

Tacit Knowledge in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

In contemporary discourse on intercultural communication and globalization the prevailing topos claims that knowledge about a society, its history, belief systems and specific forms of action are preconditions of successful communication across cultural borders. However, this kind of knowledge is explicit knowledge that can be articulated in language and propositions. Most of the concepts of intercultural training rest thus upon this explicit knowledge. In contrast, the thesis of the paper claims that it is not explicit but implicit knowledge, so called “tacit knowledge”, that has crucial pragmatic relevance in the process of intercultural communication. Participation in interaction and communication is conditioned by embodied knowledge and competencies. The ability to apply tacit criteria in order to assess the appropriateness of communications and performative actions is indispensable for the success of intercultural communication. The so called “praxeological” approaches in social theory and communication studies can offer substantial concepts which are related to empirical facts and which can meet requirements of intercultural training.

Keywords: intercultural communication, communication theory, intercultural competence, intercultural training

Introduction

Could someone from China answer the question from someone from Europe: “Do you know what it is like to be Chinese?” Or vice-versa, the question to a European from a Chinese person as to whether he or she knows what it is like to be European? You know the answer already; it is definitely: no. Even when those asked this question are very educated, perhaps even philosophers or professors at world-renowned universities who know almost all the facts about their culture and its history, the question renders them speechless. There are in fact significant differences among cultures with respect to willingness to engage in a conversation about the features of one’s own culture. In many cultures, a foreigner’s request to answer such a question might be regarded as tactless, or even as arrogant, because a comparison or denigration might be implied. In other parts of the world, on the other hand, such a question might be used as an opportunity to provide the conversation partner with extensive descriptions and interpretations of one’s own form of life, because its thematization does not have a negative connotation in this context. Despite these differences, however, there remains the fundamental problem that anyone who might want to say something about his or her own cultural form of life encounters basic limits of explication in the process. We are not just bumping up against the so-called “blind spot” of observation or the missing view from outside that can sometimes be very helpful. It is

much more the confrontation with our implicit knowledge that we cannot articulate. We live as Europeans and Chinese, yet we don't "know" how, we simply do it. In what follows, I want to talk about this apparent paradox and thereby analyze a problem of intercultural communication at the same time.

The question of how it is possible to understand the meaningful connections of foreign cultural forms of life and to participate in these forms of life is one of the central questions of research on intercultural communication. Its answer is tied to a number of thoroughly problematic assumptions. One of the most widespread convictions across all cultural borders consists in the notion that one has to know something about another culture in order to understand its members and to be active oneself within this culture. One can hardly contradict this. And yet this answer is not satisfying because we can all imagine, for instance, that reading a sociological book about a foreign society will hardly enable us to participate in this society's cultural practices. Even the acquisition of the language, which facilitates such participation, by no means ensures the success of communication. In order to show which role is accorded to tacit knowledge in intercultural communication, I would like to proceed in three steps. Following a first clarification of the concept of implicit knowledge, I would like to investigate in a second step how to determine the relationship between implicit and explicit knowledge and language. In a third and final part, I would like then to show the consequences of this analysis for the praxis of intercultural communication and the acquisition of intercultural competence.

What Should be Understood as Implicit Knowledge?

Interest in the problem of implicit knowledge has greatly increased within the contemporary discussion (Schatzki, 1996, 2002; Schatzki et al., 2001; Turner, 1995). The background to this interest is an increasing skepticism regarding Cartesian and mentalist positions within the social sciences. These approaches presume that the human being is above all a rationally-acting being, which thinks and reflects before it acts and orients itself around general principles of reason based on the ability to speak and learn. Tied to this position is the conviction that there is a very close relationship between action and reflective, linguistically graspable knowledge. Whenever communication and action are successful, it is because of rational knowledge, which the agents can provide information about and which can be substantiated. However, this view has been challenged for good reasons, primarily by exponents of American pragmatism, in particular by Dewey (1922, 1929) and Mead (1934), but also by German-language philosophers such as Heidegger (1927) and Wittgenstein (1969, 1989); by British thinkers such as Ryle (1949) and Winch (1958), or French thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty (1962) or Bourdieu (1977, 1990). Common to these approaches is a critique of the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, and hence of the primacy of reflective consciousness. Agents are namely in the position to do something that they cannot precisely describe or explain, something that they do not even know that they know. Heidegger describes it as a unique knowledge tied to activity: "[...] the closest kind of association is not mere perceptual cognition, but, rather, a handling, using, and taking care of things which has its own kind of 'knowledge'" (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 68). Many years later, Michael Polanyi formulated this very simply in his book *Tacit Knowledge* from 1966: "We know more than we can tell." That which is constitutive for a common praxis is

