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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

An introduction to the thematic section

Contemporary societies are witnessing the greatest migration of human populations in recorded history, an unparalleled increase in the magnitude of communication flows across national frontiers, and an accelerating internationalization at all levels of society. Accordingly, interactions among citizens of these societies are becoming increasingly intercultural and we all face a steadily growing demand for continuous cultural adaptation, adjustment and interchange in our ways of life and, not least, in communication. The pace of this development would seem to have been further spurred with the increasing West European politico-economic integration, which is effectively transforming the European Communities into the world's greatest cultural laboratory.

The internationalization of our societies and the surge in intercultural communication has triggered a plentitude of scholarly studies into the field of intercultural communication. However, despite the widespread agreement about the importance of studying intercultural communication in today's world, there is little consensus among those working with the subject about how best to define, conceptualize and study it. Writers often begin their research with different assumptions about how to conceptualize the issue, with different goals about the desired outcomes of their research, and with different methodologies to observe and reach conclusions, and only too rarely are these fundamental starting points clearly explained. It is therefore evidently a major task to make the findings converge into a coherent body of knowledge about intercultural communication and only few such attempts have yet been made.

The objective of this Introduction is to address, at least in part, some of the terminological confusion within the field of intercultural communication and to discuss some of the most pertinent issues in current studies within this field. In this way it is hoped that the Introduction will set the frame for this volume which has been designed to focus on aspects of cross-cultural and intercultural negotiation in general and aspects of Scandinavian negotiation parameters in particular.

The taxonomy of intercultural communication studies invariably frustrates first-time readers of academic works in this domain, and even more ardent readers of intercultural communication journals are sometimes puzzled by the terminological innovation and creativity brought to the field. This is, of course, mainly due to the growth of the specialization in studies of intercultural communication and the variety of approaches. To bring at least some coherence into this quandary, we will first set some basic definitions right. The first distinction that should be made is between *cross-cultural* and *intercultural* research. It is commonly accepted that the former is concerned with the comparative study in multiple cultures, whereas the latter involves the study of people from different cultures who are interacting together. The focus in both crosscultural and intercultural studies is often on their outcomes or effectiveness and appropriateness. The late 80s, therefore, saw an emerging consensus on the use of *competence* to identify the object under study because it is generally assumed that this term embraces both *effectiveness* and *appropriateness*, the two key words that would seem to unite most research in intercultural communication. Effectiveness is usually characterized as the judgement about the ability of the interactants in the intercultural exchange to reach their goals. Appropriateness refers to what is believed to be proper and fitting in a given situation within a particular culture.

Approaches to intercultural communication tend to fall into two categories depending on the uses to which they are brought. One, mainly deductive, category of studies has as its main endeavour to approach theoretical perspectives, compiling elements of theory or creating theoretical frameworks. Regrettably, these frameworks are only too rarely operational in empirical studies¹. Another approach begins by documenting observations and then developing theory. This chiefly inductive approach often produces results aimed at the practical application of knowledge in order to improve intercultural interactions. Much of this research, especially that which is of an interdisciplinary nature, has too often lacked in theoretical grounding and methodological rigor and it has therefore often been dismissed as ‘anecdotal’ or ‘unscholarly’, etc. However, because practice lies at the heart of our activities at the Business School, this volume will give emphasis to the practical manifestations of intercultural

¹ However, a theory proposed by Stella Ting-Toomey would seem to represent a highly interesting, operational theoretical framework (International Communication Annual, Volume XVII, May 1993).

interaction, but we should not thereby say that theory is not important. On the contrary, theory underlies both the practical and the training applications.

Closely linked to this issue is the question whether it is possible to identify intercultural communication without explicit reference to the specifics of interaction rules within a specific culture. Thus, where some argue that the theoretical and practical aspects of intercultural communication should be understood from the point of view of a specific culture with a particular set of rules, knowledge and behaviours, others claim the existence of concepts that apply universally across all cultures. Accordingly, researchers from the latter group implicitly claim that there is a general or universal dimension to their results whereas the former regard their results as entirely culture-specific.

The methodological intricacies of intercultural communication have fostered heated debates on the quantitative-qualitative choice; a privilege which is, of course, shared by most other linguistic disciplines. Although the accuracy of the quantitative approach still has its proponents, while others profess to the richness and vitality of the qualitative methods, the majority of researchers today recognize the need for a balanced approach that takes both aspects into account.

Finally, any scholar of intercultural communication must invariably address the problem of which of the elements (s)he should emphasize: culture or communication. Again there are two possibilities. Where some studies start from the perspective of interpersonal communication aiming to apply such strategies to intercultural settings, others adopt an intercultural perspective from the very start and aim to elucidate how distinctive properties in different cultures affect the communication.

In this thematic volume of *Hermes*, the guiding principle has been to bring together current empirical studies focusing on negotiation. The structure of the thematic section represents our understanding of some of the choices the authors have made along the multiple perspectives described above. Although most of these perspectives are represented in this volume to a greater or lesser extent, there is a predominance of qualitative, mainly inductive and therefore culture-specific studies geared to practical ends. Still, the thematic part is developed in two sections. The first section, which is concerned with intercultural negotiation between Scandinavians and non-Scandinavians, offers a variety of approaches and languages. Thus in Bülow-Møller, *Negotiating in a Foreign Language*, the characteristic features of simulated negotiations are examined.

Bülow-Møller stratifies the difficulties encountered by the non-natives at various levels according to *footing* and suggests specific courses of action to improve negotiation training. In Fant, *“Push” and “Pull” Moves in Hispanic and Swedish Negotiation Talk*, the focus is on the cultural differences in the discourse and interaction of Hispanic (Mexican and Spaniards) and Swedish trained negotiators. Negotiation is seen as a three-step-operation (initiation, problem-solving, and resolution), and it is shown how teamwork will assist the negotiator’s triple purpose of managing at one and the same time the argumentation, the information flow and the interpersonal relationship; a topic also taken up by Walker. In Neumann, *The Language of Negotiation in Management Training*, arguments are presented that the teaching of foreign language (German) negotiation in a Norwegian industrial setting should have as its principal focus the ‘language of negotiation’ rather than ‘negotiation techniques’. The paper explores aspects of intonation in questions and the metalanguage used in argumentation.

The second part of the articles is concerned not with interlanguage issues but with intracultural aspects of communication, i.e. negotiation. In Öberg, *Team Work in Business Negotiations*, authentic Swedish business negotiations are studied with the aim of describing the overall structure of the negotiation. The paper traces the different phases, analysing manifestations of interactional cooperation and their development over time. In Walker, *Union Complaints in Industrial Relations Negotiations*, it is observed that the complaint is accomplished indirectly and that implicitness and mitigation on both sides of the negotiation table is instrumental to the success of industrial negotiation. Via a description of this phenomenon, the author builds an account of how the participants’ orientation to ‘doing negotiation’ is built into the global structure of the talk.

The contributions to this thematic volume provide new insights into negotiation, an area recently propelled to the forefront of intercultural linguistic attention, not least because of the accelerating internationalization. We hope that the diversity of approaches and perspectives brought to the task by the contributors will provide for an interesting reading and that this diversity will be seen not as a lack of coherence, but as a source of richness that makes the significance of each individual contribution stand out and truly reflects the current state of research in intercultural negotiation.

