Intercultural communication

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Interculturality is a concept that captures the complex phenomenon of intercultural contact, including intercultural communication. The concept of intercultural communication combines the concepts of interculturality and communication. It also describes the problems and pitfalls of misunderstanding, and the skills and competences required for successfully understanding members of other cultures. Examples for intercultural communication studies are given from the area of intercultural German studies. The semiotic aspect of intercultural communication is important, as it goes far beyond the realms of language alone. In institutional communication potential misunderstandings should be anticipated by counseling immigrants, for example. Examples are also given from different literatures and theater traditions, and immigrant discourse in films.

Key Words: intercultural communication, semiotics, intercultural misunderstanding, media communication, migration discourse in film.

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The Concept

Many anthropologists see cultural difference, transcultural contact, and interculturality as the basic condition of a developing civilization. The interest of numerous disciplines addresses an *intercultural communication* that explains the common topic according to their specialty, defines it with the help of specialized terminology, and outlines its history from the discipline's standpoint. *German studies* based on cultural scholarship focus today on interculturality in all of the discipline's subsectors as a problem of linguistics, literary esthetics, literary history, comparative literature, and didactics.

When members of different cultures meet, the medium of their understanding each other becomes problematic to the extent that rules of usage are hindered on both sides. Mutual understanding can be influenced but also enriched by this. To the extent that automatic routine action in everyday conversation becomes deautomated by confrontation with other "foreign" routines, their structures, processes, patterns, designs, sign units, and linkage rules are accented more acutely in the individual conscience (Gumperz 1982). Yet since the rise of work by the Prague School's circle on linguistic poetics, deautomation has also been described as a characteristic of esthetic language usage. Research on *intercultural communication's* everyday aspects as well as its esthetic, historic, medial, and institutional use can only gain significance in German studies as a sign of increasing transcultural contacts, contexts, and conflicts everywhere (Hess-Lüttich et al. eds. 1996).

The Term

The term *interculturality* is a derivation combined from the prefix *inter* (< lat. *inter* = among, between) and the noun *culture* (< lat. *cultura* = agriculture, cultivation [of the body and soul]). The metaphor introduced by Cicero was revived in German only during the late humanist period (Pufendorf) and then used parallel for cultivating land on one hand and cultivating spiritual objects (*cultura animi*) on the other.

The general meaning of culture has evolved from the second meaning (since Herder) as a sign of the entirety of a society's spiritual and artistic contributions that can be seen to constitute the forming of their identity as a social group (political nation, language community, etc.). Wilhelm von Humboldt compared it with the term *civilization* - which had quite

an impact on the history of thought in that respect. Tyler (1871) sought to define "culture" as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" which, at least in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, has since been associated with the term "community": "A culture refers to the distinctive way of life of a group of people, their designs of living" (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952: 86). The phenomenology of the everyday life of individuals as social subjects in culturally defined social systems (Alfred Schütz) leads to the academic institutionalization of *cultural studies.* Since the 1960s, they shaped the liberal arts program and modern languages syllabuses, especially in the USA which was perceived as multicultural (*new ethnicity).* During the 1970s, this led to the establishment of the teaching and research area of intercultural studies (introduced later in Great Britain and above all at the *Centre for Cultural Studies* in Birmingham). The term caught on as a newly coined jargon phrase, prevailing during the 1980s and 1990s in continental Europe with its corresponding French, Italian, and Spanish equivalents. This occurred not least due to the efforts of the *Centre UNESCO d'études pour l'éducation et l'interculturalité* in Besançon (Rehbein ed. 1985; Spillner ed. 1990; Loenhoff 1992; Maletzke 1996).

Stimulated by the reception of such theoretical concepts from the English- and Latin-language area as well as corresponding to the needs of the related academic practice (an increase in the ratio of foreign students), a first topical outline and syllabus of a German subdiscipline *Deutsch als Fremdsprache* (German as a Foreign Language) is being proposed simultaneously in the German-speaking countries as a supplement to mother-tongue philology. It is being rapidly implemented and (with the exception of German-speaking Switzerland) belongs in varying degree today as a firm component of the specialty at most larger institutes.

