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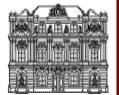
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Talking to each other: Reflections on intercultural communication

Keynote lecture at the International Workshop: "Communication across Cultures: Intercultural Communication in a New Europe", Stradins University, Riga, Latvia, June 5th, 2004

In contemplating what I might best offer as my modest contribution for today's workshop, I have chosen a broad topic which might be of some transdisciplinary interest to the various various fields in the Social Sciences and the Humanities, as they are represented here in Riga. My title is

"Talking to each other:
Reflections on intercultural communication"

Introduction

In the following lecture, I will strive to present my views on the broad and contested topic of "intercultural communication". This will be the view of a socio-cultural anthropologist with some comparative expertise, but with limited regional knowledge about the Baltic countries today. Out of this specific background, I shall try to outline what I regard as current insights and tasks in the broad field of studies in intercultural communication, with a specific and marked emphasis upon the new Europe in which we live and act today.

In some ways, studies in "intercultural communication" occupy a position in the German-speaking countries and in parts of Scandinavia that is similar to "Cultural Studies" in today's English- speaking academic world. By consequence, "intercultural communication" is not well understood in English, at least not as a term which represents any new and interdisciplinary field.

In fact, what we are discussing here in English is the English translation of a term which designates a growing field of new academic reseach in German. Similar to "Cultural Studies" in the English- speaking world, studies in "intercultural communication" have emerged in several northern and central European academic spheres quite recently. They attract young scholars from established fields such as educational studies, philology and the history of literature, linguistics and language education, media studies, political siences, and so on and so forth.

Inside my own field of socio- cultural anthropology, there were mixed feelings at first about the growing influence of "cultural studies" and studies in "intercultural communication". Meanwhile, many among "us" (i.e., among the socio-cultural anthropologists) have learned to regard this as a realm of additional opportunities, rather than as a dangerous development, namely the fact that "you" (the non-anthropologists) become more and more interested in topics and themes for which "we" regard ourselves as the professional experts. In fact, it is quite a positive turn in the recent history of the social sciences and the humanities that a growing number of fields turn towards anthropology's core topics. Although this creates new fields of competition, it primarily offers the chances of new intellectual interest in anthropology, and of fresh interaction and intellectual cross- fertilisation in themes which obviously are marked by increasing public concern .

I shall therefore address this interdisciplinary topic out of an anthropological approach that is interested in such a kind of interdisciplinary sphere of dialogue. My declared aim is to convince you that socio-cultural anthropology can offer unique and indispensable methods and concepts in these research fields. I shall pursue these reflections on intercultural communication today along three basic questions, three questions which in my opinion no research project and no university course can leave out in this field.

These three questions are:

First, intercultural communication *about what?*

Second, *who* is communicating in intercultural communication?

And thirdly, in which *ways*, or *how* does intercultural communication take place and has to be studied?

What, who, and how therefore are the three question marks to be discussed and studied today, and in this field.

I.

So let us first turn to the "About what?" question: what is it that intercultural communication is all about?

In most cases, intercultural communication is about distinctions and differences – and it may therefore refer to almost any field of socio-political, cultural, and everyday life. Is your national football team better than ours (I'm afraid that yes, this is the case!), do your folk songs sound rather melancholic, while ours sound more optimistic (maybe so), does our food taste more like that of a mountain and wine country, while yours tastes more like coming from a seafood and beer country (yes, perhaps), and so on and so forth. Having made this basic point about more or less important differences and distinctions, two things become clear immediately:

First, there obviously are plenty of topics and spheres to be studied here, which basically cover all fields of life: sports, the arts, jokes, riddles, literature, everything. The point is that people usually choose only a few of these fields for themselves as "markers", in order to distinguish themselves from others and others from themselves with the help of these markers.

Secondly, we have to be careful as social scientists in order to not reduce our interest to the study of differences, and of distinguishing markers, alone. Even if the people we study see themselves nothing but difference, *we* as social scientists should also point out, and have to insist upon the simultaneous importance of something else, namely of parallels, of similarities, of commonalities. The normal is easily forgotten. In everyday life, people tend to notice only the exceptional, the unusual, the counterintuitive.

