PERSPECTIVES ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION: A CRITICAL READING¹

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The 4th IPrA conference in Kobe last year shaped its theme, 'Cognition and communication in an intercultural context', around a number of panels which provided for unified forums of discussion. But in the margins of these arranged sessions, there were a number of individual speakers addressing intercultural issues, who, in attending each others' presentations, came to see the need to establish a post-factum 'panel'. Indeed, exchanging impressions in the corridors of Shoin Women's University about how clearly they saw their presentations overlap in terms of a preferred approach to intercultural communication, they concluded that a valuable opportunity had been missed to voice these overlappings in a panel session. At the same time, however, the opportunity presented itself to continue the cross-fertilization of ideas, extending it to other like-minded Kobe lecturers who came to join the discussion. The present volume reports on the outcomes of these reflections.

As a 'critical' reading of the Kobe lectures brought together in the present special issue, this introductory article can actually be read as a postscript to the volume. Rather than merely rewording the main theme and setting of each of the contributions, we prefer to engage in what Garfinkel would call a 'purposeful misreading' of the articles, raising issues about each of them which the individual contributors may or may not have intended to address explicitly. It is our purpose to pick out some significant trends in order to demonstrate how we see this volume as a challenge for and confrontation with the field of intercultural communication research. In doing so, we invite the contributors and readers alike to evaluate our reading vis-à-vis their own.

A *basso continuo* that runs through the contributions is a critical outlook on intercultural communication.² This critical outlook manifests itself at two levels: at the object level of the analysis of intercultural interactions and at the metatheoretical level of the discussion of current trends and models within

¹ The ideas presented here have greatly benefited from discussions with Dennis Day, Thiru Kandiah, Tom Koole, David Shea, Shi-xu, and Jan ten Thije, as well as a number of other people. Many of them will at least agree that the usual disclaimer 'all the ideas remain our own responsibility', is this time not just a formal decorum.

² There is, of course, no claim implied that the present collection is the first attempt to adopt a critical approach to intercultural communication — its precedented status will become apparent as several articles acknowledge the foregoers who have problematized current trends in intercultural communication research.

intercultural communication research. On the basis of reported analyses of empirical interactional data sets, the authors make an attempt to reveal the ideological processes at work in the communicative structures of intercultural encounters, or to present alternative viewpoints and methodological apparatuses more suitable for such investigations. These critical data analyses then lead each of them to 'interrogate' a selected range of existing models and theories of intercultural research, asking to what degree the analytic models are able to disclose the dimensions of social inequality and power relations present in intercultural encounters. The challenge is aimed at understanding and 'denaturalizing' some of the key analytic constructs and categories that in intercultural communication research are glossed over or taken for granted as unproblematic explanatory resources.

The first paper challenges the way ethnic identity has in some traditions been viewed as an ingredient of individual identity at the macro level of societal structure. Drawing on the school of ethnomethodology, Day addresses the question as to how ethnic identity is constructed in on-going interaction, i.e., how people make relevant the notion of cultural group membership in their discursive practices. In the particular context of the multicultural workplace, these cultural classifications of colleagues, superiors, and subordinates can serve as functional strategies in the development of the professional and the social hierarchical relationships between these different groups. Moreover, as the first voice in this volume, Day's case study has the 'sobering effect' of showing that 'culture' is already intercultural *per se*. Cultural identity is an accomplishment of the 'work' interlocutors do in intercultural — or interculturally constructed — interaction. It appears that, as abstractions that are intersubjectively accomplished through talk, such categories can more sensibly be accounted for in discursive, constructivist terms, than in terms of objectively identifiable attributes of people.

If these categories are matters of intersubjective construction, what is the exact relationship of these constructs to conversational behavior? Shi-xu approaches this question by way of criticizing a view of cultural attributions — i.e. the way informants describe and explain people's behavior in cultural terms — as pre-existing and stable cognitive structures determining conversational choices. Referring to recent discourse-analytic trends within Social Psychology, he opts for an action-oriented approach to attributions and stereotypic perceptions, in order to examine how they are constructed in talk and what interactive purposes these constructions serve. Shi-xu argues that an action-oriented approach to discursive attribution formation and its local functions can circumvent a reduction from social action to cognition dismissing individual agency. As such, Shi-xu cautions against viewing attributions and related perceptions as collective properties of cultural groups. This is of particular relevance for studies which set out to reveal the role ethnic perceptions and stereotypes play in intercultural encounters.

The two caveats formulated in the articles by Day and Shi-xu are targeted at the community of intercultural communication researchers in general as well as at the other articles to come in this volume. Indeed, ethnic categories, discussed by Day, and group stereotypes, elaborated upon by Shi-xu, recur as analytic resources in some of the other contributions, who in their turn go on to critically explore intercultural phenomena of different kinds. We are convinced that this polyphonic

'contour' which implicitly profiles the contributions against each other, is consistent with, and can only be enriching for, a publication which aims at critical insight.

