ASYMMETRICAL CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS, THE PUBLIC SELF AND THE ROLE OF THE NATIVE SPEAKER: INSIGHTS FOR THE EXPANSION OF INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING[*]

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1. Introduction

"I don't know what you mean!" "I just can't understand you!" As Deborah Tannen (1992) has already illustrated, communication between partners from the same cultural, even from the same social background, living together for years, knowing each other and sharing the same language, often might fail due to different conversational goals and strategies. In intercultural communication, there are at least two speakers (A+B) from different cultural backgrounds communicating either in the native language of one of them or, maybe, in a third language, foreign to both of them. In the first case, even though the speaker (B) who uses the other (A) participant's mother tongue might be highly proficient in this second language, the linguistic conditions are asymmetrical. Going back to basics will be helpful to distinguish the multiple factors involved. Albeit using the same language, or in Sausurre's terms, the same signifiers, speaker (B) might relate them to signifieds from his/her own cultural background.

Therefore, in order to understand how interaction in an intercultural context works, it is crucial to understand how meaning is construed and conveyed among members of different ethnolinguistic groups, how language interrelates with social-cognition mediating processes, and finally how language becomes an outstanding dimension in this interaction.

Strategies used to deepen the efficiency of interpersonal interethnic communication are restricted by personal, situational and social factors, as well as the linguistic competence of the speakers and their ethnolinguistic accomodation. A rich vein of linguistic writings has devoted considerable attention to speech events as the starting point for the analysis of verbal communication.

Research in the field of discourse analysis has for many years now been concerned with the study of miscommunication. But, if communication between a married couple is often marked by misunderstandings, how can we expect two participants from different cultures to communicate successfully? This question, its underlying causes and subsequent outcomes, has occupied many researchers in the field of intercultural communication. Thus, for instance, analyses of cultural variation at different speech levels (see among others Tannen 1984; Clyne 1994; Scollon – Wong Scollon 1995; Scheu – Hernández 1998) attempt to predict possible conflicts and their effects on intercultural communication.

Our main goal in this paper lies in examining whether in intercultural communication among speakers using the same language any misunderstandings occur and in determining which factors might cause these misunderstandings. For our present purpose, it seems worth giving priority to the review of those studies (intercultural relation studies, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis and cognitive psychology) which from different perspectives promote a major understanding of intercultural communication by accounting for premises/constraints, such as:

–   how language and culture mediate worldview and its influence on interaction;

–   how worldview and sociocultural knowledge are structured into schematas, frames and prototypes that constrain the conveyance and intepretation of meaning;

–   how speakers' goals and expectations are dependent upon their cultural assumptions, which in turn affect discourse norms and, if different, may hinder intercultural interaction;

–   how speakers' self-evaluation might be threatened by the clash of diverging cultural assumptions, both the foreign "incoming" speaker as well as the native speaker facing an intercultural encounter.

These approaches help us elicit those factors that are essential to be considered for the production and interpretation of utterances in intercultural communication. Relying on this theoretical background, our study will offer several instances of intercultural communication[1] analysed in terms of the weight participants' cultural background has on the successful communicative outcome.

Finally, the findings will be discussed for their consequences of bridging the gap between language teaching and intercultural education. Within this context, we will attempt to offer some theoretical and methodological suggestions useful to re-orientate the expansion of Intercultural Education, in general terms:

–   how, therefore, the emphasis on conceptual knowledge in Language Teaching should be intensified, in order to broaden the range of meanings/concepts/assumptions for learners;

–   and, consequently, that Intercultural Education should be introduced into any Language Classroom.

2. Reviewing intervening factors in intercultural communication

2.1 Worldview

Fantini's work (1992, 1995) offers an essential contribution for our understanding of how language and culture mediate worldview and, consequently, of how intercultural competence entails the transcending of one's own worldview towards the diversity of intercultural knowledge. The way in which language exteriorizes one's perceptions of the world has been depicted by the input-output framework elaborated by Fantini (1995: 146).[2] Therefore, successful intercultural interaction requires not only speakers' linguistic competence but also, and even more important, the expansion of their worldview, which means in Fantini's words, the interaction of their "linguacultures". From this perspective, the author illustrates how the components of several linguacultures form different worldviews, and explains why the development of an LC2 (acquisition of the second language and its culture) involves not only the proficiency in the language but also a grasp of how the components are reconstructed. It follows that the learners must reshape their worldview while expanding their communicative abilities, or in his words "we need to develop 'intercultural' competence" (1995: 151).

