Abstract

Intercultural communication is a fast growing interdisciplinary research field. It refers to the complicated problem of intercultural contact. Its interdisciplinary character leads to four types of approaches which build on each other: 1. contrastive analysis, 2. imagology 3. interaction analysis, 4. transfer analysis. In this article, PhD projects and Master theses using these types of analyses are presented in relation to each other. The studies are mostly explorative because there are few methods, concepts that are readily applicable in this relatively new field. However, the studies show the relevance of each of these methods of analysis. The contrastive analysis supplies insights necessary for an interaction analysis, since the latter detects the effects of cultural differences in ongoing discourse. Moreover, the interaction analysis investigates structures that can not be traced back to each of the cultures in contact, because these structures emerge from the contact itself. The results of both contrast and interaction analysis are necessary to study how aspects of intercultural competence can be taught and learned, which is the focus of transfer analysis.

Introduction

Intercultural communication is a fast growing interdisciplinary research area, developing between sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, imagology¹, discourse analysis, inter/cross-cultural pragmatics, cultural and linguistic anthropology and didactics of language (See recent English, French and German handbooks, as for example Zarate et al. 2008; Straub et al. 2007; Kotthoff & Spencer-Oatey 2007). The centre of interest lies in (learning to) handling linguistic and cultural diversity in multiple organizational settings.

Before discussing the various approaches of intercultural communication presented in this issue, we would like to make a few remarks on culture and on the difficult problem of intercultural contact (See also Ten Thije and Deen 2009). It is beyond the framework of this short editorial to discuss the various meanings of culture. In any case, the studies presented here presuppose a broad meaning of culture, which is not limited

¹ Imagology (or discursive social representation) analyzes cultural representation in book, journals, public discourses, films, etc. of the produced images of cultures and collectivities with the help of all possible semiotic means (See for example Gautheron-Bouchatsky et al 2004).
to values and meanings, but includes also pragmatic and practical aspects of cultures. In other words, culture comprises everything that is learned including the methods of learning.

Intercultural contact, while often quite self-evident, and successful, can sometimes be full of difficult problems. In any case, if one wants to avoid a shallow version of relativism (Fay, 1996), any satisfactory form of intercultural contact presupposes at least the following working principles: on the one hand, it is necessary to adopt at least a weak form of universalism (in outlook concerning statements about facts, values, and action principles) and values. Indeed, strong forms of universalism (See Fay, 1996) cannot avoid to refer to cultural presuppositions, and therefore they always express some aspects of ethnocentrism of those who put forward strong universalistic statements. A weak form of universalism attempts to elaborate a universal outlook, taking progressively into account various interpretations and meanings of the outlook in different cultures. On the other hand, for realizing such a program, it is also necessary to proceed with great care and cautiousness. In other words, it is necessary to adopt a deep respect for diversity, not only of individuals, but also of groups and collectivities. To combine such a weak form of universalism with deep respect for cultural diversity, however, entails to accept that a variety of partial contradictions and conflicts appear. For example, self-determination could be one of the weak universalistic values. However, self-determination of individuals, groups and collectivities can be partly contradictory at present, such as in the example of emancipation of women in some cultures. Because all kinds of partial contradictions can appear, it is not possible to capture the combination of a weak form of universalism with deep respect of cultural diversity with simple concepts (See Maier, 2007). A consequence of this difficulty is that establishing a satisfactory intercultural contact can only be realized in a temporary way, taking into account the context and the type of contact. Such a temporary solution presupposes in any case that intercultural communication proceeds in a tactful and cautious way.

A few comments seem appropriate in order to explain such a complex program. Relativism is a philosophical perspective that recognizes cultural differences. Rejecting any strong form of universalist statements, relativism was quite successful during the last decennia of last century, and presented itself as a post-modern perspective. However, relativism entails also the consequence that cultural differences cannot be any longer compared in a unique way, because each culture will realize a particular form of comparison. In other words, comparability is lost, and different cultures appear as incommensurable. And that consequence excludes any universalist outlook or comparability. Intercultural contact and intercultural communication become hazardous enterprises, without any possible general guidelines.