Interculturality is also becoming the image and framework term of an approach recommending establishment during the 1980s of "culturally differing lectures" in German literature *between* basic German and foreign-language study and German literature (at least in the context of the German sub-discipline "*Deutsch als Fremdsprache*"). It was urged that such courses become a segment of foreign-culture scholarship and comparative cultural anthropology (Wierlacher 1996: 550-590). This approach to "intercultural German studies" made the claim (discussed in a thoroughly controversial manner: Zimmermann ed. 1989; Grub 2003) to have introduced a "new paradigm" into German studies research on

the interacting relationship between "*Fremdem und Eigenem*" (things foreign and things peculiar to one's own culture) in language, literature, culture, and media.

The Development

Intercultural communication in the broad sense (Ehlich 1996; Hess-Lüttich 1989) is an intranational as well international everyday phenomenon. Scholarly attention to it grew steadily during the last quarter of the 20th century. This promoted systematic sector formation up to academic institutionalization as can be seen in the founding of journals (*e.g.*, *Plurilingua, Multilingua*), book series (e.g., *Jahrbuch für Deutsch als Fremdsprache, Cross Cultural Communication*), handbooks (*Deutsch als Fremdsprache*, ed. Helbig et al. 2001), scholarly associations (*Gesellschaft für Interkulturelle Germanistik*) and the proceedings of their conventions, departments, and chairs (*e.g.*, in Munich, Hamburg, Bayreuth, Karlsruhe, Mainz, and Chemnitz among others).

In a transdisciplinary dialogue with linguists, cultural anthropologists, sociologists, pedagogues, psychologists, as well as text and media scholars, the specific German studies topic of *interculturality* is devoted today especially to the role of language in intercultural contacts and contexts, relationships with and among foreigners, perception of foreignness and xenologic study, the potential for misunderstanding and causes of conflict in interethnic communication, problems of intercultural learning and their language-specific political consequences, perspectives of intercultural translation, behavior of minority cultures (subcultures) and majority cultures, development of training and continuing-education measures to prepare activities abroad or to impart intercultural knowledge domestically, the culture-specific accent of specialized and scholarly communication as well as intercultural communication on the job, functions and effects of the fine arts (literature, theater, film) in mediating between the cultures, intercultural communication in and through the mass media, as well as impacts of modern technologies on international communication.

Within the inner circle of intercultural German studies – in the sense of the challenge by Albrecht Schöne (1986) for an intensified "exchange" between domestic and foreign German studies – the development of a hermeneutic of plurality with varied cultural perspectives on German literature stands in the foreground with a special stress on "cultural topics"

such as foreignness, politeness, work, tolerance, food, travel, etc., on which *Publikationen der Gesellschaft für Interkulturelle Germanistik* (since 1985) provides an abundant overview. How foreign cultures appear in German literature (travel literature, exile literature, etc.), is of as much interest as adaptation of German culture in the texts of foreign authors ("*Gastarbeiter*" literature, migrant literature, etc.: Weigel 1992; Esselborn 1997; Luchtenberg 1999: 169-192).

Literary history description for foreign-culture readers has been reflected theoretically and has been realized in a number of projects (Bohnen 1987; Krusche 1985; Denkler 1987; Thum 1985). Within the context of contrastive phraseology, a new branch of comparative analysis has emerged to profile specific cultural stereotypes from proverbs and expressions (Hess-Lüttich 1991; Sabban & Wirrer eds. 1991). New tasks for intercultural German studies are finally expanding to include issues of comparison (theater, film, and journalism), especially in the sphere of intertextual and intermedial relations (Fischer-Lichte ed. 1995; Hess-Lüttich ed. 1992). In this connection, there is also a challenge to reconstitute the discipline as "media culture science" (Schmidt 1996) and to open it entirely to intercultural perspectives.

