continue longstanding and pervasive processes of contact and interaction. They simply do so on a scale that has made cultural diversity a major social issue in many countries, including in the day-to-day activity of commercial, political and not-for-profit organisations that operate internationally and are not based in or defined by any single place. Linguistic dimensions of cultural diversity are interesting precisely because they are not narrowly national. Such questions draw attention instead to fundamental problems in what ‘culture’ is, what purposes it serves, how deeply people are attached to what they perceive as their culture, and how readily or reluctantly they adapt in the face of changing and increasingly interlocked societies. Questions of this sort inevitably tug at the definitions of ‘culture’ and ‘communication’ in play in the applied linguistic agenda from which much intercultural communication research has emerged.

The challenge of communicating in situations of cultural diversity

The different categories we have identified so far – of engagement between speakers from relatively distinct backgrounds; of interaction between people with complex or hybrid identities; and of group interaction in less clearly defined ‘multicultural’ situations – are intertwined especially densely, and often in unforeseen ways, in the current period. In the third category, for instance, the significance of cross-cultural differences between respective speakers may be less important than the overall group dynamic involved in the interaction between them. In such situations there is no established discourse model for speakers to accommodate to or converge on. What can ensue is shared formation of new communicative patterns. In this respect, intercultural communication has features in common with development of pidgins (and then, over generations, creoles). Its experimental, improvised forms and strategies may also contribute, with the passing of time, to the process of internationalisation and change within the adopted lingua franca.

There are theoretical reasons for foregrounding questions about how people interact with each other in contexts where multiple kinds of diversity *within* a group of interactants may be as significant as contrast *between* one member (or an identifiable minority of members) and a dominant group identity. Intercultural communication studies have often classified culture on the basis of nationality or pan-national traits such as Nordic, Southern European or Asian, or more generally still as Western (individualist) and Eastern (collectivist). It is sometimes as if these categories are axiomatic, rather than historically constructed in complex ways. There are also practical implications. Situations of intercultural interaction are important in the functioning of workforces in multinational companies, as well as for the increasingly international student cohorts of modern educational institutions. They are also of central importance to the wider, multicultural make-up of contemporary electorates and civil societies. In a period of cultural adaptation and hybridisation, more precise specification of both ‘culture’ and ‘communication’ appear to be needed if we are to understand how cultural identities relate to variation of communicative styles with which they co-occur. Such theoretical *and* practical refinement is needed if cultural stereotyping is to be avoided, including among researchers in intercultural

communication who are professionally committed to limiting the damage caused by cultural simplification and misunderstanding.

‘Culture’ and ‘communication’

Questions about intercultural communication of the kind raised so far are sometimes overtaken by practical tasks: collecting data and drawing inferences from data that has been collected. For example, the difficulty of deciding at what point a Filipino, Vietnamese or Croatian immigrant to Australia becomes ‘an Australian’ for the purposes of the data, rather than a representative of their earlier nationality, or when an utterance constitutes a speech act of a given kind (even though most are multi-functional), may be acknowledged but hurried past in a particular analysis. If we want to re-engage with the larger questions, it will be helpful to reconsider what we mean by ‘culture’ and ‘communication’ in this context.

The ‘cultural’ in intercultural

Both ‘cross-cultural’ and ‘intercultural’ (as well as an important third term in this semantic field, ‘multicultural’) depend for much of their meaning on their shared stem, ‘culture’. That term is notorious for the difficulties it creates in many academic disciplines, as well as in wider public discussion (Williams, 1983; Eagleton, 2000). In using the derived terms, it is therefore important to keep relevant complexities in mind. At the same time, it is essential not to get bogged down in definitional problems. If abstract, theoretical problems come to dominate over questions of application, then little progress may be made towards training or policy outcomes that are prominent conditions of existence of this field of investigation.

One important starting point in thinking about ‘culture’, in the context of intercultural communication, is the amount of baggage carried by generalised differences between national cultures. Caution is needed, for instance, in relation to studies inspired by Hofstede’s (1980) influential work on regionally different world-views (cf. his concepts of ‘power-distance’ and ‘uncertainty avoidance’ as characteristics of social behaviour and attitude that make it possible to differentiate between regional cultures). Complicated relationships such as those between Belgium, Holland and France, for instance, present a challenge to Hofstede’s approach to classification, as does the twentieth-century history of Germany, and more generally the changing relationships worldwide that can be seen between national boundaries, political systems and structures of social interaction.

