
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AS A SITUATED, CULTURALLY COMPLEX, INTERACTIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

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The field of intercultural communication includes a variety of productive theoretical approaches as well as different methodological commitments. Some studies are built on the basis of self-report measures, aggregate tendencies, and/or resulting scores within and across national populations. This article focuses on a different kind of empirical study that is based upon careful observations of actual intercultural interactions and interpretations which honor the participants' views of those interactions. The article first diagrams the process of intercultural communication as a situated, cultural accomplishment. Next, distinct and complementary modes of analyses for phases of such study are presented. Finally, specific goals and eventual insights are discussed.

Key words: intercultural communication, interactions, interpretations, social and cultural interactions.

INTRODUCTION

I want to address some underdeveloped features in the study of intercultural communication. My exposition here, of "underdeveloped features", stands alongside other programs of work which are different; many explore statistically-based scores of populations along abstract dimensions and then compare them cross-culturally. My purpose is different; it is to draw attention to intercultural communication as it is actually getting done among participants, rather than compare aggregate scores reported via self-report measures. I seek to keep in view what participants in intercultural communication actually do, what they believe is getting done as they do it, as it is achieved in actual scenes of social interaction.

My exposition, then, has as one contrastive backdrop well-known studies such as those in the Hofstedian tradition which are based upon ratings of "national cultures" such as "how the less powerful expect power to be distributed; how integrated individuals are in groups; the distribution of roles between genders; the degree of tolerance of ambiguity; and a society's orientation to the future. Based upon a sample from a national group, one can compute a mean score for each dimension and thereby establish a snapshot of that nation's culture, with that nation's score on each dimension, relative to other nations, being rather stable, [at least as] Hofstede argues". I have summarized such studies elsewhere along with their critical assessments (Carbaugh, 2007, p. 21; based upon Geert Hofstede, 2001).

Studies that use quantitative measures of social phenomena as these are important as they provide a view of central tendencies within and across populations of people. Geert Hofstede (2001), as one prominent example, provides an instrument which can rank national populations along such measures. One is "individualism" with two na-

tional scores relative to that dimension being 91 for the United States and 20 for China. As scores, then, we see a tendency in the US to rank individualism much higher than it is ranked in China. A second measure is of “a long term orientation” with China’s tendency or ranking being 118 with the US being 29. Combining the two, together, yields general ratings in the United States, relative to China, being toward short-term interests of individuals, and with China, relative to the US, as focused on the longer term with a collective orientation. These are measures of important aspects of internal human cognition, or mental programming, as it presumably pertains to national populations.

If we were to add Russia’s scores to the above dimensions, we find this nation’s score on individualism to be 39, closer to China at 20 than to the US at 91. On long term orientation, Russia’s score is 81, a bit closer to China’s national tendency at 118 than the US’s at 29. The scores suggest something general according to Hofstede; that in Russia and China, relative to the US, the consciousness of the “we” is emphasized over the mindfulness of the “I” with more interdependence being presumed among society’s members; on the other measure, China and Russia strive in one’s thinking to maintain more of a link to the past, than the US, when looking toward the future.

The measures, again according to Hofstede, are measures of a population-wide “mental program” and as such are located — from the view of the theoretical model — inside people as a shared cognitive template. Culture is, in this sense, the social programming of a national mind. As a result, the measures provide a reading, so to speak, of that national mind, generally speaking. It is important to recognize that according to Hofstede and others, the measures are NOT measures of social action, of conduct in context, or of what people actually do when they are together with others. In this sense, the measures are not about intercultural communication as a social practice, but are about comparisons of aggregate scores of human populations that are abstract and located within national minds.

In fact, studies of what people do together, especially in intercultural interactions are, by comparison, more rare and difficult to find. Put differently, Hofstede’s approach and studies are widely cited and implemented. Studies of actual intercultural interactions are less so.

Why is this? Studies of actual intercultural interactions paint the intercultural picture with a different brush. If I were to load my language about the matter, I would say the Hofstede brush offers strokes along a few familiar dimensions about typical generic tendencies, while those of intercultural interactions bring into view vividly situated interactional dynamics which may offer deep insights. It is this, the latter sort of picture about studies of intercultural communication I want to hold in view. And it is a general approach to them, a systematic theory and rigorous methodology I advocate (see Carbaugh, 1990; Carbaugh, 2007). In the process, I think we can develop better knowledge about such studies IF they are situated in the details of social life, explored as interactional achievements, and interpreted as tied deeply to cultural traditions which are being activated in those very achievements.