Yet now as before, the largest portion of empirical research in intercultural communication so far is found in linguistics (and, with special emphasis on nonverbal communication, in social psychology, though no attention will be paid to this here). Instead of a research report on this discipline, which cannot be justified within this framework, see Hinnenkamp (1994) for a compiled bibliography as well as current reappraisals (e.g., in Clyne 1996: 7-31 or Luchtenberg 1999: 9-34). The textbook by Jandt (1998-1999) offers the most recent introduction in international research.

German studies based on a theoretical framework of culture and communication, and not fixed on its own specialized history, but attentive to the signs of its times, will declare, focus, question, illustrate, and apply intercultural studies as a teaching and research object in its own right and in all its aspects. From the abundant fields of applications that have become inescapable in the meantime, only four are cited here as new tasks of German intercultural communications research in their semiotic dimensions.

The Applied Semiotics of Intercultural Communication

Language and Institution

Institutions for "the purpose of education, clarifying disputes, health care, administration, etc. are normally generated by society on the basis of the social formation and function, but they are culture-specific, *i.e.*, based on historic developments of varying significance" (Rehbein 1985: 18). If foreigners in Germany seek the advice of a physician, an attorney, or their children's teacher, they do this based on their experience in contact with representatives of such institutions for health care, the law, or education in their own home countries. On the other hand, German physicians, attorneys, or teachers usually have only vague ideas about institutions in these alien countries. The medium of understanding also strengthens the position of institutional representatives who must subject the individual concern to the regulations of his institution. The foreigner seeking advice who neither grasps these regulations nor can equal his opposite's mastery of the language, easily sinks into the uncomfortable Kafkaesque feeling of being extradited to obscure powers.

The Chinese patient can learn forms of medical counseling and therapy in Berlin that may be new or unfamiliar to him. The German lawyer must seek to decipher the case for his Afghan client in the context of legal counsel based on the premises of another legal system rather than to perceive it as dysfunctional. It is normally the case today in big city classrooms with ethnically heterogeneous groups that communication problems are compounded with pupils who may be used to quite different teaching styles in their home-country schools and ascribe a different role to their teacher. If the teacher lacks intercultural knowledge, he will presume the causes of communication problems to lie at the wrong point; the wrong therapy will follow the wrong diagnosis, and conflicts will multiply.

They can also break out within the institution of the "family" if children must grow up with an erosive discrepancy between differing cultures. These frequently observed conflicts of the so-called "second-generation" have led to various proposed solutions. In daily practice, the child, the teacher, and the parents have obviously been helped very little by well-intended goal recommendations such as "integration without assimilation", development of "bicultural competence", preservation of "cultural identity" with "multilingual socialization", etc. This also applies to

contact with authorities, financial or social offices, job and housing agencies, alien police and welfare inspectors. Here a great deal of valuable practical work has been performed in adult education of foreign immigrants with targeted training programs that could be even better justified in theory by systematic research of intercultural *institutional communication.*

This occurs above all through study of codes of intercultural communication, i.e., language and gestures, texts and signs in exchanges between native speakers and foreigners. This is primarily the task of intercultural pragmatics with its now highly sophisticated methods of conversational analysis. Intercultural misunderstandings are very often based on discrepancies in treating culture-specific mechanisms of assuring understanding and of differences between intention and interpretation of certain gestures and expressions, of kinemic and proxemic conventions of which those involved are usually unaware.

Yet culturally specific differences also show up in everyday rhetorical forms and presentations of certain discourse types, such as narrative, reports, descriptions, congratulations, condolences, and arguments. Here, depending on the situation, the boundaries between individual types of discourse may be drawn differently in other language communities in different ways. This can lead to irritation concerning reciprocal assessment of the situation or definition of the relationship.

