

# Intercultural communication : self-consciousness, translation and mutual understanding

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION.  
SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS,  
TRANSLATION AND MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING.

Guest Editors' Introduction

In some respects a theory of intercultural communication would have to be concerned first of all with practical cases of mutual misunderstanding rather than with the possibilities of true reciprocal ideal understanding. A particularly intricate example can illustrate this. A venerable Mullah from Teheran once complained about having been badly offended by a Western General who had been eating his meal using his left hand. To express his loathing he wagged his naked left foot sole against him. Of course the general had not the slightest idea that his eating habits were distasteful to the Mullah. Even less was he aware of the fact that within this particular cultural context the wagging of a naked foot sole was an expression of deep contempt. The Mullah on the other hand was completely unaware that both his repulsion with regard to the guest's eating habits as well as his strong gesture of disapproval were utterly wasted on the General.

A forceful comment upon this bizarre misunderstanding can be found in Moulakis' introductory essay. He points out that intercultural communication is exposed to a twofold ambiguity resulting from the compounding of two highly ambiguous terms, that of "culture" and that of "communication" which results in a basic asymmetry between theory and practice, one being over – and the other undertheorized. As a matter of fact intercultural communication is less about cognition than about mutual recognition, it is, in short, a practice of friendship, the answer to the question, how can people from radically different cultures still become friends?

The following two papers deal with the general relevance of intercultural communication within specific contexts of research. Hess-Lüttich's contribution reconstructs the impact intercultural communication has

had on the field of German studies. His analysis ranges from institutional consequences – the founding of new journals, the coming into being of new scholarly associations – to literary history, literature, theatre and media communication, as well as to a short description of migration discourse in film.

Ljungberg takes a well-known scene from Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* – the discovery of a foreign footprint by the hero – as a starting point for a discussion of the construction of otherness as an act of intercultural communication. In her analysis she considers four semiotic models of intercultural exchange: the cultural model proposed by the Tartu school as Lotman has developed it, Bakhtin's dialogic view of communication, the constructivist approach as it has been put forward by Maturana and Varela and the theory of interpretation offered by the semiotics of C. S. Peirce.

The following three papers concentrate on the relevance of intercultural communication for translation theory and translational practice.

Schäffner retraces the development of translation studies and intercultural communication studies in recent years focussing on similarities and differences in the use of some key concepts. As it turns out, the two disciplines share a series of concerns and assumptions but operate with a different concept of communication and intercultural communicative competence. Intercultural communication studies tries to delineate natural communication for independent acting, whereas translation studies is interested in a very specific kind of professionally enabled communication.

Guldin's article explores some aspects of the theoretical convergence of translation studies and intercultural studies by reconstructing the use of the term "culture" within translation studies and use of the concept of "translation" within cultural studies. This twofold development has led to a redefinition of the meaning of translation that threatens to bereave it of its operability as the theoretical reflection has not been able to keep pace with the rapid growth of the different functions of the term over the last years. The paper, however, focuses on the theoretically challenging aspects of the interdisciplinary approach resulting from this convergence.

In the last contribution Mühleisen explores the way address forms have been dealt with in cross-cultural communication especially in film translation. Address forms and their meaning are highly culture-specific, which causes a series of problems for the transfer of meaning in translation. This is especially true for audio-visual media. The central part of the paper is dedicated to a close analysis of a specific example.

A theme that runs through all the articles, to greater or lesser degree, is the relationship between intercultural communication and translation. They are heuristically interrelated and in practice frequently interwoven, but their relation is more complex than that of genus and species. The first does not simply encompass the other nor is the latter, conversely, one an exemplar or paradigm of the first. They are in fact both pragmatically situated practices that evoke and inform each other.

This complex relationship, that does not allow for easy taxonomy, points to a second theme present in the papers collected here and that is that neither intercultural communication nor translation are neutral techniques, operations of a discrete self-contained subject on a given object, but rather processes that deeply affect the operating subject itself. They both involve a reflective motion that is co-formative of the actors that cannot be thought away from an objectifiable result or purpose.