The rejection of a strong form of universalism by relativism is certainly justified, because as already stated, a strong form of universalism cannot avoid ethnocentrism. However, there is also an alternative, namely, a weak form of universalism. This perspective also rejects a strong form of universalism, but attempts to establish comparisons between different languages and cultures, by taking into account as much as possible the meanings and interpretations attributed to statements of fact, value and
action principles by the different cultures. A detailed account of this perspective can be read in Fay (1996).

The perspective of weak universalism avoids therefore the shortcomings of relativism. Moreover, it offers on the one hand an understanding of the difficult problems involved in intercultural contact, and on the other hand, as a theoretical perspective, it enables to formulate a research program on intercultural communication including general comparisons which are executed in a careful and respectful way.

This brings us back to the question of intercultural communication, and the interdisciplinary approach of it. Such an approach takes shape in four related analyses: (1) contrastive analysis describes the relevance of linguistic and cultural differences for intercultural understanding; (2) imagology studies the production of cultural representations of cultures and collectivities using not only language but also other semiotic means (3) interaction analysis reconstructs the actual realization of intercultural understanding in communication, and (4) transfer analysis investigates methods for transferring intercultural understanding in trainings, coaching or mediation.

Müller-Jacquier & ten Thije (2005) state that the contrastive approach forms a pre-condition for acquiring insight in intercultural communication. The underlying concept of ‘intercultural understanding’ means that in intercultural communication various linguistic and cultural conventions get into contact. These different conventions are not automatically in harmony, the opposite is quite frequent. The differences of the linguistic and cultural conventions are than used as explanation of possible problems of communication. Such an analysis illustrates well the perspective of a weak form of universalism. In intercultural communication not only different languages and cultures meet each other, there is also interaction. The participants react on each other and on the reactions of the other.

The connection between the four different approaches is strengthened when asking the question of the consequences of the linguistic and cultural differences in interaction. Such a focus offers the possibility to appreciate on the one hand the escalation as consequence of linguistic or cultural misunderstandings, and on the other hand to identify the creation of new interaction structures in intercultural communication. The new interaction structures can in general not be reduced to the action structures of one of the participants from one culture. The insight of the working of linguistic and cultural differences in intercultural interaction forms an important starting point for the fourth approach, centering on the transfer of intercultural competences.

3 Contrastive Analysis

The first interdisciplinary approach, the contrastive analysis has as aim to develop general categories in order to describe linguistic and cultural differences (Clyne, 1994). Forerunners were for example Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper (1989) with their comparative research of sociolinguistic and pragmatic aspects of language in interaction.
With the emergence of pragmatics and discourse analysis during the nineties of last century, the focus of contrastive analysis has changed. More attention is given to interference of pragmatic and discourse phenomena (Barron, 2003). Moreover, the problems of simple comparison of parallel linguistic structures in different languages are now backgrounded. The comparison is at present more concentrated on functional equivalences (House 2009). The same linguistic function – for example informally addressing a reader or hearer – can after all be expressed by quite different structures in two different languages. The analysis attempts to systematize these different form-function relations.

With the help of contrastive analysis it is possible to analyze differences of language and communicative practices of members of different cultures. The aim is to identify systematic differences related to culture. This kind of information can than be used in intercultural trainings of language teaching in order to make clear that learning grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation of a language and knowledge of a country is by far not enough for effective communication. Knowledge of the use of language in communication, of the influence of values, norms and practices on language use is also necessary, after all, for effective intercultural communication.

In many different countries, the use of pictorial information symbols to convey warnings, instructions and directions is becoming more common. An important reason for this is that people from a variety of cultures can easily understand graphical symbols. However, symbols developed to be comprehensible in one culture may be difficult to comprehend for persons from other cultures. Blees & Mak’s study (in this issue) tested thirty pictorials from a series of ‘universal’ disaster pictorials created by Dutch designers. Dutch and Chinese participants completed a web survey, in which comprehension levels and judgements of five design features (semantic closeness, familiarity, meaningfulness, simplicity and concreteness) of the pictorials were measured. Furthermore, the effect of showing context pictures on comprehension levels in both groups was investigated. Dutch participants showed a better comprehension of the pictorials than Chinese participants, which indicates that the designers probably used conventions that are more familiar to Dutch than to Chinese people. However, the relative comprehensibility of different pictorials was similar in both cultures: generally, the same pictorials were easier or more difficult to understand for both groups. Photographs conveying context information significantly improved comprehension levels for Dutch as well as Chinese participants. Furthermore, judgements of the design features were correlated with comprehension levels of participants from both cultures. Remarkably, these judgements did not differ across these cultures. This kind of research can be a useful tool to explore comprehensibility problems of ‘universal’ pictorials in different cultures.