The presumably neutral and objective style of scholarly argumentation is not the same everywhere either: Galtung (1985: 151-193) has already made well-known distinctions between Saxon, Teutonic, Gaelic, and Japanese scientific styles and described their idiosyncrasies. The established "technolinguistics" of specialized and scientific jargon has largely excluded this outsider perspective to culture-specific forms of speaking and writing up till now (but see Wimmer 1987). In doing so, it would not only be of importance for imparting specialized language in the context of acquiring second and foreign languages (Hess-Lüttich 1987) but also for international scientific communication (Bungarten ed. 1986) and for the intermedia sphere of scientific know-how transfer in mass-communication systems of information societies and developing nations (Kretzenbacher 2003).

Literature and Theater

Harald Weinrich (1983: 13) pleads for reintegration of literature in foreign-language instruction, because it forces "slow reading" and "de-automation". This also applies to pupils who must laboriously "decode" a foreign language text. However, if this effort does not repay him through its formal, esthetic quality, as in the case of most instructional texts or dialogue exercises, he can hardly escape the "boredom of language lessons" (Weinrich 1981). Precisely because the poetic text causes "stumbling over the routine of absorbing information rapidly and thus bringing it into reason" (Weinrich 1983: 14), it is more suitable and more sustainable than primarily informative texts for the study of national customs to awaken the interest of the pupil in a foreign culture.

Literature offers texts suitable for foreign language lessons in richer abundance, not only for the final demanding phase, but from the very beginning. Specific lyrics and visual poetry guide the pupil's attention in a playful way and teach language forms naturally. Contemporary authors from German-speaking countries are engaged to formulate poetic texts that are dedicated to a specific grammatical problem (Stöpfgeshoff ed. 1981). Foreign pupils' consciousness of esthetic form in contact with the foreign language when receiving literary texts may become an impulse that has led many of them to producing their own texts. These then serve as motivating instructional texts for later pupils and can give them the courage to adapt their fantasy to the foreign situation.

But even literature itself has always profited from meeting foreign influences. Artaud let himself be inspired by the Balinese theater in order to clothe archetypes of the subconscious in symbolic forms. Brecht fit the artificiality of the Chinese theater into his program of Enlightenment by Alienation. Tairov expanded the repertoire of theatrical signs by exploiting the Indian theater's abundance of forms. But not only literary reactions to the 19th-century middle-class theater of realistic illusion offer a wealth of examples. Precisely the history of the German theater originated from meetings with foreign, mainly English, Italian, and Dutch groups of actors that moved through Europe in the 17th century. Goethe too always saw his adaptations of numerous dramas from other epochs and cultures as a task of imparting culture.

Deeper understanding must not always be inherent in the meeting. Intercultural misunderstanding can become a source of esthetic enjoyment, as Erika Fischer-Lichte (1985: 79-92) has shown with the example

of the Beijing Opera's successful German tour with a program that was also transmitted in television excerpts. The German public knew nothing about the Beijing Opera's highly complex traditional theater code dating back nearly 1,000 years in unchanged form. Fischer-Lichte explained the surprising success of the Beijing Opera in Germany by the fact that it was subject to another code well known here: it was interpreted as a circus game, a feat of acrobatic art. What one knew from the circus performances was carried out to utmost perfection here. The color of the costumes was not interpreted historically as a semiotic signal of social rank but as a colorful arrangement of artistic precision. Literature, theater, and esthetic media are to be discovered even more precisely as an impulse for foreign cultural understanding (or misunderstanding) and to be justified hermeneutically (Hammerstein 1997).

Media Communication

Mass media communications have been considered comparably less from a specifically intercultural perspective in German studies to date. Yet their importance can no longer be overlooked during a period of increasing international information networking. At the outset, German media studies focused on critical analyses of radio and television's special foreigner programs. The declared goal of "integration" was missing due to the program planners' lack of intercultural knowledge (Koschinski 1986); the conceptual claim of building a cultural "bridge to the home country" was not fulfilled (Bach 1984). In view of such findings, it is not surprising that immigrants have long since built up their own media selection. In the sector of newspapers and magazines, sound and video cassettes, movies, radio, and also theater, there has been a wide range of choices that would be worthy of study for its intercultural implications (Goldberg 2000).