Some years ago, I published an article which anticipated future studies of intercultural communication that would be designed with regard to, what I called there, “the C factor” (1993, pp. 110—111). My plea then, as it is now, was for scholars of

communication “to design studies that are *cultural* and *comparative* with special attention to *contexts of intercultural contacts*” (p. 111) [italics in the original]. In the meantime, many studies of this kind have been created (e.g., Hall, 1994; Wierzbicka, 2010; Witteborn, 2010) and I have added my own (e.g., Carbaugh, 2005). But these are not easy studies to design or to conduct.

Part of the difficulty is the range of features which need to be carefully distinguished in such study; this is due to the variety of qualities that are actually involved in the phenomena of interest, namely, intercultural interaction. What I want to offer here is a sketch of those qualities, in that phenomenon and some of the features needing attention when it is being studied.

As I delve into these matters, let me provide a larger frame around my exposition. The spirit of the framework derives from the programmatic enterprise initiated by Dell Hymes (1972) and is offered as an inquiring one, open-minded, investigative; one that wonders, in the case in view here, how an intercultural interaction gets done as it occurs. The frame for this sort of investigation does not start and stop with an observer’s abstract dimensions like individualism and future orientation, although one MIGHT find those matters to be active in the concrete details of a particular interaction. One does ask what social interaction is indeed getting done, and how do participants in such an interaction find it; what form and meaning do participants experience as active within it; what critical assessment do they make of it? This is where we are headed as we think through the following qualities and features of intercultural communication.

OVERVIEW

The exposition is in three main parts: first, I diagram the process of intercultural communication with special attention to its main features; second, I discuss some essential modes in inquiry for its study; then, I discuss some of qualities in the types of insights offered, relative to the others introduced above (i.e., those based upon quantitative scores and others based solely on conversational structure without its cultural features).

THEORETICAL ELEMENTS: INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION AS SOCIAL AND CULTURAL

Readers of this article are undoubtedly aware, based upon personal experiences of the kind of phenomenon we call “intercultural interaction”. In it, we find ourselves interacting with others in ways we might find puzzling, or might find later was not quite what we thought it was. A few years ago, a new acquaintance from China was spending a sabbatical year in our Department of Communication. After meeting for a first time, we met again and I received the following cheery remark, “have you eaten yet?” Upon hearing this, I wasn’t sure if my interlocutor was worried I had not been fed, was hungry herself, was overly attentive to my needs, or something else. A communicative act had been performed by her in social interaction, its form and meaning not quite known by me at the time. Eventually, I realized her words, and thus our interaction was a well-known and simple form of greeting — a Chinese version translated by her into English — of which I was unaccustomed to hearing in the US. (I note that given the sort of difficulty her utterance raised in my understanding and in coordinat-

ing our subsequent interaction, knowing her nation's score on individualism and future orientation was of little practical help.)

So what sort of study might complement those others and provide different, if complementary insights?

I think such study needs to be done through careful explorations that give detailed attention to actual, real-world examples of intercultural interactions. Attending to these moments of social life demonstrates the toe-hold of different cultural realities in actual social interaction; it demonstrates further how, for a moment at least, that interaction at that moment — that is, its meanings and significance — is not being shared by participants. Understanding how that sort of process occurs lends insight into such moments, as well as the general cultural practices that produce them. And with the benefit of those insights, better future practices can be forged. Or at least that is the hope.

Identifying intercultural encounters as such requires, first, an ability to notice that such moments indeed have occurred. (There can be much resistance to identifying moments as such.) Such a “noticing” stands between two human impulses: On the one end, it is natural and periodically beneficial for any of us to believe that basically all people (or all structures of conversation) are alike; at the other, it is natural and periodically beneficial to believe that each single individual (or each conversation) is different from all others. Both beliefs in a collective humanity and individual dignity or uniqueness, respectively, are important. Each honors important qualities about the universal features and unique experiences immanent in the human condition.

However, when we study intercultural interactions in the way being advanced here, we work between these, noticing a moment when individuals are doing something together, socially, yet as they are co-enacting that shared moment, it turns out, in effect, they are not interacting within the realm of the shared or shareable; the form, meanings and significance of the interaction varies to a degree, with the variance being recognized by them (or not); this is due to the cultural realities that are presumably active according to participants in that very moment. Understanding how this happens is a great challenge. (The latter unrecognized variances are especially interesting to study; I have called them “invisible misunderstandings” in my 2005 book, *Cultures in Conversation*.)