Now, there is an important experiment from cognitive psychology (Bloch 1998) which underlines my point. I shall briefly outline it to you. In that experiment, the photograph of a normal office room is given to, say, 50 persons, who can look at the picture for ten seconds. The photograph shows an office room with, for instance, four windows, seven desks, fifteen chairs, shelves with dozens of books, folders and the like, five telephones, seven computers, and 1 monkey sitting on top of one of the desks in the office. After having looked at this picture for twenty seconds, each of the fifty test persons then is asked to write down what they have remembered about the picture. Nobody remembers the exact number and types of the whole office equipment, everybody forgets at least something about the windows, desks, chairs, shelves, books, telephones, and computers. Each and every among these 50 test persons, however, will always remember correctly one item from the photograph, and this is? Correct: the monkey on the desk!

What the experiment demonstrates is this: we humans tend to remember the unusual and the exceptional better than the routine and the normal. This precisely was my point, when I emphasized that as social scientists, the people we study and interview often will tell us a lot about "markers" and "differences" between themselves and others, and of course we should make notes of this and include it in our research reports. But simultaneously, we will have to also explore the normal, the regular, the things many groups have in common, whether they are aware of it or not, whether they like it or not. The fact that for example, they dress in similar ways on a daily basis in any larger region, the fact that they not only have different but also similar jokes, for instance; or the fact that they even may flirt with each other in similar ways-- in short, that they're all jointly humans first of all, and that the distinguishing markers thus are of a secondary, but not of any primary importance.

Let me conclude this first section, about the "what" in intercultural communication, by moving from the spheres of everyday lives a little bit away, towards the direction, and the wider purposes of these communication processes. When people discuss their cultural similarities and differences as compared to others, they usually want to make a point, they want to present a case, and an argument. As social scientists, we need not, and should not take sides, but it is important to include these cases, points, and arguments in our study as well. What directions may these arguments take, then? Some people might say "Those people are so different from us, we have nothing in common with them, we hardly manage to live together with them." By contrast, others could say the opposite, namely: "Those people are so similar to us, there are almost no differences, let's forget about differences altogether." Alternatively, a third group still might argue: "Actually, differences and commonalities between them and us balance each other, so let us find an accommodation for that."

These three alternatives of opinion, about the combination of parallels and differences, might come up within one and the same society, and in fact, even with one and the same person, depending on circumstances, contexts, and occasions (Baumann and Gingrich 2004). These three combinations of parallels and differences thus represent a vast field of investigation and research by social scientists on the "about?" question in intercultural communication.
It does make a difference whether we communicate about

1) maximum assimilation, or

2) maximum minority rights or even about separation, or

3) about a moderate balance between the two, as one or the other form of integration.

Moreover, it is worth pointing out that the broad spectrum of national constitutions, as represented in today's European Union and the European Economic Area, also more or less directly corresponds to these three alternatives. A few constitutions in Europe primarily follow the assimilationist option, for instance France, whereas an even smaller handful of constitutions primarily follow the maximum minority rights model, for instance those of Belgium and Switzerland. By contrast, the European mainstream majority of countries, which I understand also includes Latvia now, is primarily following the more centrist third orientation.

II.

This leads me on to my second section, which is dealing with the "Who?" question in intercultural communication studies. Who are the people communicating here about each other, and hopefully, with each other?

Let me start to reflect upon this second question by pointing out what we may today consider as the absolutely normal, regular, totally standard, and boringly routine case anywhere in the European Union. How is this typical, average, boringly routine case in the EU to be characterised? It is characterised by cultural diversity (Gingrich 2003: 81)

So, from Estonia and Finland to Portugal and Spain, and from Ireland and the UK to Greece and to Malta, we may characterise the standard groups involved in intercultural communication, in each and every of the EU' s nation states, by a specific set of cultural diversity.