Within the same line of argument, Fisher-Yoshida (1999: 71) posits that a greater awareness of our role in interacting with others, of our cultural filters and worldviews, might reduce the number of conflicts and/or miscommunications. However, this awareness of our worldview and its influence on our interaction implies an analysis of the assumptions upon which we act. A more detailed consideration of the role that assumptions play as a series of guidelines that assist us in guessing what we think something means and in acting on this guess/assumption, will be given later.

Worldview is at its most "visible" when we are able to identify the discourse norms that manifest the cultural values that mediate between worldview and language.

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[2] In this article Fantini argues that the mental processes of converting perception to thought and thought to language are governed by the adjustment of holistic experiences to the word categories available in one's language.

guage (Corson 1995). Cultural values provide structures or mechanisms that affect the behaviour of the members of the group, the way people behave and interact. Corson establishes an analytical relationship between the idea of a norm in language use and the idea of a cultural value. Many aspects of language use vary across cultures[4] and grow from cultural learning processes that establish socially appropriate norms of communicative behaviour. Understanding and mastering differences in discourse norms between two languages and cultures is a key achievement in becoming bilingual and bicultural. Discourse norms go on to reinforce cultural world view by every day exposure to them.

2.2 Cognitive Structuring of Sociocultural Knowledge

An immediate consequence of the interdependence of language and culture – the essential premise of research in intercultural communication – leads towards the insight of the relevance of cultural factors both in the construction and in the understanding of utterances. Successful intercultural communication, obviously, as already pointed out by Dell Hymes (1962) depends on speakers' intercultural competence. Fundamental to this view is that culture cannot be considered as an organized orderly endstate, but as a dynamic, changing process influencing human interaction. Both politeness studies and interactional sociolinguistics have repeatedly highlightened the importance of shared socio-cultural knowledge for interpersonal communication. In particular, the concepts of speaker meaning, contextual inference or what Gumperz (1982) calls contextualization cues, the notion of *face* as well as politeness strategies rely on both participants' cultural and contextual knowledge put to work in their interpretation of discourse. The methodological consequence of this is that one can discover shared meaning by investigating the process of interaction itself, i.e. by using the reaction that an utterance evokes as evidence of whether interpretive conventions were shared (Gumperz 1982: 5).

2.3 Schemata and frames

Among the whole range of variables that have been studied to account for the constant flow between context, background and communication, we may consider the concept of *frames*: data structures which represent stereotyped situations selected from our memory, when confronted with a new situation, and adapt to fit reality (quoted by Brown – Yule 1983: 238) or we may speak about *schemata*: as complex knowledge structures which function as ideational scaffolding in the organisation and interpretation of experience, and therefore determine or predispose us to interpret experience in a certain way[3]. The fact is that

they direct us to interpret people, events and experiences in a specific way. From a more purely linguistic approach, Tannen (1979: 138) speaks about schemata as the organised background knowledge which leads us to predict aspects in our interpretation of discourse, so that we can expect what is coming in the interaction and understand it better, but at the same time it gives shape to our thinking.[4] Robinson, in turn, uses the term *schemas* to refer to the "cognitive structures through which people interpret information" (1985: 52) and which contribute to the meaningfulness of particular contexts.[5] These frames, schematas or schemas are then cognitive structures socially and culturally acquired, which, regarding language, allows Widdowson to differentiate between what he calls *schematic knowledge* and *systematic knowledge*, or the formal properties of the language (1990: 110). Whereas in first language learning we acquire both knowledges at the same time, in second language learning, as we have already been socialized into the schematic knowledge of our mother tongue, we will tend to adapt the systemic knowledge to these previously acquired cognitive structures. Agar (1991) even proposes an approach to L2 acquisition as the study of interpretive frames. His epistemology holds that when two languages are brought into contact, some connections are easy to establish, whereas others are strikingly difficult. Precisely, this may cause serious problems for our learning of the second language, as it may be compared to the attempt to fit a square peg into a round hole, and in fact we should make an effort to become familiar and acquire as much of the schematic knowledge of the second language as possible.[6]