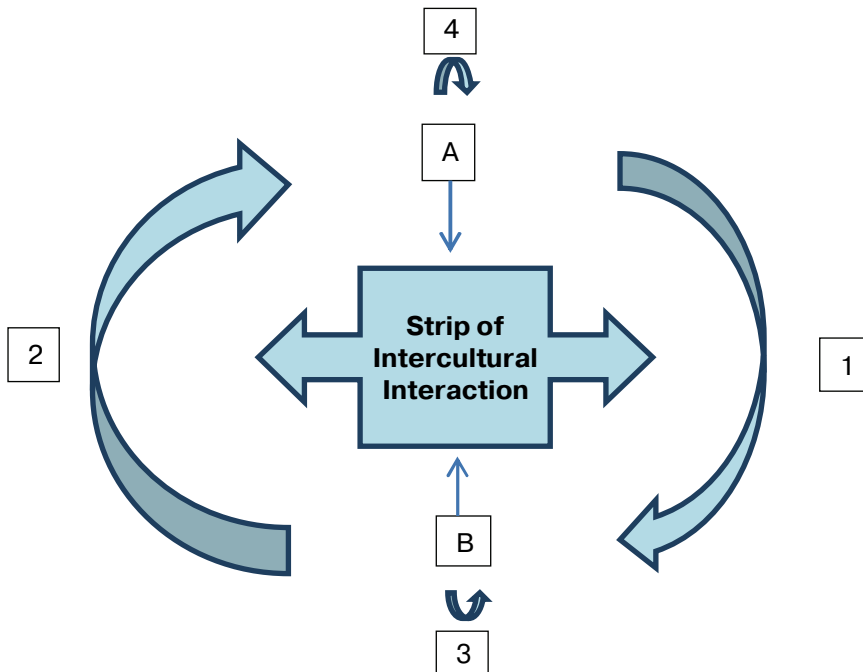
A way of conceptualizing this process can be understood with the concepts of coordination and coherence. In the above example, I was able to coordinate my social interaction with my Chinese interlocutor, but I did so with little coherence or shared meaning about what I and we were doing. This sort of dynamic, coordination without coherence, is behind some if not many intercultural situations which are sometimes cast as: “when in Rome do as the Romans do.” In such moments, one can go along by coordinating one's actions, but at the same time not quite understanding or knowing fully what one is doing. Through careful study of such interactions, one can elevate the degree of coherence in such acts and events, deepening the knowledge about the range of meanings being attached to such interaction.

In the brief example introduced above, the utterance, “have you eaten yet” [trans. From the Chinese, “Ni chi le ma”], made when greeting another, is, from a Chinese view, a well-known token of acknowledgment which is used today and was prominently

spoken most often during “Mao’s-China.” In its way, the saying is linked to historical conditions when people were concerned about food and whether family and friends literally had enough to eat. Active in such a saying is a feature of Chinese face-concerns (“mien tze”) where one wants to show care for another, with social duties or obligations being incurred in the process (e.g., see Chen, 1991). This snippet of Chinese social history may not be, and likely is not known or shared by non-Chinese interlocutors, and when not, its utterance as a “caring greeting” may go unrecognized as such. In fact, it may be heard alternately as an inappropriate or odd question for information — from the US view. The utterance, then, in the form of a question about one’s eating, is significantly different among participants as a form, with different meanings and symbolic significance being active from the view of these two traditions. While this example is relatively simple, others pertaining to decision-making, problem-solving, international conflict, inter-religious dialogue, and so on can occur similarly as different historically-based practices and cultural premises can be active — knowingly or not — at the same time.

So, how to organize studies which attend to such dynamics? The following is a diagram which seeks to introduce some central elements in such study of intercultural interactions.

Note first, the starting place in the middle of the diagram, a strip of actual intercultural interaction.



Basic Elements in the Study of Intercultural Interactions

- Key:
Central Box: Actual Intercultural Interaction
A, B: Cultural Views of the Interaction
1, 2: Intercultural Dynamics
3, 4: Reflexivity

Actual intercultural interaction: The central box refers to a real event of intercultural communication, a sequence of communicative acts that has happened. Analyses work best when they are based upon that social interaction and it has been transcribed in an exacting and detailed way. Various transcription systems are available for this sort of recording with several examples including inter-lingual dynamics appearing in the articles cited above. The point is to create a publicly consultable and accurate record of the event-for purposes of analyses -which carefully describes actually what was said, including nonverbal features of the event if that is possible. Some special kinds of analyses can utilize audio-visual recordings of events as primary data and this can work quite well. Earlier studies I have conducted of Russian and American intercultural interactions were based upon recordings of actual intercultural encounters (Carbaugh, 1993, 2005, pp. 55—81). Watching these together with Russian participants, and colleagues provided invaluable insights to the interactional dynamics under study.