Can that cultural diversity be characterised any further, for all these totally unexciting, boringly routine, standard cases? In fact, it can be characterised by a common denominator in the form of three main features:

First, there is one, more or less demographically and politically dominant ethnic group, that is shaping majority national culture in state and society. The French in France, the Latvians in Latvia, the Swedes in Sweden. On the one hand, it would directly lead towards blunt nationalism,

if nothing else were constantly emphasized but the fact that these national ethnic majorities exist. Likewise, it would immediately lead towards nationalism if the whole plethora of internal differences among these majorities constantly were ignored, or if any commonalities shared between similar sub-groups from various ethnic groups were declared to be irrelevant from the outset. These intellectual perceptions unavoidably would end up in the non-academic political ideology of nationalism (Gellner 1996). On the other hand, however, it would also be ignorant and non-academic to constantly do the opposite, namely to ignore the mere existence of majority cultures and their position inside nationhood (Eriksen 1993).

Second, there always are one or more, smaller of larger "traditional" minority groups with some linguistic, religious, or other cultural distinctions. Some of these traditional minority groups in one society do have affinities to a national state nearby, like the Swedish minority in Finland, the Tyrolean minority in northern Italy, or the Russian minorities in the Baltic countries. It is evident from these constellations that such affinities to nearby states provide additional resources for the minorities in question. By contrast, other traditional minorities do not have such cultural affinities to nearby states anywhere, such as the Basques in Spain and France, the Sami in Scandinavia and Finland, the Ladino-speakers in Switzerland and Italy, or the Roma and Sinti all across Europe. As will be remembered here in Latvia and in the other Baltic countries, the Jews of east central Europe also belonged to this second group until the late 1930s. Their history is the most drastic and terrible example in this part of the world. In our context, the example reminds us that ethnic or religious minorities without any cultural affinity towards state power elsewhere lack that additional resource of power, and in some cases, of additional diplomatic or legal protection.

Thirdly, and in addition to (1) the dominant ethnic group in one nation, and (2) a number of traditional resident minorities in the same nation state, Europe also hosts a third class of groups. More or less reluctantly, more or less helpfully, Europe also is sheltering large numbers of new, and much more mobile, migrant minorities (Banks 1997). Whether you and I like it or not, whether you and I ignore it or not, we will not escape the unavoidable facts. This third, more recent group of labour and refugee immigrants is bound to stay on with us, anywhere in Europe – our economies would not work without them. Even today, demographic statistics make it abundantly clear that for instance, the number of migrants coming into the 10 new EU member countries is already outweighing the number of migrants from the 10 new EU member countries into the old EU of 15. Moreover, Europe's economies might need even more labour migrants in the future, including those coming from far away and distant regions. Both economists and

demographers are very clear about this, and any change in domestic fertility rates will only modify but not substantially alter this development.

So, this is the basic pattern underlying any research related to the "who?" question in the EU today: national ethnic majorities, traditional resident minorities, and a growth of new migrant minorities. As I said, whether you and I like it or not, these are the boring facts, and we better deal with them creatively instead of helplessly ignoring them.

Let me end this second section by drawing a few conclusions from this *tripartite standard structure of cultural diversity inside the EU.*

First conclusion: those nationalists who still dream of ethnic homogeneity in any one national state are profoundly wrong. The case of Iceland, with its "one language, one territory, and (almost) no minority" constellation is the fairly irrelevant and very marginal exception. Everywhere else the standard rule is different, namely at least tripartite.

Second conclusion: cases of *imperial majorities who then were transformed into new national minorities* are not totally unique for the Baltic countries alone. In fact, the Swedes in Finland, the loyalist Protestants in Northern Ireland, the Tyroleans in Italy, or the Muslims in Greece and Bulgaria are similar cases. Actually, some of these stories indeed represent "worst case" examples of the 20th century, which should warn us, rather than serve as sources of inspiration. The awkward history of 'dethroned' German- speakers, (with affiliations towards the Habsburg empire and Austria, or towards Germany and then towards Nazi Germany) in eastern Europe during the 20th century perhaps is the most widely known of these "worst case examples" from the wider class of 'old imperial majorities transformed into new national majorities' (Gingrich 2002). Other examples with a difficult and violent, but less devastating story include the cases of the post- Ottoman Turkish minority in Cyprus, and the Ulster loyalists in Northern Ireland.