Similar caution is needed if we *start* with particular stretches of discourse and work outwards towards cultural generalisations, rather than appealing to cultural difference benchmarks as already established. Consider, for instance, studies that begin with recorded speech data, such as turn-taking behaviour or apologies by Japanese speakers in meetings with US business representatives. It is tempting to link patterns in the collected data to speaker variables, and to put forward the suggestion that the distinctive turn-taking behaviour, or way of offering apologies, occurs because the speakers are Japanese, rather than because they are particular individuals, young or old, men or women, people working in a given commercial sector, or people managing their options during a specific act of negotiation. A further move is also tempting: towards the explanatory hypothesis that Japanese, or sometimes ‘East Asian’, speakers adopt a distinctive pattern of turn-taking or apology because of conventions in their first language, or because of behaviour patterns in their home society.

Inference from data to cultural generalisation is justified where it is based on repeated patterns in a sufficiently large corpus of data, adequately matched to speaker and situation variables. Because the links identified are between communicative behaviour and regional or cultural variables, such findings are inter-*cultural*, rather than findings of mainstream contrastive linguistics: what is at stake are matters of interactional pragmatics, including differences of strategy, conduct, belief or values conveyed by communicative forms rather than differences between conventional idioms or forms of expression in respective languages.

Many researchers into intercultural communication nevertheless recognise that generalisation from speaker performance to national or continental tendencies must be undertaken with caution, if cultural stereotyping is to be avoided. Some of the complexity that makes generalising without stereotyping difficult is ‘communicative’ (e.g. the general fact of significant style change within any given speaker’s repertoire). Other kinds of complexity must be considered ‘cultural’. This second kind of complexity includes how far different speaker histories cut across general notions of speaker *type*, for instance as a result of travel, intermarriage, cosmopolitan social networks, or online contact with members of, or texts from, another culture.

It is worth establishing a general point here from a geographical perspective: that cultures may or may not be spatially definable. A ‘cultural’ classification of communicative behaviour based primarily on place will inevitably be selective. It may also be misleading. While there are clear cases of highly spatially segregated cultures around the world, there are also cases of cultural difference linked to co-location or propinquity. One highly distinctive example is the ‘upstairs-downstairs’ co-residential pattern of many high-status neighbourhoods of Victorian and Edwardian cities in the UK, a pattern repeated with whites and blacks in early twentieth-century America (and forever stereotyped in *Tom and Jerry* cartoons). Another case is that of apartheid South Africa, with whites (monied) and coloureds (live-in servants). In these and many similar examples, spatial segregation mirrors social segregation only at the micro-level of the individual residence, not at the more typical level of neighbourhood or region.

It should be noted, too, that geographical and/or social separation of apparently distinct ‘cultures’ is not an unvarying property of particular contexts, viewed historically. Muslims, Christians and Jews lived in close proximity to one another in the medinas of Middle-Eastern cities until relatively recently (Karabell). Greeks and Turks occupied mixed-culture villages in Cyprus until the Turkish invasion of the northern part of the island in 1974 forced wholesale relocation. Many identifiable ‘national’ groups – judged on the basis of the politically defined borders of any given moment of analysis – contain internally diverse cultures (of religion, region, or ethnicity). Boundaries between regionally distinguished cultures may be permeable rather than fixed; and, through time, specific ‘cultures’ may exhibit highly varying attitudes and behaviour towards exclusive occupancy of geographical space. Categories of place, culture, nation and language cannot be unproblematically superimposed on one another.

This facet of cultural geography (i.e. the varying binding of culture to place) has important repercussions for intercultural communication viewed as a general phenomenon. Many of those repercussions have already been felt in linguistics, and have been reflected in a general shift of approach from (location-based) dialectology towards (class or network-based) sociolinguistics. Social and spatial propinquity also has a material bearing on propensity, and as well as ability, to communicate. This affects whether, and how much, intercultural communication takes place among people of varying backgrounds.

It is important that the detail of each situation must be treated in its specifics. In work on intercultural communication, finer distinctions than are routinely made may accordingly need to be drawn between work investigating interaction in specific, physical places (e.g. where migrants and refugees are establishing themselves in relation to communication patterns of a dominant surrounding 'located' culture) and research into socially constructed or virtual 'places' (e.g. where workers of different language backgrounds interact in a multinational corporation that has adopted a common language for business).

Our point is not just that culture cannot be reduced to place. Rather, we wish to emphasise that regarding culture as a foundational or fundamental element of society, in the conventional perspective of social analysis, is not the only way of viewing it. Culture can also be understood as an emergent property of interactions *within* society. What is distinctive in this alternative view is an increased willingness to look elsewhere than in place or in 'society at large' for the locus of cultural interactions.