Tempel & ten Thije (another study in this issue) discuss the question of whether House’s (2000) theory on a cultural filter can be applied in the study of the appreciation of multilingual audio tours. According to House (ibid) cultural adjustments of a target text to a specific target culture will have a positive effect on the appreciation and understanding of the information provided. This contribution analyses the appreciation of British and German users of the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum audio tour. After an institutional ethnographic investigation of the coming about of the German and English
translation of the Dutch source text three audio stops were selected of which two alternative versions were made: one linguistic manipulation of the text and one content manipulation of the text (Tempel 2008). In the linguistic manipulation one of the five dimensions of cross-cultural differences (House ibid) between English and German was manipulated, namely: orientation towards content versus orientation towards persons. All texts were presented to thirty British and thirty German visitors of the Rijksmuseum. Responses were measured using questionnaires composed by a multicultural team of Dutch, English and German native speakers and translators. The results of this experiment do not seem to confirm the hypothesis. The found differences signalize however a trend that the linguistic adjustments are appreciated more highly and the content adjustments are appreciated less than the original version of the text. The study encourages the discussion between multimedia producers and museum curators with respect to the standardization or cultural adjustment of audio tour translations.

In sum, these contributions illustrate how the contrastive approach analyses the relevance of linguistic and cultural differences for intercultural understanding. Clearly, this approach uses comparisons, however, in a careful way, reflecting on possible effects of ethnocentric presuppositions, such as in the first study.

4 Imagology

Imagology analyzes cultural representations in book, films, journals, and many other meaningful productions, where images of cultures and collectivities are created (For example Gautheron-Boutchatsky et al 2004).

De Graaf (this issue) focuses on representations in media. Often stated is that in the so-called ‘global village’, world mediascapes are mainly dominated by the West with large press agencies such as the Associated Press and international news networks like CNN. In 2006, Al-Jazeera started to compete with this hegemony with the satellite station Al-Jazeera English. The question whether Al-Jazeera English produces a counter-ideology to oppose the dominated Western worldview in news was the main cause of the research. A comparative analysis between CNN International and Al-Jazeera English was undertaken. Both network stations were subjected to Critical Discourse Analysis and compared, studying the news concerning the withdrawal of the Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip in 2005. Both CNN International and Al-Jazeera English were examined on lexicalization, predicational strategy, topicalization, intertextuality and framing.

Not surprisingly, the news coverage by Al-Jazeera English contains counter-ideological elements vis-à-vis the reporting by CNN International. Nonetheless, research shows very clearly in which linguistic structures this respectively dominant ideology and counter-ideology can be found. Some of these structures exhibit very explicitly the dominant ideology. Additionally, it appeared that both network stations have ingroup – outgroup polarization characteristics. In Al-Jazeera English’s news coverage, the ingroup is the Palestinian side and the outgroup is the Israeli side. The
reverse is seen in CNN International. By using different strategies, both network stations represent the ingroup positively and the outgroups negatively.

Fernhout (also in this issue) explores the place of the Dutch “Cosmopolitan” by means of a comparing analysis of a Dutch and an American article about online dating and an interview with an editor of the Dutch cosmopolitan. Although content-wise the Dutch cosmopolitan places its emphasis on feelings and seems to have a more serious tone than the American cosmopolitan, the global structure and discourse – according to the fun fearless female slogan- remain unchanged.

Gerritsen and Maier (see further in this issue) analyze and compare the discourses of young migrants in the Netherlands and the dominant discourse of policy makers and social scientists. The new dominant discourse, the so-called genre of ‘new realism’ is formulated as the discourse of the ordinary Dutch citizens. It presupposes that migrants adopt without reservations the Dutch language and culture. Young migrants, on the other hand, present themselves as happy residents in the Netherlands, they would like to integrate and at the same time to conserve many aspects of the culture and language of their country of origin. Such a difference is the source of many conflicts and misunderstandings, which can only constrain the further integration of the young migrants.