By contrast, there also are a number of "best case" examples among this wider class of ex-imperial, new ethnic minorities. These best case examples include the Swedish minority in Finland, the German minority in Denmark after 1945, and after the 1960's, the South Tyroleans in northern Italy. All these cases show us that is has not been easy anywhere. Yet the "best case" examples demonstrate that it was and is possible to promote peaceful communication instead of the non-solution of violence, and of Apartheid. In these best cases therefore, it was possible to peacefully accommodate those new, ex-imperial minorities within two or three generations. It

thus takes patience, democratic dialogue, negotiations, and good will. In fact, negotiations are a specific, important variant of "talking to each other".

Third and final conclusion: for all these reasons, it is therefore worth working for a critical social science that helps to facilitate the peaceful settlement of major problems with old resident minorities as smoothly and as patiently as possible. Relationships between relatively young, and relatively weak "new ethnic majorities" in newly independent states, towards "old imperial majorities transformed into new national minorities" inside the very same new and weak states obviously need careful study and some concerted effort to understand the sensitivities from all sides. Besides, the real challenge of the future, as pointed out before, might in fact soon be the rising necessity of accomodating and integrating new minorities (Bade and Münz 2002).

III.

Finally, this leads up to the end of my presentation, namely to the question "In which ways? How?" should research in intercultural communication take place. Out of the up-dated and most recent inventories of social science research in intercultural communication spheres as I know them, I would like to suggest, in the end of this presentation, three basic methodological devices.

The first device starts with the premise *"communication as dialogical conversation"*. Put into a positive mode, this means that research on inter-cultural communication should focus on spheres of "talking to each other", rather than limiting itself to "talking about each other", and on interacting *with* each other, rather than being reduced to interacting among one's *own* group only. If we follow this first device of "communication as dialogical conversation", then we should be aware that we do not follow a very wide definition of communication. Such a wider definition might also include, for instance, violence, or confrontation, or silence as forms of anti-communication. Instead, this narrower definition of communication as dialogical conversation follows Berger and Luckmann' s perspective in "The Social Construction of Reality" (1966), which outlines conversation as a vehicle to maintain, and to strengthen, social homogeneity and cohesion. Dialogical conversation then will include all sorts of positive interaction – from debates and language to arts, sports, to religion.

The second methodological device puts an emphasis upon searching for *arenas, networks, and structures*, where such dialogical conversation does take place, might take place, or cannot yet take place. These arenas, networks, and structures will comprise schools, offices, and kindergardens,

as much as discos, parks, churches, parishes, rock concerts and chess competitions, cultural and sports events – in short, any public or semi-public sphere where inter-cultural communication already is taking place, or where it might still but cannot yet occur. As you see, *a bottom up* and *grassroots approach* here is perhaps more important than a more official top down approach. Likewise, it is essential to not only make interviews, but to actually be there, and witness, and participate – since as we all know, there is a systematic difference between what people say they do, and what they actually do (Kuper 1996: 15). By consequence, interviews never will be enough, because they only grasp at cognition, but not at actual practice. For this reason, participant observation as the key element of *ethnographic fieldwork* is gaining increasing importance among the social sciences, and quite rightly so.

The third and final device which is helpful in researching the "how?" question concerns the difference between views "about others", and interactional conversation "with others". This is the same as the difference between addressing another group as a collective "You", and referring to another group as a collective "Them", as emphasised by Jürgen Habermas in his more recent work (1985).

Of course, there always will be a "Them". Conversations focused upon "them" references are indispensable, and per se there certainly s nothing wrong with that. In particular, a relatively small majority inside a young nation state is bound to reflect among its own members how it is coping with "them". For small nations, dealing with a strong Europe and with strong minorities, some reasonable amount of patriotism thus is unavoidable and in fact, may be quite healthy for a while, as long as this leaves enough space for those who dissent and disagree.