2.4 Prototypes

In order to shed light on the means by which we make sense of each other in conversation, Clift (1998) examines the role of prototypes and schemata in the relationship between lexical items and utterances. In exploring how participants construct mini-theories consistent with their own interpretations, misunderstandings demonstrate the relevance of schemata as a means of conceptual organisa-

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[3] Restated by Gillian Brown and George Yule (1983: 247) from ideas presented by van Dijk (1981) and Anderson (1977), among others.

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[4] For instance, whereas in Spanish we would expect a real answer, "Bien, gracias" after the question "¿Cómo está usted?", in English, after the question "How do you do?" we expect another question, "How do you do?", something difficult to understand unless we possess that specific schemata.
[5] She classifies them into person schemas, "structures about people which include traits that are grouped together", and event schemas, which anticipate or suggest a particular sequence of events within a particular setting; in this way most Americans may have the same picture of what an American high school teacher is, which will very likely differ from the picture the Japanese have of their counterparts, similarly a meal in an American household will not follow the same pattern as a meal offered by the Japanese.
[6] In Alptekin's opinion, a learner of English, for instance, who has never resided in the target-language culture will have problems in processing English systemic data if they are presented through unfamiliar contexts such as Halloween or English pubs (1993: 137).

tion. The fact that our expectations are conceptual rather than lexical, leads to the conclusion that the ambiguity of a lexical item may be due not to a specific meaning but to a specific referent. With Clift's proposal that prototypes stand in the same relationship to lexical meaning as schemata to utterance meaning, it seems relevant to consider that both prototypes and schemata are culturally specific and affect the interpretation in interaction. Lexical items constitute the co-ordinates from which we build up a cognitive model, which acts as a conceptual guideline (Anderson 1977, Rummelhardt 1983). Our pragmatic knowledge provides the connections between those coordinates.

A comparative analysis (Scheu – Alarcón 1993) of the relationship between concept and lexical items in speakers from different cultures by means of applying the theory of semantic networks, reveals that differences in associative processes are one of the major causes for cultural transferences. Findings of discourse analysis from the perspective of Social Psychology reveal how different category terms are involved in, and exemplify different wordviews (Sacks 1979). The fact that certain concepts or categories are conventionally associated with specific activities or other features, serve as guidelines for people to make sense of their social world. In learning terms connected to these concepts, it can be assumed that members from a different culture will transfer to, and use these concepts in the target language and culture. This interesting insight of the repercussion of culture specific concepts associated to lexical items in the foreign language reinforces the importance we contribute to cultural assumptions and conceptual knowledge underlying and affecting intercultural communication.

2.5 Assumptions

This view on conceptual knowledge as constraining the interpretation of utterances leads us to consider the notion of deductive functioning (theory of relevance by Sperber – Wilson 1982). The mechanism of generating inferences relies on a formal system of deductions: we "read" new assumptions and adjust them to the assumptions that already exist in our memory. By applying deductive rules, the mechanism rejects redundancies and resolves possible contradictions in terms of the relative weight of the assumptions. One of the main functions is that of deriving the implications of any new information in relation to the already existing assumptions. This type of inference is known as contextual implication, since here context is understood as a set of premises that is used for the interpretation of each utterance. First, the deductive mechanism derives the analytical implications of the new assumption and, then works out any synthetical implications, that might be obtained by the combination of the new assumption with the existing ones. The resulting contextual effects can be of two types: reinforcement (the new assumptions reinforce the previous one), or contradiction (the new information weakens or contradicts the previous ones). In the first case, the mechanism will increase the

force of the assumption, in the second case the contradiction will be resolved in terms of the higher probability or veracity of one of the assumptions.