not a knowledge of facts, but a non-verbalizable sense for the appropriateness of actions, or as Bourdieu termed it, the “sense for the game.” The metaphor of the game is already familiar to us from Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of language, in which he shows how language games and certain forms of life are so entangled with one another that the one cannot be understood without the other. One does not acquire elementary practices through cognition in the sense of grasping explanations, but through participation and rehearsal. This is as much the case for the acquisition of a mother-tongue as it is for the acquisition of the ability to use chopsticks that is so difficult for a European visiting China.

Accession into a social praxis thus remains continually bound to an embodied experience (Dreyfus, 1980; Taylor, 1989). Practical action and the coordination of this action in the process of communication are also techniques of the body and embodiment. Balancing on a bicycle, swimming or playing tennis, making music, tasting a sauce—they are all techniques of the body and the corresponding competencies are all forms of incorporated knowledge. Such knowledge is above all not verbalizable as recipes. It is in this sense less a knowledge as it is an activity; it is a “transdiscursive” proficiency and a physically incorporated competence. Thus the term “knowledge” is not particularly felicitous. In order to accommodate this aspect, the concept of understanding has to be transformed and liberated from its primarily mentalist character. “Understanding” in this sense no longer appears as a contemplative or reflecting insight into the connections between facts or the motives of persons, but as a practical ability to participate in common actions. According to Heidegger (1927/1996):

World is always already predisclosed for circumspect heedfulness together with the accessibility of innerworldly beings at hand. [...] being-in-the-world signifies the unthematic, circumspect absorption in the references constitutive for the handiness of the totality of useful things. Taking care of things always already occurs on the basis of a familiarity with the world. (p. 76)

Structure, connectability, and comprehensibility of social action are not the product of cognitively manifest convictions, the complementarity of interests and values, or of a discursively attained consensus over validity claims, but primarily of those routines that are performed in and through implicit knowledge: “Things at hand are always already understood in terms of a totality of relevance. This totality of relevance need not to be explicitly grasped by a thematic interpretation” (Heidegger, 1927/1996, p. 150). This “totality of relevance” is hence a practical proficiency that Ryle (1949) calls a “knowing how,” and which he regards as underlying all “knowing that”.

Two additional features of implicit knowledge must be mentioned, for these characteristics have consequences for the problem of intercultural competence. Implicit knowledge is not an individual knowledge, but a collectively shared social background knowledge. We acquire it through participation in a social praxis in our primary process of socialization through imitation, accession, rehearsal, and training, as Wittgenstein (1989) says, in the sense of drilling. Through this participation in the language games of a life form, and that is the second feature, an implicit norm is always communicated, namely the correct participation that is distinguished from an incorrect participation: one does it this way and not another. Actions’ accessibility

for further action ultimately depends upon this correct participation. We encounter here the normative character of implicit knowledge, which cannot be transformed into explicit norms or articulations of rules and which should not be confused with them (for example, with a law or a prescription). In his path-breaking book *Making it Explicit*, Robert Brandom (1994) argues in line with Wittgenstein that “[i]t must be possible to make sense of a notion of norms implicit in practice [...] without appeal to any explicit rules or capacities on the part of those participants to understand and apply such rules” (p. 26). It is due to this normativity that implicit knowledge is even a knowledge and not merely an arbitrary ability or individual talent. Now we come to my next point, to the relationship, namely, between implicit and explicit knowledge and language.

