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SEARCHING FOR UNDERSTANDING IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Tatiana Larina
(Rusija / Rosja)

In our globalized and multicultural world, the problem of understanding is crucial. It is the concern not only of politicians, sociologists, and psychologists, but also a key subject of linguists, translators, language and culture teachers, and specialists of other fields sensitive to cross-cultural issues. This was once again demonstrated at the international conference *Cross-cultural Pragmatics at a Crossroads III*, held from 26–28 June 2013 at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK.

The conference itself represented a model of our multicultural world, as its participants came from different parts of Europe, Asia, America, Africa, and Australia. The theme of this meeting tapped into two spheres of research in intercultural communication: research in its value and contribution to the wider society, and research in its investigation of factors that impede or promote communication, understanding, and respect for otherness.

Professor Istvan Kecskes from the State University of New York, Albany, USA, delivered the opening plenary speech, "Intercultural impoliteness in the socio-cognitive paradigm," giving an impetus to the conference. Showing how some of the major tenets of impoliteness theories work in situations in which all or some of the speakers are communicating in non-native languages, he examined context-dependency in intercultural communication, where interlocutors cannot always rely on the existence of a large common ground or conventionalized context, but need to co-construct most of it in the communicative process. The lack of shared background, he argued, may restrict the interpretation process to the propositional content of an utterance, possibly increasing the context-creating power of that utterance. In intercultural communication, the most salient interpretation for non-native speakers is usually the propositional meaning of an utterance (Kecskes 2007). So interpretation generally depends on what the utterance says, rather than on what it actually communicates. Professor Kecskes provided many interesting examples showing that, when interlocutors focus on propositional meaning, they can sometimes be unaware of impoliteness, especially when it is conveyed implicitly or through paralinguistic means.

Over the three days of the conference, more than 100 presentations were made.

They were devoted to various aspects of pragmatics and communication, including pragmatic variation, speech act analyses, pragmatic strategies, etc. The papers devoted to comparative studies of politeness in different languages (English, Arabic, Russian, Dutch, Indonesian, French, Japanese, and others) once again showed that despite its universal character, politeness is viewed and conceptualized in different ways in accordance with the type of culture and social organization of a society, its value system, etc.

A significant number of papers concerned problems of translation, including the plenary talks by Professor Mona Baker (Centre for Translation and Intercultural Studies, University of Manchester, UK) on "Translation, representation, and narrative performance," Minako O'Hagan (Dublin City University, Ireland) on "Modern digital entertainment as a locus of intercultural communication: Gamer response to translated games," and Ana Rojo (University of Murcia, Spain) on "The impact of translation on the empirical scale: When translation makes a difference in cognitive processing."

Special attention was given by the conference participants to problems of second language teaching and cultural education, such as pragmatic failures, meaning transfer, communicative intercultural competence, cultural awareness, etc.

There were six parallel sessions. I will concentrate on the panel called "Communicative styles across borders and disciplines: Europe and beyond," in which I participated. The panel was organized by the European Network for Intercultural Education Activities (ENIEDA)—a collaborative academic network exploring innovative initiatives that promote the values of plurilingualism, democratic citizenship and intercultural cooperation—and convened by vice-president Dr. Svetlana Kurteš (University of Portsmouth, UK). It explored a range of issues within the scope of the discourse of verbal interaction across disciplines, languages, and cultures. It looked into the specifics of how cultural idiosyncracies impact the values, norms, and practices of a society, its specific subcategorisation of reality, and, ultimately, its communicative styles. On the whole there were nine presentations in this panel, of which mine was the first.

My talk, "Culture-specific communicative styles as a framework for interpreting linguistic and cultural idiosyncracies," began by defining *communicative ethnostyle*, and suggested parameters of its description on the basis of the ideas of Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1990). Taking British English and Russian communicative cultures as an example, I elaborated further on this theoretical model and showed that misunderstandings in intercultural communication stem from the fact that people not only speak different languages, but use them in different ways on the basis of their cultural values and politeness strategies—which form their culture-specific communicative styles. Admitting the relative nature of ethnostyles, I pointed out some dominant stylistic features of Russian and British communication, revealed through a large-scale comparative study. I argued that the description of culture-specific communicative styles is an important theoretical field, which has a vast didactic application and should be the focus of further cross-cultural studies.