Shea applies the critical strategy of denaturalizing taken-for-granted analytic constructs to the notion of contextualization and inferencing conventions, problematizing the way they have been used in some models for intercultural communication as given resources for explaining communicative conflicts. Turning *explanans* and *explanandum* around, he argues that contextualization and interpretation strategies should first of all be examined with respect to the ways in which they are themselves mediated by the societal positions of the interactants and the situational structure of the conversational activity. They should not simply be considered as pre-given and stable normative patterns that just 'come along' with the speakers into the interaction. This discussion of the underpinnings of such conventions leads Shea to problematize the view that cases of intercultural miscommunication can be traced to culture-specific contextualization and inferencing conventions.

The next paper supports Shea's challenge of the analytic link between cultural differences and communicative breakdown, and also shares Shi-xu's concern with the role of attributions in intercultural encounters. Meeuwis draws attention to the fact that the relationship between cultural differences and communicative problems is not at all straightforward or invariable across different intercultural contexts. Reporting both on cases of intercultural communicative success in which discourse conventions are realized in a strongly differentiated way and, conversely, on cases of communicative conflict where this realization is less differentiated, he urges for a more refined and critical view of the relationship in question. He suggests that such a critical view should take into account the way in which historically institutionalized modes of ethnic prejudice tolerate technical and culture-specific deviations for one speech community, but not for another.

One issue that will have become clear by now is the already-mentioned reflexivity which is implicitly or explicitly present in all the articles: in each case the implementation of a critical perspective is two-fold in that it is both directed at the processes at work in the very intercultural data under analysis and at the social relevance of some selected approaches to intercultural communication. The final paper realizes this reflexivity in a very concrete way. Contributions such as Day's, Shi-xu's, and Shea's look at the way basic categories such as ethnic identity, cultural attributions, and cultural differences are not so much pre-determined structures but are in fact themselves constructed in, and thus outcomes of, intercultural discourse. Sarangi addresses exactly these questions, but he shifts 'addressees': while those other contributions investigate such construction at the object-level of intercultural talk, Sarangi scrutinizes the ways in which these constructions are deployed at the level of theory formation and research practice. He examines, among other things, how certain analysts of intercultural miscommunication play too much upon 'cultural differences' at the expense of other factors in accounting for (mis)communication phenomena, to the point where they themselves come to 'stereotype' intercultural communication as more 'intercultural' than 'communicative' in nature. As an alternative, Sarangi suggests that one should situate the intercultural encounter both in its societal and in its institutional context. This allows him to trace the specific discursive practices of interactants into the broader societal forces.

Amongst all the intercultural matters on which the articles in this volume offer critical perspectives, the concept of 'culture' appears as the most common subject of 'interrogation'. At various levels of explicitness, a common trope underlying all the contributions is the denaturalization of an opaque use of culture as the necessary and sufficient explanation for what is going on in intercultural interactions. But apart from criticizing a view and use of 'culture' as the 'ultimate explanator' of interactive phenomena, this publication is, at the meta-analytic level, also critical of a view and use of culture as the 'ultimate *extenuator*'. It rejects the mask of scientific neutrality and the essentially conformist character of a discipline, which predominantly refers to 'involuntary' processes such as interference from cultural or linguistic background as the causes of interactive trouble, and, as such, slights activities of social exclusion and other ideological strategies deployed by the powerful in intercultural communication.

Although many of the contributions do not directly draw on the framework of Critical Linguistics, we see a strong parallel between what this volume as a whole strives for and the mainstay of that critical tradition (e.g., Fairclough 1985, 1988, 1989; Fowler *et al.* 1979; Kress 1989a, 1989b; Kress & Hodge 1990). There is, first of all, the issue of analytic reflexivity: in the development of its own model for a critical study of communicative processes, the Critical-Linguistics tradition comes to challenge some prevailing models in the linguistic sciences in a similar vein. It holds against these models their inability or reluctance to address linguistic practices and strategies oriented to societal inequality. Secondly, Critical Linguistics holds the view that any critical endeavor in the realm of linguistic analysis necessarily implies the analyst's constant orientation to discourse as both being informed by and contributing to the (re)production of the social order. This focus on the discursive manifestation of the structure-agency relationship is also one of the fundamental ingredients of the critical perspectives on intercultural communication presented in this volume. The contributions demonstrate that power relations can impossibly be revealed by limiting the intercultural study to descriptive — or at best locally explanatory — accounts of micro-level or macro-level phenomena alone. In general, Kress (1989a: 446) writes that the goal of Critical Linguistics is "to move the discipline of linguistics towards social and political relevance, and by the use of its insights to provide a social critique by documenting structures of inequality". We believe that the present publication, together with the other critical voices heard before in the field of intercultural communication research, can help to shape such a preferred destiny of the discipline.

We would, finally, like to draw attention to the fact that in adopting critical perspectives on intercultural matters, the present special issue also offers the possibility of contributing to specific theoretical and methodological concerns in the linguistic sciences in general. Many intercultural encounters are located in several public and institutional domains — some of which have provided the data sets for the following articles. The critical analysis of such intercultural settings reveals the complexities inherent in the analytic categories and dynamic processes involved in talk in institutions, and can, as such, offer an opportunity for challenging some assumptions related to descriptive and explanatory constructs in the broader language sciences, such as native speaker, native-speaker competence, conversational cooperativity, and social equality between conversational participants. These notions can and do of course receive critical treatment in communication

theories of a more general scope; but, as this volume can testify, critical intercultural communication studies are particularly well equipped to bring them to the fore.

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