On the Relationship between Implicit and Explicit Knowledge and Language Use

A practical, incorporated proficiency lies at the root of all explicit knowledge. Before I adhere to an explicitly formulated directive, I have to have already understood it in the first place and judged its situative appropriateness. In contrast, explicit knowledge is linguistically constituted and communicable. As a “knowing that,” explicit knowledge that something is the case thus has a propositional structure: I know that London has more inhabitants than Glasgow, I know that Beijing is the capital of China and not of Switzerland, and so forth. Such sentences let themselves be translated relatively unproblematically into other languages which have a word for capital. The ability to participate in communication through the use of language is however not itself established by such an explicit knowledge. Linguistic competence — at least not the acquisition of the first language — can not be acquired through the learning and observing of explicit rules, for this would already presuppose linguistic competence. Little children acquire their mother tongue, as is well known, not by participating in grammar lessons or by receiving explanations for the meaning of linguistic signs in a meta-pragmatic and meta-semantic discourse, but in practical communication and playing around with persons and things through imitation and rehearsal. Within the pragmatic context, language merges completely with action. Here we do not have consciousness of the delineated meaning of single words or signs. Knowing what a symbolic utterance means does not entail that one has studied and subsequently has a dictionary “in one’s head” (that would be a mentalist misunderstanding), but that one can more or less safely assess the context-specific effects of an utterance on a communication partner. Only with the distance of observation and reflection can we say: this word or that sentence means this or that. But then we find ourselves already no longer on the primary level of frictionless coordination of action, but already in a secondary, quasi-derivative mode of action in which we render something explicit. Such explication necessarily abstracts from the indexical relations of the concrete situation. Meta-pragmatic or meta-semantic discourses, in which we clarify forms of use and meanings, are examples of such linguistic explication (Loenhoff, 2010; Silverstein, 2003). A pragmatic understanding of language and knowledge is based, in contrast, on the conviction that knowledge does not explain a proficiency, but conversely that an already practical proficiency underlies all knowledge. Dictionaries and grammar are certainly very helpful when learning a foreign language, but the question of what a linguistic utterance means, what resonance it has, the extent of its semantic reach, which connotative cross-references it produces and the criteria of its appropriateness, cannot be found

in the dictionary. Here the background of comprehension enters into the picture that is evoked by the concept of implicit knowledge. This position, described by Brandom (2002, p. 49) as a “fundamentally *normative* pragmatism,” claims that:

Norms explicit as rules presuppose norms implicit in practices because a rule specifying how something is correctly done (how a word ought to be used, how a piano ought to be tuned) must be applied to particular circumstances, and applying a rule in particular circumstances is itself essentially something that can be done correctly or incorrectly. [...] If the regulist understanding of all norms as rules is right, then applications of a rule should themselves be understood as correct insofar as they accord with some further rule. [...] To conceive these practical proprieties of applications as themselves rule-governed is to embark on a regress. (Brandom, 1994, p. 20)

Certainties shared with others supply the background for explicit acts of agreement about something, for instance, about our convictions or our specialized knowledge. Instructional manuals, educational books, linguistic or pictorial representations can not replace the implicit criteria for the appropriateness of actions. Such certainties and tacit agreements are the unthematized resources of social cooperation, which can by all means transform into themes, most certainly in those moments when processes of normal action are interrupted. In intercultural communication, we often encounter the opposite of such shared certainties. This often takes the form of doubt as to whether one’s own manner of action is appropriate within another culture and one has correctly interpreted the unfamiliar manner of action. Or it is the certainties which are not readily available but are commonly implied that interrupt communication and cooperation. Vis-à-vis uninvolved observation and the associated “spectator theory of knowledge” (Dewey, 1929, p. 23), a pragmatic perspective offers the insight that it is the intuitive knowledge of practical consequences and presuppositions of speaking and acting, as well as the connected implicit knowledge of the adequacy of this acting and experiencing, that guarantees agents acting within their own cultural form of life a chance to participate in this world, provides them with the feeling of normality in this world, and ensures familiarity with everyday affairs in this world. It is a practical certainty enacted in and through those forms of use that are lacking explicit features and explicit justifications. Now I have arrived at my last point.