What is not as helpful are loose paraphrases of the event, or distant, individual post hoc recollections, as these tend to slip into areas A and B of the diagram, which I will discuss next.

Cultural views of that interaction: Parts A and B of the diagram identify two different cultural perspectives about at least some part of the intercultural interaction under study. In our example above, we find the utterance, “have you eaten yet?” is hearable as a question from the view of everyday usage of English (A), but is hearable as a token of greeting from a Chinese view (B). Each, in turn, has its particular, and different meanings as such, rooted in historically-based cultural forms and routines of English and Chinese, respectively. A careful study of intercultural communication can bring each of these in to view in deep and revealing ways. Cultural propositions and premises can be formulated for each, a point we turn to below after examining the rest of the features of the diagrammed process.

Intercultural Dynamics: What impressions are created among participants? Parts 1 and 2 of the diagram identify how, if at all, each cultural reality positions the other. This can focus on impressions one creates about the other, for example, how the Chinese participant views the American’s comments (2), and vice versa (1). This can also focus on interaction details as each casts what the other is doing in particular ways, for example, the American wondered at one point, why is the Chinese participant asking that question? The American “wondering” might be apparent in nonverbal reactions or subsequent interactional details. The purpose here is to bring into view the cultural shaping of the interaction as it positions not only the view the participant has of herself and her actions (in the above paragraph focused on A and B), but also how this positions the other’s (this paragraph with 1 and 2).

Reflexivity: The above analyses can lead, via an understanding of different cultural bases of social interactions, to new or deeper insights about one’s own cultural preferences. One begins reflecting upon what one has said, and can start remarking differently upon it. In short, we can say more, more deeply about our sayings. This introduces reflexivity, with 3 and 4 in the diagram, as each cultural perspective about communication can learn something anew about itself. We have written in detail about

this aspect — discursive reflexivity — of intercultural communication (see Carbaugh and Hastings, 1992; Carbaugh, Nuciforo, Molina-Markham, and van Over, 2011). Adding a reflexive element to the study of intercultural communication (1) provides an explicit opportunity for developing theoretical insights, often because our theories hold residual and unreflective features of cultural views, and (2) offers the potential for practical advancement of intercultural dialogue, sometimes due to intercultural miscues being hidden from participants' views (A and B) of the interaction at hand. New insights, creative movement is made possible.

DISTINCT MODES OF ANALYSIS

The above diagram, if fully exploited, requires several distinct modes of analysis. Each is hidden in the above discussion but made explicit in this section. The point is to move systematically and rigorously through specific stages of analyses of intercultural communication.

Descriptive Analysis: Descriptive analyses provide convincing evidence in response to the question: what actually occurred? A recording and/or a transcription of an intercultural event provides evidence that the social interaction was not made-up or inaccurately recalled. Note that an event, as such, can be inspected by others so they can see it in as close to its original form as is possible.

I use the concept, “analysis”, here advisedly. I want to draw attention to the fact that a descriptive record is something produced through recording, inspection, writing or sometimes drawing. This process is itself an analytical one. One can discover, when consulting one's record of an intercultural interaction, that there is something actually there (from the view of A) that was missed (from the view of B). I have found this myself in my own recorded nonverbal cues and in others such as a significant word choice or “lip smack” or “brow movement” that I missed. Insights as these are important in the interaction from at least one cultural view and are easily missed from another. This can be a humbling realization which can lead in the best of cases to further reflexive insights, theoretically and practically, as discussed above.

Interpretive Analyses: Interpretive analyses provide culturally appropriate insights to the question: what does that interactional word or cue or act or event mean? At times, interpretive analyses supply meanings that are similar for all participants; at others, the meaning goes deep for some but is missed by others; also possible is the way the same act or word choice can go deeply and differently in different cultural directions. In the first study of Russian-American intercultural communication I conducted in the 1980s, I puzzled over Russian responses to questions about sexual practices as these were formulated by an American interviewer. While the descriptive record was extremely challenging to produce even with the audio-visual recordings I had, it was the eventual interpretive analysis of that interaction which, according to Russian and American readers of the report, provided quite satisfying insights (see Carbaugh, 1993, 2005). In other words, it is the combination of careful descriptive analyses, with interpretive analyses, that can create such vivid portraits of intercultural interactions.