Thus, the interpretation of utterances puts to work a mechanism by which contextual implications are obtained. Once new information is combined with the previous knowledge, it is crucial to detect the resulting contextual effects. There are three ways of determining whether a new item of information may create contextual effects:

1. it may allow the derivation of a contextual implication;

2. it may provide further evidence for, and hence strengthen, an existing assumption;

3. it may contradict an existing assumption.

Only when an item has a contextual effect will it be considered relevant in that context. In each case establishing the relevance of a new assumption involves inference, and in each case it entails the interaction of existing assumptions with the new assumptions. In the case of contradiction, the weight of the assumption will depend on several factors. First, if an assumption is the product of the individual's experience it will have a greater force, and second, if the assumption has been transmitted by persons that we consider trustworthy or experts it will weigh more than one transmitted by people we hardly know. The suggestion is that in processing information we try to balance costs and rewards – one automatically processes each new item of information in a context in which it yields a maximal contextual effect for a minimum cost in processing.

If we apply these mental processes to intercultural interaction it may show the difficulties that arise from speakers with different sets of cultural and conceptual assumptions. As Gumperz (2001) points out, among members from different cultural background, their assumptions about what information is to be transmitted, how it is organized and put into words as well as their conceptualization cues, may vary.

A twofold conflict may arise: a) when new assumptions from the foreign culture contradict the ones assumed in the native culture, this experience may entail a threat to the speaker's beliefs and his/her worldview; b) even when using the same linguistic code speakers are acting upon assumptions that do not coincide, so that the outcoming misunderstanding will shatter their self-image or public self.

2.6 The public self

As we have mentioned above, a conflict in contradicting assumptions might threaten an individual's worldview as well as his/her *face*. The awareness of a clash between assumptions, values, beliefs and social norms will lead to a culture shock (Brown 1986) and even more so, apparently endanger the social role

that the individual plays. In intercultural encounters, these kind of conflicts might affect the "selves" both of the foreign and the native speaker.

From the view of cognitive psychology, the self is structured into a collection of schemas, prototypes, goals and assumptions. As already outlined above, members of the same culture share values, beliefs and schemata, but they also put similar criteria to work in evaluating the relevance of certain types of behaviour for the sense of self-worth (Triandis 1989). The process of self-evaluation entails the use of a set of criteria, among the three facets of the self, distinguished in terms of three reference sources: the public, the independent and the interdependent self; we center our attention on the public self. This facet represents cognition concerning others' views of oneself, and thus relies on the evaluation obtained by others (Somech 2000). The relative differentiation between the self and others varies across cultures. In intercultural interaction, where the differences in underlying assumptions, which – as mentioned before – might affect both the construction and the interpretation of utterances, both foreign and native speakers might feel their self-evaluation threatened. The expectation of the maintenance of certain attitudes or behaviours, as results from underlying cultural values, might be shattered and both speakers will feel their public self, adjusted to certain criteria, has been put into doubt.

Until now, the main body of works in intercultural research has studied and examined the role of the foreign student, his/her constraints in adapting to a foreign culture and language. Nevertheless, it shouldn't go without saying that in intercultural communication not only the foreigner but also the native speaker become involved in a process where success depends on all of the participants, their willingness and the commitment of their "selves" (Scollon – Wong Scollon 1995) to achieve an understanding.

3. Study

3.1 Objectives

Our general aim in this study is to examine how sociocultural knowledge and worldview affect intercultural communication. According to/in terms of the studies reviewed our specific objectives are to study whether in intercultural communication among speakers using the same linguistic code

- differences in schemata and prototypes present obstacles for their mutual understanding;

- differences in speakers' sets of assumptions lead to conflict;

- which differences in assumptions affect speakers' public self.

