WITTGENSTEIN'S LANGUAGE-GAME AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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"IDEAL LANGUAGE" AND "PRAGMATIC" VIEWS ON MEANING

Despite the frequent deployment of the expression "intercultural communication" in a wide range of scholarly writings, there has not been found a good way to capture its precise signification, being either vacuous or inscrutable. Most statements that seem to be offering its definition amount to no more than giving a circular explication. For example, the editors of the *Handbook of International and Intercultural Communication* speak of it in such a way: "Intercultural communication generally involves face-to-face *communication* between people from different national *cultures* (Gudykunst & Mody 2002:ix; my italics)." Here both the term "communication" and "culture" re-appear in the very sentence supposed to be an explanation of the expression "intercultural communication". Would it be possible to say anything substantial regarding the signification of intercultural communication without using the two key concepts of the term which themselves call for clarification? In this paper, I will examine the relevant conceptual contours surrounding the notion of intercultural communication, which has been presented in most cases in either explicit or implicit contrast with intracultural communication. First, I will sketch the difference between an "ideal language" view and a "pragmatic" view on meaning and the nature of language, providing the background for the up-coming elucidation and discussion. Then, drawing on the later Wittgenstein's notion of language-game, I will argue that there is no essential difference between intercultural and intracultural communication.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes:

> [W]e are so much accustomed to communication through language, in conversation, that it looks to us as if the whole point of communication lay in this: someone else grasps the sense of my words – which is something mental: he as it were takes it into his own mind. (Wittgenstein 2001: §363)

As Wittgenstein points out, human communication has been pervasively conceived as a

determinable process of meaning transference, wherein meanings are regarded as definite entities. I will call this, following the renowned linguistic theorist Roy Harris (Harris, 1981), the code model of communication. This approach to communication has been dominating a variety of elaborate theories of intercultural communication. For example, Samovar, Porter, and Stefani remark, "intercultural communication occurs when a member of one culture produces a message for consumption by a member of another culture (Samovar, Porter & Stefani 1998: 48)."   Similarly, S. Ting-Toomey describes intercultural communication as a process of "simultaneous encoding (i.e., the sender choosing the right words or nonverbal gestures to express his or her intentions) and decoding (i.e., the receiver translating the words or nonverbal cues into comprehensible meanings) of the exchanged messages (Ting-Toomey 1999: 21-22)."

However, the picture of communication presented as a process of message encoding and decoding becomes hardly convincing on a careful deliberation over some aspects of the mundane life of human beings. Just consider such things plainly lying before our eyes: one laughs, before getting conscious of any determinate inner awareness of happiness which one then wishes to convey to another person. One groans, and tends where one is hurt, before one conducts any fictitious process of encoding one's feeling painful into these activities. One speaks, before one, in a certain mysterious fashion, translates one's intentions and ideas into words, or has the whole sentence to be spoken present to the mind first.

Consider the example of making a gesture. Is one who makes a gesture always clear about his inner state and then chooses a gesture to express it? The answer is in the negative. In most cases, it seems that the gesture just comes over one, and only after the gesture has been made does one *sometimes* try to provide some explanations as to what is meant by the gesture. Thinking is not an incorporeal process which is hidden somewhere in the speaker's mind. What one thinks is always to be judged on the basis of what one says, one's tone of voice, and numerous other fine shades of nonverbal behaviour.

The code model of language depends on a belief in the possibility and importance of an ideal language, a notion which can be traced back to the origin of western philosophy. One can find it already in Plato and Aristotle's works. Aristotle wrote:

> Words spoken are symbols or signs of affections or impressions of the soul; written words are the signs of words spoken. As writing, so also is speech not the same for all races of men. But the mental affections themselves, of which these words are primarily signs, are the same for the whole of mankind, as are also the objects of which those affections are representations or likenesses,

images, copies. (Aristotle 1967: 115)

These statements exemplify a view that there exist a series of isomorphic relations between mind (thought), language, meaning, and the world. In the time of Leibniz and Descartes, the attempt at constructing an ideal language was a matter of great concern for many philosophers. Leibniz, who devoted a life time to such an enterprise, articulates his commitment in such words: "I inevitably stumbled onto this wonderful observation, namely, that one can devise a certain alphabet of human thoughts and that, through the combination of the letters of this alphabet and through the analysis of words produced from them, all things can both be discovered and judged (Leibniz 1989: 6-7)." Descartes expressed a similar conviction:

> I would dare to hope for a universal language very easy to learn, to speak, and to write. The greatest advantage of such a language would be the assistance it would give to men's judgment, representing matters so clearly that it would be almost impossible to go wrong. It would make peasants better Judges of the truth about the world than philosophers are now. (Descartes 1954, letter to Mersenne: November 20, 1629)

With the development of symbolic logic in the second half of the nineteenth century, the "ideal language" project was given a new stimulus through the works of Frege, Russell, and the early Wittgenstein. Frege offers the following comment on Leibniz's project:

> Leibniz also recognized – perhaps overestimated – the advantages of an adequate method of notation. His idea of a universal characteristic was too ambitious for the effort to realise it to go beyond the mere preparatory steps. But even if this high aim cannot be attained in one try, we still need not give up hope for a slow, stepwise approximation. (Frege 1879, v)

According to Frege, an ideal language has to meet the following requirements

It has to be objective, eliminating individual and poetic aspects.

It has to be exact. There can only be one denotation (reference, *Bedeutung*) and one designation (sense, *Sinn*) for each expression.

It has to be structured, i.e. compositional. It should be possible to "calculate" the denotation and designation of each expression from the denotation and designation of its constituting parts.

Each sentence has to be either true or false. (For the above points, see Frege 1892: 58n, 59, 63-4, 69-70)

In the early part of the twentieth century the ideal language approach was often criticized from a pragmatic perspective on language and meaning, by philosophers, linguists, and anthropologists. Peirce wrote,

> There is no difference in meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice… Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearing, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object. (Peirce 1965, CP 5.400, 5.402)

Volosinov remarks,

> Any utterance, no matter how weighty and complete in and of itself, is only a moment in the continuous process of verbal communication. Language acquires life and historically evolves precisely here, in concrete verbal communication, and not in the abstract linguistic system of language forms, nor in the individual psyche of speakers. (Volosinov 1973: 95)

Malinowski observes,

> Words which cross from one actor to another do not serve primarily to communicate thought: they connect work and correlate manual and bodily movements. Words are part of action and they are equivalents to actions. (Malinowski 1935, II: 52)

Wittgenstein's later views are characteristic of a pragmatic view of language. Language does not derive its significance from reporting information about an independent reality and conveying it from one person (encoding it) to another (decoding it). Rather, it is a social phenomenon, embedded in wider contexts of actions or lifeworld(s). Meaning, use, action, life cannot be separated for there to be any communication and language. The pragmatic approach to meaning and communication undermines the foundation of the ideal language project.

According to the ideal language approach or code model of communication, communication means "conveying information". On the pragmatic view, the content of speech can only be understood in terms of the action which the speech performs. Speech (and writing) are used to effect, produce, achieve, and mean things. As the context of an utterance cannot be described completely, the domain of discourse can never be fixed completely; similarly, there

is no "context-free" criterion for how to separate utterance and context. Some of the predominant ideas of the pragmatic views can be delineated in the following way:

1. The descriptive function of language has no special status. Phatic communion, idle conversation, and other forms of language use are of equal importance in communication. To a greater or lesser extent it can be said that *all* language functions (expressive, appellative, representational, phatic, poetic, metalingual) are present in *every* utterance.

2. There is not a principled distinction between literal and metaphorical language. Neither is there a principled distinction between descriptive and evaluative or emotive language.

3. Linguistic communicative interaction is meshed with non-linguistic communicative interaction.

4. Speech acts are full of ambiguities, malapropisms and hybridities, which yet do not obstruct communication in a principled way (Bakhtin 1981)

5. In the last analysis, scientific language should be considered in relation to "ordinary" language from which it rises.

6. Meanings are not theoretical objects. They have a certain identity in a temporal sense, but not essence. Meaning is holistic, hence normative. In this sense, there is no criterion of meanings apart from concrete interpretative practice. The term "meaning" can only be made sense of in terms of attentiveness to the fluency and effectiveness of dialogue, to the successful negotiation and attunement, smooth conversation (cf. Quine 1990: 47, 59).

7. The "force" which speech acts may have (including non-linguistic speech acts) is a power derived from the social institutions in which the utterance of the speech act occurs (cf. Bourdieu 1977, 1991). Hence, meaning is subject to the forces of symbolic power, imperialism, regimentation, and processes of adjustment of the periphery to the centre. This makes the actual negotiation of meanings the product of social, political, and ethical forces.