Interpretive analyses seek to make explicit cultural knowledge that is typically taken-for-granted. Several layers of this type of analyses need to be mentioned. One

is that implicit and often unspoken knowledge is being made explicit. If one is not Russian, how does one know the Russian meta-cultural commentary related to “sex” — or any other matter — if it is not made explicit? Similarly, when a Finn speaks English and comments on Finnish “shyness,” how does one know the active Finnish meanings (i.e., of the Finnish “*ujo*”) unless one knows Finnish? Interpretive analyses make that sort of knowledge explicit. I must add that cultural members may be poor reporters of this knowledge, precisely because it “goes without saying”! So, the cultural analyst has demanding work to do relative to this task. In the end, all participants may benefit from making the implicit cultural knowledge explicit.

Several concepts are used for interpretive analyses in the research tradition I am reporting here. One is “cultural proposition” which an analyst formulates using key terms from the cultural vocabulary of a participant (such as Chinese, Finnish, Russian, US sayings); another is “cultural premise” which an analyst formulates to express a significant belief (that something exists), or a value (that something is preferred) that is relevant to the intercultural interaction being studied; also, and eventually, an analyst might formulate a “communication code”, a system of beliefs and values pertaining to participants and their communication practices. (For further explication of the conceptual and methodological approach see Carbaugh, 2007; Carbaugh and Boromisza-Habashi, 2015; Carbaugh and Cerulli, 2013; Philipsen, Coutu, and Cavarrubias, 2002).

Comparative, Cross-cultural Analyses: Comparative analyses respond to the question: In what ways is the social interactional achievement similar, and different, to participants? Specific analyses in response to this question can address (1) the nature of the communicative act and whether it is being done, for example, as a greeting or a request for information, (2) the sequence of acts, whether and how the sequence under study is a cultural form; (3) the style of the act and its relevance to the context; and (4) the meanings, the cultural significance and importance of the acts, event, or style. Comparative and cross-cultural analyses as these contribute to knowledge in two general ways, identifying what is culturally distinct to each communication system as well as what is common across them.

Critical Assessment: As intercultural communication occurs, it is possible that the interactional dynamics create advantages for some participants just as they create disadvantages for others. The question is raised: whose interests are being served and how so? This sort of question is responded to through a mode of critical analysis, seeking to make clear a practice of concern, its interpretive features, the ways it works to advantage some and not others. In the process, if an evaluation of the practice is warranted, the standard of judgment being used in order to make that evaluation is to be made explicit. This procedure has been discussed in detail elsewhere (Carbaugh, 1990) with ethnographic field reports of intercultural communication implementing such analyses (Carbaugh, 2005; Covarrubias, 2008; Witteborn, 2010).

GOALS AND INSIGHTS

The study of intercultural communication has largely appeared through statistical manipulations of aggregate scores across human populations. Another kind of study can complement those as it seeks to explore actual instances of intercultural interactions.

Explorations as these focus on this phenomenon as socially situated, culturally complex, and an interactional achievement. The goal of such study is to understand better what people actually do when they are engaged in intercultural interactions. A better understanding can be developed about communication acts, events, and styles, cultural views of each, as well as how meanings about each can go in different cultural directions. Advanced are better insights into the cultural features in these social interactions including the cultural integrity each may have relative to its particular form and meaning.

A robust theory and methodology is needed for such study. While sketched here, it has been helpful in producing studies which can be placed alongside others, offering insights about actual interactional dynamics as these penetrate cultural worlds. A forthcoming volume (e.g., see the chapter by Klyukanov and Leontovich, in press) of such studies from around the world demonstrates the heuristic value in such cross-cultural work, theoretically, and the promise it holds, practically, for enhancing the conduct among people in their actual intercultural encounters.

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МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ КОММУНИКАЦИЯ КАК ПРОДУКТ СИТУАТИВНОГО КОМПЛЕКСНОГО ВЗАИМОДЕЙСТВИЯ

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Сфера межкультурной коммуникации включает в себя как разнообразные продуктивные теоретические, так и методологические подходы. Некоторые исследования основаны на данных самооценки, общих тенденциях и/или изучении данных внутри национальных общностей и между ними. В данной статье основное внимание уделено разным видам эмпирических исследований, основанных на наблюдении реального межкультурного взаимодействия и его интерпретации с точки зрения участников. В начале статьи рассматривается процесс межкультурного общения как результат ситуативного столкновения культур. Далее представлены четкие и взаимодополняющие методы анализа для каждой стадии исследования. В конце работы определяются специфические цели и перспективы исследования.

Ключевые слова: межкультурная коммуникация, интерпретации, социокультурные интеракции.