The close but mostly taken-for-granted relationship between intercultural communication research and business communication research is important here (Bargiela-Chiappini et al, 2007). One influential accompaniment of the Industrial and Information Revolutions of the past 150 years or so has been the emergence of the work-related organisation, and with it the appearance of 'organisation man' (to use Whyte's (1957) pregnant phrase) as well as 'organisational culture' (to borrow Handy's (1983) perceptive relocation of this term). Organisational cultures may now be seen as drivers of change in conventional cultures classified by place; and communications between cultures within organisations may come to be of greater significance than communications between the equivalent cultures at large, reflecting in part the important role played by economic considerations in the long-recognised triad of economy, society and culture (e.g. Castells, 1996-1998; Halsey et al.). For many working individuals, organisational culture increasingly matches (or may even override) aspects of what might be called their social culture, especially where individual work-life balance has become skewed in favour of the needs of the workplace. This can have unpredictable consequences (which need not be negative and may have socially desirable outcomes). For example, where organisations strive to align themselves with requirements of a 'diversity' agenda, intercultural communication and behaviour within the workplace may be far more common and successful than in the highly segregated neighbourhoods typical of many urban environments that surround the workplace.

The 'communication' in intercultural communication

We have looked at ideas of 'culture'. What happens if we elaborate similarly on the notion of 'communication'?

Mostly, intercultural communication has been researched in terms of the interpersonal dimension of any given communicative exchange. Such research focuses especially on cultural expectations associated with discourse functions (e.g. as regards greetings; small talk; use of honorifics and forms of address; managing face, politeness or rapport; and use – or avoidance – of joking and indirectness). Patterns in these areas of communicative behaviour are then investigated in detailed studies of how they are realised in different cultures. An investigation might be made, for example, of how people from different backgrounds perform specific illocutionary acts such as requesting, apologising or complaining (Blum-Kulka et al.; Clyne).

A wider view of communication needs to take account of other factors as well. Verbal communication takes place, for instance, in social structures of action and often in coordination with other semiotic resources. Those resources, as we have indicated above, range from gesture and physical distance through to clothing style and ambience created by interior design or conventional event schemas. Such resources also extend into behavioural considerations, such as how much people choose to inhabit public spaces where they can be seen by or engaged with by each other. These parallel, often coordinated sign systems and modes of behaviour may in some cases significantly strengthen mutual intelligibility. In other cases, they may confuse or hinder it.

Sign systems and activity that accompany verbal communication can significantly affect intercultural communication. Linguistic communication may be made more difficult interculturally, for example, where there is no reinforcement by features of social context or by common action: where the topics being addressed are displaced from the immediate situation and deal instead with persons who are not physically present, with events at other times and places, and with abstract ideas. Such difficulties of abstraction and displacement may be further compounded where the communication itself is conducted at a distance (for instance on the phone).

If we want to examine communication events interculturally, it is important to distinguish between communications carried out between people separately from any coordinated or shared action and activities jointly engaged in largely or wholly without any accompanying verbal discourse. A continuum might be conceived between these two limiting cases. 'Activity-only' engagement would be at one end and 'verbal-communication-only' interaction at the other. In-between are to be found variable combinations in which people do things together and accompany their actions with verbal interaction to varying extents. Particular points along this continuum of the embeddedness of communication in social action or practice may impose more or less intercultural demand on communication than others. There may be significant differences, for example, in the degree of interculturalness of, say, service transactions (e.g. at a supermarket checkout), workplace interactions (e.g. in committee meetings), and shared learning events (e.g. at college seminars). If we are to appreciate fully what is going on in intercultural communication, we need to explore how far the intercultural complexity of each of these situation-types approximates less instrumental forms of communication (such as visits to a bar, pub or club) that are entered into by participants from different cultures on a more discretionary basis.

Alongside questions of this kind about the relation between verbal and non-verbal modes of communication, questions arise about the chosen channels and means of verbal communication itself. In most intercultural communication research, discourse being investigated consists of a combination of talk, writing and, increasingly, electronic communication such as e-mail, blogs, text messaging and corporate website content. The exact mix of communicative forms available, however, reflects and changes in line with the development of the 'network societies' in which it occurs (Castells, 1996; 2004). A typical mix will involve distinctive, mediated kinds of intercultural communication whose specialised styles and effects are inevitably to some extent flattened out in any general discourse corpus. But significantly different strategies and styles are likely to be adopted in a speaker's mediated and virtual networks, by comparison with face-to-face interaction, on account of different norms that govern each environment.