This also applies for the issues of what media are used by foreigners, how they are used, and what image they impart of foreigners in Germany or of Germans abroad (Merten 1986; Hess-Lüttich ed. 1992). Even more important is the sector for imparting intercultural management and negotiating as well as using intercultural advertising by multinational firms that have set up their own research departments for this purpose (Bolton 1998; Bungarten ed. 1999). Recent studies devote themselves to discussions of racism and immigration in the media (e.g., van Dijk 1991; Wodak et al. 1995; Hess-Lüttich 1997; Luchtenberg 1999: 133-168). As

a sign of the globalization and multiculturality debates, a broad field opened here that is still little cultivated (Großklaus 2003).

Migration Discourse in Film

"Foreigners in film" are common and may not be worth further discussion. The "stranger" has been a topic and object of film history since its beginnings and remains one today - as an agent of exoticism, folklore, clichés, social criticism. But that is not the focus here. However, the depiction of everyday life in our Western post-industrial society has become another medium of discourse on migration which has hardly awakened analytical interest of critical discourse analysis to date (for the notion of critical discourse analysis see Fairclough & Wodak 1997; for linguistic application cf. Brünner et al. eds. 1999). At the same time, the corpus is growing toward which this interest could be aimed: short and full-length movies as well as documentaries filmed as a reaction to public debate on migration problems within multicultural societies. The media portray ethnic minorities primarily as a social problem, serving for a xenophobic *vox populi* as proof and depiction of a reality that could hardly be visualized within the setting of its own everyday experiences.

T. Coraghessan Boyle's politically correct bestseller *The Tortilla Curtain* (published in Germany as *América*) was filmed lavishly in the Hollywood style as a parable on immigrants from Mexico. The film *Brothers in Trouble* also concerns illegal immigrants. Its Indian director Udayan Prasad, who grew up in England, shows everyday life filled with conflict in London districts in which immigrants from the subcontinent of India and Pakistan already represent most of the inhabitants. Young Turkish German filmmakers such as Neco Çelik offer tough entertainment in British style (*My Beautiful Laundrette*) with films such as one he made for WDR television, moonlighting after work in his job as a social worker in the Berlin youth meeting place Naunynritze. Everyday for Turks in Berlin is also the topic of films by Thomas Arslan (*Dealer*) and Yüksel Yavuz (*Aprilkinder*). Film director Kutlug Ataman, who is working in Istanbul again today after a few years in Berlin, Paris, and Los Angeles, offers a multicultural mixture with his film *Lola und Bilidikid.* He blends Turkish melodrama, German family history, and American thriller as well as the touching love story of two men in a multicultural neighbourhood of Berlin: Lola, a Turk and transvestite as well as the star of a nightly show, turns the head of the 17-year-old Murat, confusing his feelings.

The subject seems recently to have gained such a lively interest among filmmakers and media people as well as part of the public that the Amsterdam documentary film festival offered it a widely observed forum for films on refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers in its own series called "Global Motion". Sabine Derflinger and Bernhard Pötscher have made their documentary film *Achtung Staatsgrenze!* in a deportation prison at Linz, Austria. Maurizio Zaccaro describes in his film *Articolo 2* the Algerian Mohamed's futile efforts to receive his "second" family in Italy, where his situation is obviously prosecuted as bigamy. The film *Winterblume* by the Cologne resident Kadir Sözen uses penetrating images to describe the illegal effort of a rejected Turk to return to his family. Mehmet Umut freezes in snow at an Alpine pass while the court ultimately rules in favor of his return. As a rule, though, after years of agonizing waiting among foreigners in asylum housing, eating foreign food, and observing a strict ban on working, the end of the procedure means deportation, called "Ausweisung" in Germany, or "Schubhaft" in Austria, or "Ausschaffung" in Switzerland.