In addition to this healthy amount of conversations about "them", however, we also need to study the actual conversations and interactions with the "you" groups. These "address you" conversations require our specific research attention, wherever they do already occur now, and likewise, where and why they do not yet occur. In the long run, it is the "you" conversations that actually will matter most, as well as the top down and the bottom up practices which are accompanied by these conversations. In the long run, it is decisive whether these conversations create an atmosphere where *talking to each other does facilitate and promote living with each other.*

In my contribution for today, I have suggested that social science research on intercultural communication has to be firmly rooted in the pursuit of three questions – the "about", the "who", and the "how" questions, as I phrased them.

For the "about" question, I emphasised that the intercultural dimension cannot be reduced to obviously exceptional differences and markers, of the "monkeys on office desks" kind, which are remembered so easily. First of all, this has to also include the seemingly trivial parallels and commonalities, even if, and precisely because, they are more difficult to remember. The mainstream of European constitutions balances both with each other; majority needs and minority rights.

For the "who" question, I outlined the standard tripartite model of cultural diversity in the EU. After discussing the specific variant of "old imperial majorities transformed into new ethnic minorities", as well as contemplating "worst" and "best" case examples among that variant, I emphasized "negotiations" as a particularly useful field of "talking to each other" under the conditions of new and weak nation states. In addition, I suggested that while studies on majority relations with traditional minorities are important, the future will bring additional relevance for studies on relations with new migrant minorities.

As for the "how" question, I have suggested that we might be better advised to operate with a narrow definition of communication as dialogical conversation Without ignoring the important "them" reflections, it is the actual "you" interactions that will really matter in the long run. They have to be studied in a top down and bottom up way, in an interviewing *and* participatory manner wherever they do already occur, as well as where and why they do not yet occur.

Conclusion

In the end, where does all of this leave us, students and teachers of the Social Sciences and the Humanities, in an enlarged and diversified new Europe? In a Europe that is not only contested from the outside by global and international demands – but also, in a Europe which is putting more and more emphasis by itself upon more or less useful applications of the social sciences, and simultaneously, upon shrinking and profit-making budgets? How should we cope with our tasks in researching and promoting intercultural communication in these changing contexts? In contexts in which we as social scientists often have to explain while sometimes, we even have to

apologize why we exist at all? How do we use our competencies in intercultural communication studies in today's wider public?

Stradins University has an impressive record of teaching and practicing medicine- so maybe it is appropriate to phrase some answers to these questions in medical metaphors.

Let me put it this way.

New developments always go hand in hand with the rise of new problems, and with the re-emergence of old ones. If these problems are not dealt with, they tend to become potentials for social diseases and social pathologies.

Now, in order to seriously deal with a disease and pathology, you need a therapy, we are quite rightly reminded by our medical colleagues everywhere. Yet in order to develop a sound and successful therapy, social scientists and medical experts both will agree, you need first of all a balanced, detailed and professional diagnosis. No therapy without a good diagnosis first.

Social diagnosis therefore always comes first, before we should even negotiate about any suggestions for elaborating any "therapy" which politicians and authorities may ask us to deliver. Political interests towards instrumentalising the social sciences as therapeutic tools require some caution. In the past 20th century, the social sciences have not had the best experience, when politicians often instrumentalised them very directly for alleged social therapies. After our experiences with Stalin and Hitler, the Social Sciences today need some basic independence from political and economic pressures towards quick therapies, in order to first carry out our basic task of a balanced social diagnosis.

If that is granted, then we will cooperate with civil society, with NGO's, and even with democratically legitimised politicians and state authorities, for perhaps also helping a little bit with possible therapies. But remember, the diagnosis always will maintain primary importance, and any therapeutic suggestion depends on that – not only with the medical sciences, but also with us from the social sciences.

I wish the students and the teachers of this faculty at Stradins University all the best for this workshop and for your future, for the benefit of your country, and for our joint Europe. Thank you

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