Dr. Beata Anna Gallaher (University of Colorado, USA) elaborated on this idea in her online presentation, "Communica-

tive styles of American and Russian native speakers and American L2 learners of Russian based on their complaints." She reported on the results of her empirical study of the speech act of complaint as performed by American speakers, Russian native speakers, and American L2 learners of Russian studying abroad. The data showed that speakers across cultures negotiated problems differently due both to social factors and cultural norms, and their linguistic behaviors revealed features of politeness in both cultures. Similarly to other studies (Larina 2009, Shardakova 2009), the findings indicated significant differences in the communicative styles of American and Russian speakers, and possible difficulties for L2 learners.

Dr. Zohreh Eslami (Texas A&M University, USA) focused on online communication and students' pragmatic choices in English. Based on the fact that, when writing emails, students have to make pragmalinguistic and socio-pragmatic choices in different speech acts with respect to the level of formality and relationship between the interlocutors (Baron 1998, 2000; Kling 1996), she investigated the level of formality in the openings and closings of the emails sent by native and non-native English-speaking students to faculty members of a US-based university. Using Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimension of power distance (PD), she distinguished between relatively high- and relatively low-PD cultures.

Dr. Monika Kopytowska (University of Łódź, Poland), in her paper on "Identity and ideology in the newsroom: Journalistic discourse in Kenya," explored the dynamics and cultural conditioning of mass-mediated communication, as reflected in news discourse—understood both as a product and a process. Her study adopted an eclectic multi-dimensional approach combining a pragmatic perspective on language with insights from cognitive critical discourse analysis and media studies, and took the media-scene in Kenya as an example (Grinker 2010, Hamelink 2011, Kalyango 2010, Kasoma 1996).

The presentation by Dr. Neelakshi Suryanarayan (Delhi University, India), "Requesting in Indian English: A study of communicative strategies used by university students," was a vivid illustration of the impact of culture on communicative styles. Comparing requesting in Indian English, or Hinglish, with British English, she looked into the level of directness that the two communicative styles (British and Indian) tend to exhibit (Larina and Suryanarayan 2013), and showed that even when people speak the same language, they use different communicative strategies depending on their cultural traditions and values and their understanding of politeness.

Professor Jesús Romero-Trillo (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain), in his paper on "A cross-cultural analysis of multilingual speakers in CLAN (Corpus of Language and Nature)," presented some results of a large-scale international project that analyses emotional and linguistic reactions to natural landscapes (Romero-Trillo and Espigares 2012). He described the cross-cultural features that characterize the preference selection of landscapes by speakers from different backgrounds in order to ascertain the patterns that link culture, language, and the choice of landscapes.

Dr. Svetlana Kurteš (University of Portsmouth, UK) devoted her paper to an investigation of the emerging patterns of forms of address in Eastern European post-Communist societies, focusing primarily on

selected instances of public communication and media language in Serbia. Her corpus-based pilot study suggested that although the demise of the Communist ideology, as the dominant socio-political paradigm, has triggered the re-establishment of the old "class-based" forms *Sir, Madam,* and *Miss*, the old "ideology-based" title *comrade* appears to have been able to re-conceptualise itself pragma-semantically and find a niche in daily interaction in Serbia today.

This topic was further elaborated by Dr. Alcina Sousa (University of Madeira, Portugal), who discussed forms of address in Portuguese. In her talk, with the attractive title of "'*Pardon, dona ou senhora?*' Reassessing some forms of address and politeness issues in European Portuguese," she discussed the impact of pronominal forms and terms of address, and the pragma-linguistic choices now in use in European Portuguese (Cook 1995), with a particular focus on Madeira and mainland Portugal, across domains, social groups, and in intercultural communication.

The panel concluded with a discussion led by Professor Istvan Kecskes, highlighting the main points raised in the presentations and suggesting further avenues for research and development. It was followed by a keen discussion initiated by members of the audience.

Summing up, I would like to say that the conference was a great opportunity to exchange opinions and learn new ideas. It was perfectly organized and was held in an atmosphere of friendliness, cooperation, and hospitality. It was an example of positive multiculturalism without borders and stereotypes. Many thanks to the organisers of this great event, and a special thank you to Svetlana Kurteš, without whom ENIEDA would not exist. Her inspiring determination to involve new members demonstrates the fruitfulness of collaborative work and academic networking.

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