Contrary to the teachings of Frege, the early Husserl, and contemporary cognitive scientists adhering to the information-processing model of thought, the pragmatic view holds that "meanings" are not files of hard data in the head. There are not simplistic isomorphic relations between meaning, language, thought and world. One can only sensibly speak of meanings and understanding when considering them in relation to concrete communicative

situations. Communication, in the widest sense, is a process of dynamic interaction among situated speakers coordinating, invoking and making meaning and sense. Speakers interpret each other within multiple background concerns. There is not a stable core to these concerns. Some words may express our ideas better than others; and some metaphors may be more satisfying than others. That is an important part of the pragmatics of communicative interaction. Consequently, no single word, or combination of words has meaning in its own right, independent of a particular use. There is no absolute meaning relative to which we can measure our understanding. Understanding is tied to a local situation, a particular encounter. Instead of being stipulated by literal meanings conceived in an abstract way, it is only subject to constraints of specific situations.

LANGUAGE-GAME AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

In this part, I will appeal to as well as develop Wittgenstein's notion of language-game, and show the light it can throw on the alleged difference between intercultural and intracultural communication.

Using language, according to Wittgenstein, belongs to our human forms of life. Language may or may not be used in the human daily activities. Such language-involved activities as commanding, questioning, storytelling and chatting are, for Wittgenstein, "as much a part of our natural history" as such nonlinguistic activities as walking, eating, drinking and playing (Wittgenstein 2001: §27). Language-game [*Sprachspiel*] is a device Wittgenstein employs to help us obtain a perspicuous overview of language and communication. It is a technical term used to refer to countless activities in which language is used, such as "giving orders, and obeying them", "describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements", "reporting an event", "play-acting", etc. (Wittgenstein 2001, §23). The language-game with the builders is perhaps the most well known one Wittgenstein puts forward. He asks us to imagine the following primitive language:

> The language is meant to serve for communication between a builder A and
> an assistant B. A is building with building-stones: there are blocks, pillars,
> slabs and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A
> needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words
> "block", "pillar", "slab", "beam". A calls them out; – B brings the stone
> which he has learnt to bring at such-and-such a call. (Wittgenstein 2001, §2)

In this language-game, which is first and foremost an activity of building, there is no such

thing as meaning or signification as an object or a mental image referred to. The expression "This word signifies (means) this", as Wittgenstein argues, is used as a way to describe the uses of the words (Wittgenstein 2001, §10). Understanding simply rests on acting in "such-and-such" a way upon hearing a call. For example, to fetch a slab on hearing the call "Slab!". By introducing the concept of language-game, Wittgenstein aims to show that communication is not a matter of a mental act or meaning transference. Instead, we always have to examine it in relation to the actual activity conducted against a particular background. Furthermore, for Wittgenstein, language is not an enclosed entity with a clear boundary. It always keeps developing and transforming. Wittgenstein compares it to an ancient city, with "a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses." (Wittgenstein 2001, §18)

Now consider an extended version of Wittgenstein's language-game of builders. Suppose a foreigner joins the builders and learns what they are doing. He brings a block at the order of "Block!", a pillar at the order "Pillar!", and so on. He also learns to give orders by uttering "Block!", "Pillar!", etc. Probably in the beginning he might pronounce the words oddly, and so his helper has to ask him to say it again. But anyway, the building activity goes on. Is there any substantial reason to say that the language-game in which there is no foreigner participating is essentially different from the one which involves a foreigner? Both cases require a certain training, and hence mutual interaction, including attunement as well as contestation. From the fact that the foreigner has a different native language, or comes from a different culture, it does not follow that communication becomes qualitatively different. Both cases are activities in which human beings participate and cooperate with each other using a certain language. We can well take a further step and imagine that the foreigner brings some part of the vocabulary of his native language into the building activity. Hence, instead of "block", "pillar", "slab" and "beam", the language takes up the form "block", "*zhushi*", "slab" and "*tiaoshi*".[1] In this case, would the builders be speaking the same language or speaking different languages?