3.2 Informants

Our informants were 280 students at the University of Murcia, in the Faculty of Arts. The majority are Spanish students of English Philology (80%) and British and German students enroled in the ERASMUS programme (20%), who spend a year at the Faculty of Arts, usually attending lessons in Spanish Philology but also in English Philology. The students are between 21 and 23 years old, with a clear majority of the female gender (90%). All foreign students were spending their first year at a Spanish university, their proficiency in Spanish was of an intermediate level (which during the months of the data collection improved considerably). A high percentage (76%) of the Spanish students had only been abroad on holidays, never on university exchange programmes, so that the everyday contact with the foreign students was also for them the first intensive intercultural experience.

3.3 Data

Postgraduate students from the Department of English Philology spent a whole course from October 1995 until June 1996 recording conversations at the cafeteria and during breaks in the classrooms or aisles. Initially this corpus of data was collected/gathered for a research project on code-switching. Among the instances of taped intercultural interaction, we have chosen a sample of 20 minutes, recorded at the end of the first month of the foreign students' stay at university. Thus, their intercultural contact was still quite recent, though there were hardly any major linguistic problems among the conversations which serve as data upon which the analysis is carried out.

3.4 Procedure

For our present purpose, our methodological procedure will be the following. Based on the theoretical background, the first step consists in analysing several examples of intercultural interaction from a discursive point of view, in order to identify the variables that might cause misunderstandings/due to which misunderstandings are caused. The examples here presented have been sequenced in terms of the causes for misunderstandings. After each example, a brief description of the setting and the participants is given, followed by a brief account for the communicative problems detected. The misunderstandings here are used as linguistic evidence in determining the influence of unrelated cultural assumptions in intercultural communication.

3.5 Analysis

Examples of lexical misunderstandings show the variety of schemata and how participants rely on mini-theories coherent with their own interpretations.

(1)   A: El sábado nos vamos de marcha, te vienes (?)
        B: De (.) de marcha... no, no gracias ...(eh) no me gustan mucho las marchas
        A: Pues, entonces ... (pausa) qué haceis en Inglaterra los sábados por la noche
        B: Por las noches ... de noche salimos a tomar copas ... a bailar...
        A: Pues... si a eso me refiero ...
        B: Aaahh..., yo creia que te referias a ver... a ir a ver una marcha
        A: ... con marcha

(Recorded on 27th of October, 12:14 p.m. at the cafeteria. Conversation between a Spanish female student and a British male student).

Even though the British student was familiar with one of the semantic meanings of the term 'marcha', he ignored its slangy application by the youth subculture to the meaning of 'going out'. In this case, the misunderstanding is being worked out by student A's insistence, though, this does not always happen. Of course, the misunderstanding happens because there exist alternative possible schemata which in turn are due to possible alternative interpretations for the lexical item.

Consider the following example of lexical misunderstanding due to different assumptions that have not been revealed at the time of interaction:

(2)   A: ... decidimos comer arroz el martes, y ...y se ofrece Sophie a prepararlo (.) a mi me extrañó un poco que supiera pero insistió en que sabía cocinar un buen arroz .... (hehehe)...
        B: Y qué pasó (?)
        A: Pues que al mediodia ..(hm). nos encontramos que había hecho ... (hehehe) arroz *blanco*

(Recorded on 27th of October, 2:23 p.m. in the lift, conversation between two Spanish female students)

Despite the fact that the foreign student knew the literal meaning of 'rice' for the word *arroz* she was unaware of its local application for a dish similar to 'paella'.

Expected sequences of activities, also called schema or script may also entail problems or at least astonishment for the foreign student. The following description of a British student of his first experience in going out and having *tapas* (little snacks served with sticks that held, for instance, an olive and a piece of cheese together) reveals his reaction towards the Spanish schema shattering his own script-expectation.

(3)   A: ... and we had (.) tapas over and over again (.) you know...eh and they ordered, ordered and no-one paid
        B: no-one paid (?)

        A: no, not at all, it was amazing, I (.) I was getting so embarrassed, you know
        B: eh
        A: but when they said to go to another place (.) the waiter just counted the sticks and told us how much...
        B: (he he he) and no-one dropped a stick or what (?)