Consequences for the Praxis of Intercultural Communication and the Acquisition of Intercultural Competence

I argued at the beginning that one can neither as a Chinese nor a European person say what it is like to be a Chinese or a European person. We only come to think about this question once we are confronted with a form of cultural life that is unfamiliar to us and notice that the commonplaces of everyday life have become questionable. Intercultural competence consists not only in the ability to deal with this missing certainty in an unperturbed, productive, and humorous way, but also in achieving distance to one’s own preconceptions. Only then is one open to the enhancement of experience. Without such reflexive ability, knowledge of a foreign language and geography are of relatively little use. If we understand culture as the

background of common meanings, which are interwoven with a common praxis, then it should be clear that a large part of culturally-specific everyday knowledge is not attainable as explicit knowledge. This goes against mentalist and cognitivist positions advanced widely in the field of anthropology. Representing a methodological approach strongly shaped by the American variant of structuralism, for instance, Goodenough claims that “culture is not a material phenomenon: it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. [...] It is the form of things that people have in mind” (1964, p. 167). Keesing formulates this even more radically in the 1970s, as research on intercultural communication was starting to establish itself in the USA: cultures “are shaped and constrained by how individuals learn, think, and understand – hence by structures of mind and brain” (1976, p. 141). We have in contrast seen how the feeling of obviousness and normality is produced not by explicit but by implicit knowledge, or proficiency, which can not be transformed into sentences with propositional content. Much of the research into intercultural communication and forms of intercultural training claim to enable uninterrupted cooperation across cultural borders (Landis & Bennett, 2004). This fundamental claim should not be criticized. What should be criticized, however, is the suggestion that this can occur primarily through the production of explicit knowledge in educational manuals, in which “do’s and don’ts”, that is to say, which rules are to be followed within another form of cultural life, can be read. This might work for very limited sectors of a specific praxis, yet for a theoretically based approach, which seeks to understand processes of translation and transformation, it is insufficient. To be sure, the conventions of a situation that are to be learned by intercultural training do to a certain extent allow themselves to be rendered explicit. This, however, is not the case for the definition of the situation itself that is antecedent to the rules posited as valid. The ability to frame communication and action as the identification of the context, in which things explicitly known can be applied, is the stuff of implicit knowledge.

Conclusion

The primary experience of intercultural communication is the experience of the incomprehensible. Only through mutual misunderstanding in a concrete encounter can cultural difference be experienced in the first place. We can call this a “performative understanding of incomprehensibility”. The need for explanations, and hence for explications, emerges only when established patterns of problem solving fail. Thus, it is the practical experience of failure that stimulates the verbalization and transformation of implicit experience as and into explicit knowledge. If the productive dimension of misunderstanding that is antecedent to such explications seemingly gets erased by stereotypical explanations, then the openness to precisely these experiences might get lost. In other words: the mediation of explicit knowledge can in practice obstruct these experiences and the related adventure of semantic uncertainty. In contrast, the insight into the functions of implicit fundamentals of processes of communication theoretically introduces the possibility of explaining the actual transfer of culture and the more or less slow self-transformation of patterns of interpretation by experiences of contrast. The evaluation of intercultural training programs shows very clearly that those concepts which primarily rely on the communication of explicit knowledge of values and convictions are of relatively little use for the participants (Mendenhall et al., 2004; Morris & Robie, 2001).

They often offer no more than stereotypical descriptions that disseminate illusory certainties. Attentiveness to the structure and function of implicit knowledge can function here as an antidote to the assertion of unproblematic participation in a foreign cultural form of life.

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