We need also to ask questions associated with the larger social contexts and expectations that set (often unequal) terms of communication and exchange between

members of one culture and another. Leave aside, for a moment, the challenging question of who an 'Indian' and a 'UK' citizen are in terms of culture, and what level of hybridisation will exist, given a sizeable and longstanding UK Indian diaspora. Even without this complicating variable, imagine the difference between an Indian and a UK citizen talking together where the UK citizen is visiting India, and the same two categories of speaker talking where the Indian is visiting Britain. In asymmetrical situations, grasping what is going on in a communication will involve not only individual variables that speakers carry round with them, and nuances of register in the language they use, but also how historical and political context sets the scene for their discourse behaviour.

Our general point here is this. While communication can be understood (and is mostly theorised in linguistics) as a set of possibilities governing individual interaction, it needs also to be viewed at another level: in terms of overall communication flows between social groups (e.g. between ethnic groups or different generations within a given society; and between one country and another). Such society-level communication flows form a historical and political backdrop to any single interaction and establish its terms of engagement. Larger social contexts can create otherwise inexplicable states of hostile stand-off; or reluctance by one social group or country to engage with another; or hesitation regarding whose language should be chosen for whatever contact does take place. Problems in this overall ecology of communicative contact call for policy initiatives (such as those associated with language planning, cultivation of freedom of expression values, or formulation of institutional speech codes); they require skills of diplomacy and public relations rather than training in the more specialised kinds of communicative competence discussed above.

All these aspects of communication are related to considerations of place, but are not reducible to them. Distinct cultures may communicate with each other almost regardless of the cultural or geographical distance between them. Conversely, as we have suggested, close proximity is not necessarily a determinant of type or amount of communication that will occur. Whyte's (1957) report of interactions among families living in cul-de-sac suburbs in the USA, for example, or Young and Wilmott's (1957) studies of doorstep interaction in the post-war East End of London, can now appear completely irrelevant to many contemporary communities in which families have minimal personal or social contact with next-door neighbours.

Underlying these complexities is a fundamental, mostly unasked question about what 'communication' means (Williams). Does 'communication' only take place when mutual understanding is achieved, or whenever contact is established by transmitting and receiving recognisable messages? Ambiguity between these different emphases is unhelpful in studying intercultural communication. Communication as an outcome of achieved understanding can occur without any conventionally conceived communicative 'act' taking place (for example when 'silence speaks volumes', as with John Cage's composition *4' 33"*, in Harold Pinter's plays, or at Quaker meetings). Conversely, communication as an outcome can fail to occur even in the face of large numbers of conventional communicative acts, for example in a sustained 'dialogue of the deaf'.

Speakers and cultural groups they represent

Now we have discussed both 'communication' and 'culture'. Directions pursued by intercultural communication research, we suggest, depend implicitly on particular

senses attributed to each of these complex, key terms. But what of interaction between the two? This question must be addressed by considering how speakers and hearers 'represent' membership of whatever cultural group they are held to belong to.

Intercultural communication relies on an idea of culture and bearers of culture. British people are bearers of British culture. When they communicate, they represent what British people do in communicating. X is British, so how X speaks represents British speech. Inevitably, such a notion of culture involves a high degree of idealisation. Quite how much idealisation is seen more easily if applied to other aspects of culture, such as clothing, eating, observance of religious and secular rituals, habits or leisure interests. X is British, so when X goes to the gym / prays / drives his or her car / styles his or her hair / eats chicken tikka masala or Yorkshire pudding, these activities are what British people do. To justify the degree of idealisation, intercultural communication research relies on a strategic decision: that cultural idealisation is needed to gain insights that will prove useful in understanding cultural interaction and limiting interpersonal misunderstanding. But how are the insights gained to be differentiated from perceptions that may be little more than stereotypes?

It is useful to keep in mind, in this context, the cultural phenomenon of diaspora communities. Such communities are intermediate between scenarios identified above, such as that of Chinese and Italian business representatives negotiating with each other, and that of spontaneously developing international groups (e.g. people in a train compartment on a long journey, or international players in a football team). Diaspora communities are increasingly significant throughout Europe as a result of economic migration following recent EU enlargement. Indeed they are central in the formation of many non-European societies. For diaspora groups there are repercussions, in terms of intercultural communication, not only between members of the community and their new host culture but also with the home culture. In Cyprus, for example, members of the Greek-Cypriot community who emigrated and subsequently return on visits are often called 'Charlies', somewhat pejoratively, on account of their changed speech patterns and ageing vocabulary. Similar mechanisms operate following inter-marriage between different language, religious and ethnic communities, with similar problems of maintaining communications with one's host culture while at the same time developing communications with one's adopted culture.