(Recorded on 27th of October, 2:46 p.m., conversation between two female British students)

The investigation of the procedural infrastructure of interaction here is used to explore contradicted assumptions and their possible resolution. The following exchange illustrates examples of different assumptions about schemata:

(4)   A: Why...why was Irene in such a bad mood yesterday(?)
        B: Well (.) because you came too early and hm (.) she wasn't dressed.
        A: Too early(?) but you said come around after dinner
        B: Yes(.) but here we have dinner at nine or even ten o' clock (.) anyway, before half past ten or eleven no one goes out ... at that time you only meet kids in the streets

(Recorded on 27th of October, 10:32 a.m. in an aisle during a break, conversation between a Spanish male and a British female student)

These reported misunderstandings are significant for what they reveal about the exchange in which they are embedded, and, at the time, about how assumptions affect social behaviour.

(5)   A: Don't you think that..(eh)... that Lidia behaves in a...eh... funny way lately (?)
        B: Didn't you meet her yesterday for lunch?
        A: Yes, I did...eh...I
        B: Well, then... why didn't you ask her...
        A: ...that's why I'm...now listen
        B: ...what' wrong with her(?)
        A: Ah ... I couldn't do that hm you see that's why I thought maybe you knew something...
        B: Well... just go and ask her.
        A: No no I just can't ask her such an intimate question
        B: *In*timate intimate question....oh come on, you always with your politeness if it'not your business she will tell you...
        A: No I don't see how...
        B: I can't understand *you* and your funny behaviour

(Recorded on the 26th of October, 7:14 p.m. at the cafeteria, conversation between a Spanish female student and a British female student)

In these cases, the conceptual power of the assumptions on social behaviour does not affect the linguistic understanding but leads to a conflict of views that is not resolved. What is being instantiated is a culturally specific meaning of social behaviour that sets up a contrast of views on interpersonal relationships.

Also differences in politeness may be conveyed by means of differences in intonation patterns. This interaction took place between two students referring to the British student who was leaving.

(6)   A: Bye, bye (.) loves. Have a nice day (!)
        B: Bye.
        C: (mocking tone) Bye, bye Loves! Doesn't she sound phoney ... always this (hm) sing-song in her voice ... as if it makes her any ... any more (pause) simpática. Parece una ...
        B: anda nena, you know que hablan así
        C: hipócrita

(Recorded on 27th of October at 9:13 a.m. at the cafeteria, conversation between two Spanish female students).

Mainly the tone of the British student is interpreted as an excess of politeness or in Scollon's terms as an involvement strategy which – probably due to a lack of solidarity between the British girl and speaker C – is considered as "talking down" on her.

In what follows, I offer an example of an exchange that clearly illustrates unrelated assumptions as consequences of different associative processes:

(7)   A: Don't you see the relationship with ...
        B: No, I really don't think... I think it is a personal matter...
        A: ...their general attitude (.) but how can a visit be a personal matter, it is something social or whatever...
        B: Well (.) but it is an individual decision...opinion, whether you like it or...I mean whether you want to...
        A: Come on (hm) it's absolutely normal to visit each other to pop in or out no one will send you a card or ask if it is convenient or so
        B: yes (.) but visiting all the time I I mean (.) I understand a visit as something that concerns two persons or ...that...at home we... at least we ask..
        A: Or you get used to it... or you will end up quite lonely

(Recorded on 28th of October, 10:35 a.m. at the cafeteria, conversation between a Spanish female student and a British female student)

Again, we have here differing concepts of the term 'visit' but also different ways of associating it to interpersonal behaviour. Whereas A relates it to her personal experiences, B considers it from a social perspective though her view is also constrained by cultural experiences.

Within these considerations of social behaviour, finally, we will examine how underlying assumptions reflect participants' attitudes in taking a rather different tack with respect to social values. The following exchange stands for a conflict due to different cultural ranges of values:

(8)   A: Deberías tratar a tu novia hm con más respeto
        B: No te metas (.) yo tampoco (!) te digo cómo tienes que comportarte

(Recorded on 27th of october 13'45 p.m. at my office. Conversation between a German male student and a Spanish male student during a debate at/in a tutorial).