Originally language is *just used* in human communicative actions. And it is a long time after a language has been in use that the process of standardization sets in. Grammars are established, dictionaries compiled, ways of learning the written language made into stereotypes. All these standardizations may give one the misleading idea that languages are countable things clearly distinguished from each other, and that language and culture are isomorphic. This is far from being the case. One cannot afford to ignore the fact that people who use what

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[1] *zhushi* and *tiaoshi* are transliterations of the Chinese words for pillar and beam respectively.

is supposed to be the same language have quite different social customs and habits, and that people who speak different languages are quite similar in many respects.

In a word, it is wrong to take language, culture (and thought) as reified entities and thus accordingly draw a demarcation between intracultural and intercultural communication. As a matter of fact, the term intracultural communication is parasitic on the term intercultural communication to be used as its oppositional correlate. If one regards communication as concrete activities in which humans interact with and respond to each other, would something "essential" be left out that has to be added in order to say something about intercultural communication in addition to intracultural communication? Consider the language-game of the builders with different language background; to what extent will this extended language-game diverge from the "original" one?

The language-game of the builders might be considered as a kind of thought experiment of how people, either from the same culture or from different cultures communicate with each other. Real life encounters might be far more complicated. How complicated they are, is always subject to a particular empirical, concrete situation. But no matter how the complications of speaking very different languages or having grown up in very different environments may cause *particular* hurdles to intercultural communication, a basic example such as the intercultural builders' language-game proves that there is no *principled* difference between intracultural and intercultural communication. On the other hand, speaking the same language is undeniably no guarantee for getting oneself freed from coming across particular hurdles of "intracultural communication", which can be equally fraught with misunderstanding or conflict.

People who grow up in different political, geographical and social environments, use different languages, and adhere to different living habits are often said to have different cultures. These cultures tend to be conceived as homogeneous and static totalities enclosed on their own and isolated from each other. Consequently, an individual is seen as more or less determined in terms of ways of cognition, values, verbal and nonverbal behaviour, and so on, by the cultural community to which he is said to belong. These characterizations, however, are highly idealised. It is true that languages, customs, and habits can be very different, but there will always be a degree of similarity or analogy between them. Both differences and similarities are not absolute, but occur or should be seen in terms of concrete manifestations of certain aspects. Moreover, these differences and similarities are always open to more concrete determinations or substantial revisions. Therefore, it is misleading to think of them in terms of differences and similarities between hypostatized "cultures". In his article "Can We

Understand Ourselves", Peter Winch has pointed out the nonsense of the surmise that cultures can be distinguished from each other.

> It is in any case misleading to distinguish in a wholesale way between 'our own' and 'alien' cultures; parts of 'our' culture may be quite alien to one of 'us'; indeed some parts of it may be more alien than cultural manifestations which are geographically or historically remote. (Winch 1997, 198)

It is true that human beings grow up in a particular society, but it is not the case that they are mere puppets programmed in conformity with a certain cultural code, over which they have no control. Individuals are exposed in a huge variety of ways to different aspects of what is supposed to be "the same culture". And they respond to occasions of communication in very different ways. Fundamentally, communication is a matter of face-to-face meeting of humans with flesh and blood, with actions, reactions and judgments of various sorts. It is not a meeting of effigies or incarnations of "different" cultures.

The false presupposition that cultures are *essentially* differentiated from one another finds one of its strongest supports in the idea that language is constitutive of culture. That is to say that language shapes and informs the thought, worldview, or conceptual scheme of the people using the very language. This is what is called linguistic idealism in the field of philosophy, or, in the area of linguistic anthropology, closely associated with the Sapir-Whorf thesis. However, this is at bottom a very deterministic view of language. One consequence of this view is the widely prevailing idea that there is a *principled* difference between speaking a native language and speaking a non-native language.

In his critique directed at the Augustinian picture of language in the opening passages of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein points out that Augustine overlooks the role of training in language acquisition. Augustine presupposes the existence of a language of thought whereby the child is already able to think before being able to speak. However, in the early stages of a child's acquiring a language what plays the prominent role is training. At that stage there is not yet room for guessing the meaning of an utterance (See Wittgenstein 2001, §5, §27). This kind of "guessing" may be typical for learning a second language. But here lies an important source of confusion. Although presupposing a language of thought makes learning and using a second language more similar to learning and using a native language (since the language of thought is the only "native" language), it does not follow that in the absence of a language of thought there is a fundamental difference between learning or using a second language and learning or using a native language. In the first place, one can

hardly make a clear-cut distinction between the learning processes of a native and a non-native language. It is not the case that all usages of a native language are taught single-handedly by training, or by taking part in the forms of life, so to speak, while in contrast all usages of a second-language are acquired by "theoretically motivated" guessing. It is quite obvious that one learns different aspects of a native language in a variety of ways: ostensive teaching, guessing, composing, and so on. On the other hand, a second-language is frequently taught by means of ostensive teaching, initiating one into a life form. This is the feature typical of native language teaching. In the second place, it is far from convincing to assume an essential difference between the relation of a speaker towards his native language and that of a speaker towards a second language. Wittgenstein detects this kind of problem in the following passage:

> Just as Germanisms creep into the speech of a German who speaks English well although he does not first construct the German expression and then translate it into English; just as this makes him speak English *as if he were translating* 'unconsciously' from the German – so we often think as if our thinking were founded on a thought-schema: as if we were translating from a more primitive mode of thought into ours. (Wittgenstein 2001, §597; italics original)

When a German who has a good command of English speaks the second language, sometimes there might be features of his own native language reflected in his speaking: pronunciation, the order of words, etc. This may generate the illusion that he was unconsciously translating German sentences into English one. Granted that sometimes a German expression occurs to him first and then he tries to find out the English correlate, which might well happen when he is unsure about the English, it would be totally wrong to attribute a special mental translating process to him involving two languages. There are not such fictional mental processes, just as one does not simply translate one's thought into one's native language.

A further supposition regarding the special status of a native language is that the native speaker has a unique feeling of attachment towards his language. This might well be the case for some people, but this feeling, if there is one, is always attributed on account of concrete manifestations. Besides, it is *not* necessarily one's native language towards which people may show attachment. Such examples as the way in which one cares for one's diction, the way in which one treats a piece of calligraphy hanging on the wall, manifest one's attitudes

towards *a* language. Empirically speaking, it is not unusual to see people having special feeling towards a non-native language. Theoretically speaking, there is no reason to reify such feelings and then use this reified entity as a man-made obstacle to distance intercultural communication from intracultural communication.

Whatever the case might be in terms of complexity of concrete situations, successful communication involves a certain sense of empathy. Empathy is not just a matter of projecting one's own state of mind into the other person, or being capable of feeling what he other person feels. It centers upon a readiness to *accept* the other person as one's fellow being, to *participate* in the feelings and volitions of the other human being. Not merely in the sense of "to feel with" or "to feel like", empathy should be taken in the sense of "to live with".   This sense of empathy is well conveyed in the following remark by Wittgenstein: "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul (Wittgenstein 2001, p.152; italics original)." On this remark, Peter Winch has an illuminating comment:

> The situation is not that I first recognize my common humanity with others
> and that this recognition then provides the intellectual justification for my
> response to certain modalities in my dealings with them. On the contrary it is
> a recognition which is itself a function of those responses. (Winch 1987: 165)

For human communication to happen, there is a primordial rapport between one another as fellow human beings. This rapport is not an abstract mental behaviour of judgment whereby one consciously recognizes the other person's humanity. To the contrary, the rapport, or empathy, is a kind of comportment towards each other in engaging in a certain activity. Only on the basis of these communal activities do human beings obtain a higher level of judgement concerning one another's character, intentions, habits, and preferences. But the empathetic rapport always underlies the very initial seeing or hearing of one another.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, communication has always to be considered in terms of interpersonal action and reaction. It cannot be identified with processes of mechanistic encoding and decoding of mental states. To draw an unsurpassable boundary line between intercultural and intracultural communication in terms of difference of language being spoken and difference of culture conceived as enclosed from within proves to be a betrayal of what actually happens in

human daily interactions. It is groundless to speak of an essential difference between communication which involves the same language, and communication which concerns people who have lived geographically far apart and hence might *prima facie* have different customs and habits. Both intercultural and intracultural communication happen at a certain location where there is an encounter of humans in a particular environment. Both involve clusters of language-games and aspects of culture with varying degrees of similarity and difference. Both depend on mutual attunements, contestations and negotiations. It is not the case either theoretically or empirically that intracultural communication is necessarily more opaque than intercultural communication. The assumption of an essential difference between the two easily lends itself to conceptualizations and stipulations in which fictional barriers between groups of people allowed a fundamental role to play. These originally fictional barriers can find substantiation in the real life and thus bring along harmful consequences in the reality of the human social and political life.

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