If migration and the formation of diasporas is not to be dismissed as a peripheral or marginal occurrence, but recognised as constitutive of many modern societies, then the high degree of idealisation involved in relating cultural norms (e.g. Chinese) to bearers of those norms (e.g. a Chinese person) is likely to become increasingly problematic. That idealisation will become less and less like the idealisation involved in theoretical contrasts between concepts such as macro and micro, emic and etic, or *langue* and *parole*, with which analogy is implied. On the other hand, if the idea of cultural typicality is abandoned altogether, then what is left will be only the proposition that *all* communication is in effect intercultural: each person lives in a hybrid micro-culture of their own, and culture is composite. This view favours the image of a sort of postmodern bricolage. Between the two stances, we believe it is preferable to view culture as constructed at many different levels and in different dimensions. Some of the large-scale manifestations of such construction become apparent as relatively stable identities, as for instance with aspects of national affiliation. The crucial question to be investigated is this: how far is the same true of language use?

The 'inter' in intercultural

Suppose we accept a multi-scale notion of culture. What then becomes worth investigating about intercultural communication is not just complex cases of membership of different social groups, but how people activate their creativity and how they adopt contact strategies when crossing boundaries or meeting unexpected situations and interactional problems. Investigating this dynamic, active aspect of intercultural communication calls for attention to how people work to find solutions and create comprehension across boundaries, rather than tracing moments of breakdown back to supposed identities that might be held responsible for them.

We can now reflect a little more deeply on what is signified by the ‘inter’ in intercultural communication. This ‘inter’ element of the phrase may even be of greatest interest, since the ‘cultural’ element serves primarily as reference to the context in which something interesting is going on between two entities. (The ‘inter’ element is similarly provoking when combined in ‘inter-racial’, ‘inter-stitial’, and ‘inter-generational’.) Interesting things, we might say, happen at interfaces (e.g. between things and people), just as they do at margins (e.g. of empires). In this sense, the linking of ‘inter’ with culture is especially motivating. The implication is simultaneously of separation and approach: of a possibility of rejection as well as welcome; and of a need for effort and guile in working the interface to yield desired rewards.

If we begin to explore intercultural communication as a theatre of meetings, then the field invites new directions by comparison with approaches based on error analysis and interlanguage development. Activity theory (e.g. Engeström et al.) suggests that it is at boundaries between more-or-less discrete activity systems (such as those of a community of practitioners) that interesting forms of behaviour and knowledge exchange occur. Behaviour is often expressed not in communication (though language is often involved), but in the quasi-geographical notion of ‘boundary crossing’; and instead of language being the focus of theoretical enquiry, we find a more holistic emphasis on all means available of spanning differences and bridging gaps. One line of research in this area, for example, has explored the deliberate creation of (often non-language) ‘boundary objects’: artefacts that act as functional go-betweens in effecting outreach from one group to another, facilitating exchange of knowledge between adjacent systems because of different and changing perspectives they allow. It is here, perhaps, that we may find an alternative and potentially more forward-looking conceptualisation of intercultural communication: a conception embedded in dynamic organisational mini-cultures and grounded in (often work-related) activities. Such a theoretical perspective, we suggest, might be better called intercultural interaction. It appears eminently adaptable to the broader social world within which, so far, intercultural communication has mostly been approached from a specifically linguistic point of view. Our revised perspective may also help in clarifying political and philosophical debates over multiculturalism (Parekh). Such debates often require explication of competing priorities as between, on the one hand, co-existence and tolerance associated with ‘cross-cultural’ thinking, and, on the other hand, engagement and shared development that we associate with what we are describing as an ‘inter’ cultural approach.

Researching culture

We conclude by briefly illustrating the complexity of participant identities in communicative exchanges, and how they might be looked at in interaction with one another, by reference to one of our present interests: the characteristics of our changing student population at Middlesex University Business School, in North London. The make-up of this local discourse community is shaped by contemporary patterns of migration, travel, relocation and social interaction typical of many metropolitan areas of the UK and elsewhere. Our student community also reflects recent trends in British higher education. Most speakers are bilingual or multilingual; in communication they combine pragmatic strategies, cultural schemas and general knowledge derived from many different backgrounds. But overlap between members of the community is also evident, for example in the degree of access they share to a body of international cultural forms carried by contemporary global media and the internet, as well as by their proficiency in English as an international language, and by familiarity with given bodies of educational subject matter. Our student population accordingly provides an interesting case of what would have been called, in an older vocabulary, a multicultural ‘melting pot’. It offers potentially important observations about intercultural contact and globalisation.