In conclusion, these contributions illustrate how the production of representations of cultures and collectivities make not only use of language but also use other semiotic means that are inherent to multi-modal genres such as websites, glossaries and urban street communication. These studies deliver the necessary comparative insights for analyzing ongoing interactions.

5 Interaction analysis

A good definition of intercultural communication is lacking. In the literature various definitions are used (ten Thije, 2006). A broad definition comprises the everyday description according to which any communication between members with a different cultural and language background can be called intercultural (Shadid 1994). This definition is rather problematic because it is difficult to differentiate between culture and nationality, and to identify the factors which play a role. Moreover, the risk exists that a communication is called intercultural, while in fact other factors – such as institutional ones – are more important for the interpretation of the communicative structure. Therefore proposals have been advanced to restrict the term intercultural communication to communication where it is in one way or another evident that cultural differences are thematized (Koole & ten Thije, 1994).

Rehbein (2006) offers the most restrictive definition of intercultural communication. On the basis of a number of discourse analytic investigations of face-to-face multi-language communication, he developed together with others the theory of the so-called “Cultural Apparatus” (Redder & Rehbein 1987). A cultural apparatus can be conceived as the shared cultural capability of members of a certain cultural group. This cultural capability includes the representations, the value orientations and action dispositions held by the group, and it is at work when solving interaction problems in critical situations. These are situations when multilingual communication does not run
smoothly or when misunderstandings occur. The concerned participants have according to Rehbein (2006) two possibilities. They can either preserve their existing opinions, representations and action dispositions, and by doing this they confirm the existing proceedings and their own thinking. The other possibility would be to reflect critically on the action dispositions and representations and eventually transform them. In such a way problems could be solved in the interaction. On the basis of this model of multilingual interaction, Rehbein states that one can speak of intercultural communication exclusively when one participant transforms his (or her) cultural apparatus. Intercultural communication is thus characterized by a transformation of the thinking or acting of at least one of the participants as a consequence of their interaction. This is for example visible when one of the interacting persons starts a negotiation on meaning on a conceptual problem (Deen, 1997). This strict definition entails the interesting difference between one-sided and two-sided intercultural communication. Intercultural communication, according to this conception, is thus tied to critical reflection on existing action dispositions, thinking habits and mindsets.

In order to clarify the internal complexity of the research area, Ten Thije (2002) speaks of intercultural communication in the broad sense in case all the mentioned definitions of intercultural communication are accepted and of intercultural communication in a narrow sense when centering on what happens actually in the interaction.

Van Gestel (2009) and Rosenberg are examples of intercultural communication in the narrow sense (see further in this issue). Van Gestel (2008) presents a report on ethnographic fieldwork concerning reactions on tourism in the Brazilian village Itacaré. Mass tourism in exotic destinations has become an important economic factor. There is also more scientific interest on the impact of such tourism on the local cultural relations. This is evident through the new specialization of the anthropology of tourism (o.a. Smith, 1989). Tourists bring various habits and new forms of communication to the local community. Van Gestel (2008) investigates the way how intercultural understanding comes about in a tourist location, with special attention to representations, globalization and cultural differences. Her case study of the Brazilian village Itacaré is an outstanding example of an interactive approach, because she put the accent on how the cultural differences influence the communication between tourists and the local population. Moreover, she takes into account the influence of institutional and economic conditions. As an example she discusses the shopping customs of tourists. In Brazil, haggling is not customary. From her ethnographic interviews it appears that the shop keepers consider the haggling of the tourists as egoistical and arrogant.

Rosenberg studied conversations between immigrants and officials, an interaction where problems of understanding are often noticeable. About 280 recordings realized at the Argentine aliens department and at several public authorities in Germany show that knowledge divergences regarding linguistic, cultural and institutional knowledge result in (sometimes serious) difficulties of understanding – even if the interactants speak the same mother tongue. The German-Argentine comparison provides the possibility to examine the role of language in intercultural communication more accurately since – in contrast to the situation in Germany – the majority of immigrants
in Argentina speak the same mother language as the receiving country but still they hail from very different cultural areas. This shows that culture contact cannot – as is often done in Western approaches – be equated with language contact. Furthermore, as the results show, problems of understanding seem to be not only a matter of “knowledge” but also of the interactional management of social roles and of discourse strategies. The interactants apply strategies of negotiation: attempts to level the relation between the interactants, attempts to constitute a hierarchic relation, attempts to reverse the hierarchic relation – sometimes with conflictuous consequences.