The Swiss documentary film *They Teach Us How to be Happy* by the Bernese filmmaker Peter von Gunten - hotly disputed yet lauded on various occasions (e.g., at Locarno in 1996 and at Berlin in 1997 - shows this topic with almost unnerving patience: speaking with foreigners as they enter Switzerland and apply for asylum, talking to - or rather interrogating - them as they arrive asking to enter for various reasons. These talks are official inquiries on their motives with the goal of identifying which of them will be granted admission, and which may have no right of asylum. The inquiries turn in perilous circles. Official distrust skewers vagueness of meanings, strips awkwardness of expression, raises other questions (yet always courteously), inquires about cultural knowledge, translates the individual's request until it fits into the agency's set pattern, seeks to trace weak points in the applicant's argument through legal hair-splitting, quibbling over specialized words, and sudden queries or trick questions.

In the film, the protagonists are Coptic Christians from the fundamentalist Islamic Sudan whose nuances in belief confuse the Roman Catholic official in the narrow office space in Chiasso. Christmas Eve is not on 24 December? Oh, really! And this one calls himself a Christian? They say they are persecuted for their beliefs? The official remains correct and makes notes. She disregards signs of impatience, but she knows the rules. The procedure follows the law's rules precisely. Morality? What if

law and morality diverge? Which takes precedence? Moral insight or political commandment? Law versus justice? Former Bernese Rabbi Marcel Marcus raises the issue in the film with penetrating objectivity. His answer: "If morality and the law are poles apart, then moral recognition must set new political goals."

In the next sequence an official at another service center shows how the inquiries are made more effective by technical controls. In only two minutes, he explains proudly, the foreigner can be identified precisely by computer comparison with a central database storing more than 480,000 fingerprints. And back to the inquiries, always carried out according to the same pattern. They are filmed in tormenting detail without hectic editing, without furious camera movements. The leisureliness of the setting corresponds to the slow pace of the process. Closer inspection - something the film forces to the limits of endurance - elicits gratuitous sarcastic remarks: the officials are only human beings too, but rules are rules; they have only the best of intentions regarding the foreigners, who should be happy and grateful instead of creating problems and costing taxpayers' money. The Coptic Christian from the Sudan grasps the purpose of the indescribable procedure with a sad enigmatic smile: "They teach us how to be happy."

Development Communication

While the sectors of applied semiotics of intercultural communications named so far as examples experienced an unprecedented upswing during the last two decades, a completely new field of research has opened up in the sector of so-called development communication and eco-semiotics that is finally mentioned as at least a key word. This concerns systematic linkage of research findings in intercultural, institutional, and interpersonal communication for sustainable imparting of know-how relevant to technology, the environment, and health-care in developing countries.

Organizations such as Amnesty International or Greenpeace plan their education campaigns supranationally today. But sensitized public awareness helps little in the industrialized countries responsible for legal security questions (as a condition of business investment) and sustainable resource investment if it cannot be imparted in Third World countries for lack of intercultural knowledge. Crises and conflicts there are often caused by interweaving problems that are difficult to untangle. These are of ecological interest and involve intercultural understanding (for eco-

semiotics in general, see Nöth 1996; for environmental discourse particularly, see Anderson 1997; Harré et al. 1998).

A series of case studies in Africa could show how problems such as the scarcity of water as a resource could be solved successfully by imparting technical know-how concerning ecology to the indigenous population. This caused changes in behavior by trained and trusted local people and their use of micro-culture-specific teaching materials (Genske & Hess-Lüttich 1999; id. 2002). The interdisciplinary approach combined processes of discourse analysis and cultural studies, applying them to instruction discourse in intercultural institutional settings (from co-worker training by international help organizations to face-to-face interaction of local mediators between development engineers and local people in arid peri-urban regions). Even today the unique link of communications and environmental studies, of cultural and technical science allows one to imagine the growth potential of intercultural communication as a field of knowledge in German studies too: this lends new meaning to it (not least in regard to education and training of future generations of students).

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