The mere coming together of students from different cultures within the geographical, organisational and learning spaces of a university, we note, does not necessarily predispose them to communicate across cultural (or, for that matter, personal or social) boundaries. Our students might exist in parallel, introverted groups. How can we discover the actual extent of their interaction? We can begin to find out empirically by means of three inter-connected kinds of study that we currently have in view:

- Mapping students’ chosen seating arrangements in lecture and seminar classes, and graphically annotating the resulting maps with salient cultural indicators (e.g. language, ethnic group, religion).
- Analysing self-selected student work groups (e.g. the small groups they work in to produce collaborative ‘team’ coursework), in order to determine the role of cultural affinity in constructing group membership.
- Asking students about their on-campus and off-campus learning and non-learning activities, in order to identify which activities involve members of similar and contrasting cultures.

Through studies of this kind, it should be possible to find out more about social patterns of interaction: who chooses to stand or sit with whom, and how much they talk. Further studies are also possible, at a larger spatial scale. For example, by mapping the home addresses of students belonging to individual ethnic groups and comparing these with maps of the distribution of ethnic groups in the university’s immediate catchment area (e.g. from 2001 population census data), it is possible to explore hypotheses concerning the likelihood or strength of intercultural communication based on geographical propinquity. Examples of such hypotheses might be:

- Members of inter-located cultures may not communicate as much as might be anticipated on the basis of their geographical propinquity.
- Communication between spatially segregated cultures appears less likely at the individual level and more likely between cultural representatives and intermediaries.

- Communication between individual members of spatially segregated cultures may be expected to occur largely outside their community base, for example at workplaces, recreational centres and other 'neutral' locations.

In empirical studies of this kind, the question remains of evidence as to what *kinds* of communication are undertaken (or not): what topics are chosen; what balance exists between small talk and more functional discourse (e.g. how different interactants achieve communication during recognised in-class tasks); and how communication is handled in more open-ended communication settings. It should be possible, however, to discover a great deal about the content and style of such communication from sources such as diaries, observation, questionnaire surveys, focus groups and interviews, and transcripts of class discussion.

Interpreting the data likely to emerge from such studies will not be straightforward. Intercultural interaction is shaped by strategic thinking behind each decision to contribute, to stay quiet, or to keep to one group rather than another. Such decisions may involve speakers suspending 'their own' cultural styles and mobilising meta-pragmatic strategies as a kind of accommodation to what they see and hear around them. The behaviour that speakers exhibit in such circumstances provides evidence less of styles associated with their cultural origins than of their 'inter' activity and improvisation, which may start, stop and modulate from moment to moment. Even so, findings from interlocking studies of the kind we sketch here should allow multi-way inferences to be drawn: between culture and location, between location and communication, between culture and communication, and among all three.

Conclusion

Complex (and to some extent unpredictable) diffusion, adaptation and hybridisation of communicative norms seems certain to become an increasingly significant feature of our communication landscape. The process of diffusion, which consists of vast numbers of improvisatory 'inter' acts between members of different cultural groups and backgrounds, will also, over time, cause some degree of adaptive convergence in communicative behaviour. Yet the strategies and creativity involved in interactions that make up the overall social process of diffusion, and which lead to important kinds of cultural hybridisation, remain not well understood.

In this paper, we have suggested that establishing research methods and standards of evidence appropriate to complex and changing intercultural patterns of communication should be a theme not only of specialised intercultural communication research but of all communication research. We have argued that attention to multidimensional speaker identities, including those of second and third-generation populations, is needed especially during the present period of major transnational population flows (some arguably a consequence of globalisation processes, others attributable to war, genocide, political repression and famine). We have also drawn attention to the impact on intercultural communication of a second stream of cultural change: that brought about by massive expansion and incorporation into everyday life of the internet and other forms of mediated communication which allows new kinds of 'communication at a distance', across traditional boundaries of cultures of place. Fuller appreciation of 'cultural' and 'communication' variables in such a rapidly changing communication environment, we conclude, may prove helpful to researchers into intercultural communication. It may in the long term also offer the benefit of greater understanding to those who are the objects of such research.

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