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ISSUES OF LINGUISTICS, LITERATURE AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Annotation:
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.

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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) Before I proceed, a note on my own usage: I use the term Intercultural Communication with capitals to indicate the field as a whole, and I use cross-cultural communication, intercultural communication and interdiscourse communication with small letters to indicate the three distinct traditions within the field. However, an additional distinction needs to be made, both within and outside of academia, between Intercultural Communication as a field of inquiry, and discourses about 'culture' and 'intercultural communication' as reified and essentialist understandings of 'culture A' in contact with 'culture B'. I want to distance myself from such essentialist and reified uses but I do want to keep the terms (cf. Baumann 1996: 11, for a similar argument), and therefore I will use quotation marks when I explore the uses of the terms in discourse. LIn the following, I will first discuss the traditions of cross-cultural and intercultural communication by introducing key issues and assumptions,describing some of the major studies in each tradition, and pointing out problematic aspects of each tradition (sections 3 and 4). The understanding of Intercultural Communication as 'interdiscourse communication' is the most recent addition to the field, and traditionally Intercultural Communication studies have been most widely understood as comprising studies,whether of a comparative or an interactional nature, that take cultural group membership as a given. This predominant essentialism makes Intercultural Communication studies an exception in the social sciences, where social constructionist approaches have become the preferred framework in studies of identity (see, for example, Benwell and Stokoe 2006, for an overview).Rather than taking culture and identity as given, social constructionism insists that it is linguistic and social practices that bring culture and identity

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into being (Burr 2003).The essentialist assumption that people belong to a culture or have a culture,which is typically a part of intercultural communication and cross-cultural communication studies, has given Intercultural Communication a somewhatold-fashioned, dowdy, not-quite-with-it, even reactionary image; an image which one recent commentator describes as follows: To many teachers and researchers working [. . .] under the broad designation of media and cultural studies, the subfield of 'intercultural communication' might seem a bit suspect. For a start, it might appear to be yet another of those divisions of 'communication' that raise questions about what is being immediately left out of the picture, theoretically and substantively, by the way in which the defining category is employed; by the way this slices into social and symbolic complexity and classifies what it wants to know more about. Moreover, there is a legacy of rather functionalist and technicist tendencies in the background, a legacy that has had its impact upon the intellectual quality of many areas of 'communications' research. (Corner 2006: 155f.)Given the frequency with which Intercultural Communication – usually in the form of 'culture A, B or C' and 'cultural difference' are invoked in a wide range of discourses, I consider the reluctance of (critical) academics to get involved in Intercultural Communication research as problematic.Therefore, following my review of each tradition within Intercultural Communication, I will then make a case for an empirical and critical enquiry into Intercultural Communication, which simultaneously narrows and widens the scope of Intercultural Communication (section 5). The scope needs tobe narrowed to distinguish linguistic issues from 'cultural' issues, and itneeds to be widened to distinguish 'cultural' issues from those where talk about 'culture' serves to obscure inequality between and within groups.Throughout, I will ask how 'Intercultural Communication' has become one of the key terms (in the sense of Bennett et al. 2005;Williams 1976) of late modernity (i.e. who invokes 'culture' when, where, how and for what purposes).'Having a Culture': Cross-Cultural Communication and Intercultural CommunicationEach year, I begin my university course on Intercultural Communication with the question 'What do you expect to learn in this class?', and each year students will tell me that they want to learn how people from different cultures communicate or how misunderstandings between cultures can be avoided. These understandings are in line with textbook definitions such as these: 'a transactional, symbolic process involving the attribution of meaning between people of different cultures' (Gudykunst and Kim 2002: 14) or 'the exchange of information between individuals who are unalike culturally' (Rogers and Steinfatt 1999: 1). What the student expectations, the textbook definitions – and maybe your reader expectations? – have in common is the implicit assumption that people somehow have culture (to be of a culture) and that they somehow are culturally different or similar to others.The next question I ask my new students is usually something along the lines, 'So, what is your culture?', and at the University of Sydney in Australia where I have done this exercise most often, I typically get a few straightforward answers like 'I'm Australian' or 'I'm Chinese', some also relatively straightforward but combinatorial answers like 'I'm Vietnamese- Australian' or 'I'm Chinese from Singapore', and a fair number of people who struggle to answer the question, as in this response: 'Well, I don't know,my mother is from Austria, my father from Japan, and I was born in New Zealand but I've grown up here.' While these answers exhibit different levels of complexity, they have one thing in common: culture is taken to be a national and/or ethnic category in all of them. Again, the students' usage of 'culture' as more or less co-terminous with 'nation' and/or 'ethnicity' is also mirrored in most academic work, where the following examples – titles of papers in two widely used readers in the field – can be considered typical (my emphasis): 'Conflict management in Thai organizations' (Rojjanaprapayon et al. 2004),'What is the basis of American culture' (Aldridge 2004),'The Chinese conceptualizations of face: emotions, communication, and personhood' (Jia 2003) or 'Communication with Egyptians' (Begley 2003).

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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