The institutional setting and the multi-lingual constellations differ considerably in these two studies. Nonetheless, these studies illustrate nicely two pitfalls of intercultural studies, the ‘minimal object’ on the one hand, and the ‘maximal interpretation’ on the other. (Koole & ten Thije, 1994). The pitfall of the minimal object arises when studies are exclusively limited to misunderstandings. The maximal interpretation arises when interculturality is invoked as an exclusive explanation for the investigated phenomena leaving aside institutional structures that could be of more relevance for the explanation of the results.

6 Transfer analysis

Interaction analysis shows that being able to handle linguistic and cultural diversity presupposes a basic competence needed by every citizen in order to function in an optimal way in the present internationally organized society. Next to insight in other languages and cultures, it is necessary to master general principles of intercultural communication. Only then will it be possible to know how to act in situations where one does not know exactly what the specific communicative or cultural conventions of the interaction partner are.

These statements form the starting point of the fourth approach, the transfer analysis. In this approach the question is to determine which aspects are important for intercultural competence, and how these aspects can be transferred to others. According to accepted standards (Knapp-Potthoff, 1997) intercultural competence consists of four components: (1) knowledge of language and culture, (2) insight in general communicative principles, (3) strategies of interaction for engaging in intercultural situations, and (4) capabilities to learn in and through intercultural situations. The approaches discussed above furnish the building blocks for transfer analysis.

Severs (in this issue) studied intercultural competence in the Netherlands. Although globalization has significantly increased the international exchange of students in higher education institutes, little attention is paid to interpersonal factors of intercultural communication of these same students at Dutch universities. This is remarkable, since the amount of Chinese students studying at European universities has increased considerably over the last ten years. Social and communication sciences have investigated learning styles and second language learning (Biemans & Mil 2008). However, little is known about the intercultural interaction between Chinese international students and local teachers and students. The standard curriculum requirements of Dutch universities focus on so called ‘academic competencies’. For
instance, students are expected to be able to participate interactively during classes, present research data and write research papers in a coherent manner (Mikkers, 2008; Wiesmann, 1999). These academic communicative requirements do not match the requirements of Chinese standard academic curriculum.

Severs (2010) investigates intercultural competence of Chinese international students in a Dutch educational environment. The research is based on a functional pragmatics approach to discourse and aims at reconstructing communicative factors that determine Chinese students' successful completion of their overseas study programme. This research shows that intercultural competence can be helpful when carrying out/ introducing/ maintaining Dutch academic interpersonal requirements (Severs 2010). The results are based on focus group and in-depth interviews with Chinese students studying at Dutch universities. They report that key difficulties can be found in the ability to switch between different expectations in various action constellations, since Dutch and Chinese academic cultural traditions differ. The paper concludes that intercultural competences can be classified as situational sensitivity and knowledge about cultural values that influence Dutch interaction structures. Intercultural training of Chinese students could help them improve carrying out interpersonal academic skills.

7 Concluding remarks

This issue presents a number of studies, which illustrate the four approaches presented in this introduction. These four approaches, as indicated, are strongly related with each other, and to some extent they presuppose each other. To begin with, the contrastive approach and the analysis of social representations (imagology) deliver the necessary insights for analyzing ongoing interactions, and all these three approaches deliver the building blocks for transfer analysis. Moreover, these four approaches realize also a model for combining weak forms of universalism with a deep respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. Indeed, the first two approaches, the contrastive analysis and imagology have a comparative global outlook, taking into account the specificities of the multiple linguistic and cultural conventions. Interaction analysis, with its accent on critical self-reflection, and transfer analysis, in particular with its accent on the capabilities to learn in and through intercultural situations, bring deep respect for cultural diversity of individuals, groups and collectivities into the research practice, and when applied into practice, these two approaches deliver a concrete model of deep respect.

The studies presented in this issue illustrate also the research practice of master students and PhD students at Utrecht University. In other words, these studies originate from a particular place and institution. These studies attempt to elaborate a global and comparative outlook. However, the best intentions pave the way to hell. Therefore, we would like to formulate a reservation: it is for the reader to judge whether there are any significant shortcomings, such as ethnocentric pre-suppositions or the use of implicit value systems, which need to be examined and corrected in the future.

Bibliografie


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