Another example of a clash in social behaviour, related to differences in gender relationships is the following:

(9)   A: Can you believe it, he gave me 'smack' a kiss on my mouth. Bloody... how would you say...(eh) cabron
        B: yeah but if you looked at him the way you do, with those cow eyes
        A: cow eyes.(?)..Me (?)
        B: he must think you are up to something else
        A: I have cow eyes, you silly bitch (!), I just look ...
        B: just remember yesterday in the bar, there happened the same
        A: ...that's not the same, different, that was different
        B: was it, was it? People,well boys just don't understand your...
        A: gosh, now I don't even know how to look at people!

(Recorded on 28 of October, 7:26 p.m. at the cafeteria, conversation between a Spanish female and a British female student).

The analysis of misunderstandings evidences that participants' interpretation and construction of utterances are dependent on their cultural assumptions. These tape-recorded conversations between ERASMUS students and Spanish students as data offer invaluable insights into how participants construct intersubjectivity.

Most examples reveal that speakers' purposes as well as their expectations in conversation are rooted in cultural assumptions. Thus, insights into how the success of communication entails the participants' sharing conceptual schemata may lead us to consider a deeper level than just the interpretation of surface linguistic elements. In investigating intercultural discourse for the variables reviewed, our findings pinpoint the relevance of certain factors as causes for major misunderstandings that will be further discussed.

4. Discussion

From the data analysed above, we can conclude that in general terms differences in schemata, prototypes and in cultural assumptions hinder the understanding in intercultural interaction. In particular, those conflicts that are not easily perceived as such and, therefore not quickly resolved, may affect the speakers' attitudes towards each other. As our further discussion will pinpoint, however, even though the conflict becomes immediately obvious, whenever the clash of assumptions threatens the face of the participants, negative and hostile feelings emerge that cannot be easily erased and which, by means of generalization, might create xenophobic attitudes.

In fact, all the instances of interaction recorded in the 20 minutes chosen offer some minor or major misunderstandings. *Miscommunication caused by lexical misunderstandings* (see (1) and (2)) is prone to arise through the speakers' immediate awareness of the semantic misinterpretation., through self-repair or other repair (Sacks 1975) participants realise that a misunderstanding has occurred. Also, since native speakers are familiar with the possible semantic meanings or implicatures, they can quickly recognise the foreign speaker's lexical confusion.

In the case of *differences in schemata* the native speakers familiarity with the dominant cultural context also allows for a rather quick awareness of the foreigner's "faulty" application of his/her cultural schemata and the underlying asumptions or expectations, as in the case of timing or sequential activities. Even though these instances of miscommunication might create a temporary clash of contextual interpretations, they do not interfere with the interpersonal relationships ((3) and (4)) if quickly resolved. Nevertheless, it should be taken into account, that a delay in the conflict-solving processes might either create subsequent misunderstandings or lead to the piling up of other miscommunicative outcomes. Whenever any of these circumstances arises, it can be predicted that negative attitudes both towards the behaviour, as well as towards the personality of the speaker will arise.

Related to *politeness and the degree of indirectness*, diverging assumptions do affect social behaviour and, as we see in examples (5), (6) and (7), already distort speakers' perception of the social "adequacy" of the foreigner's behaviour. That implies that as far as social norms of behaviour are concerned, speakers start to "judge" not only the explicit conduct but also the foreigner's personality. In (5) the foreign student is considered "funny"; in (6) the British girl is perceived as being hypocritical and example (7) contains the threat of no longer being accepted by the community. The perception of these rather contemptuous attitudes towards them, in turn, will evoke rejecting attitudes by the incoming students towards the host community. Thus, differences in assumptions on social behaviour already shatter interpersonal relationships and put the public self of the speakers into question.

Nevertheless, it is with (8) and (9) that the *asymmetrical assumptions* most clearly evidence a threat to the participants' identity. In these cases, the native speaker (in (8)), and the foreign student (in (9)) feel their public self attacked and suffer from the conflict of cultural values. Considering these examples we may state that the encounter with a foreign speaker implies not only the danger of seeing the unquestioned validity of one's worldview, values, beliefs and cognitive structures put into doubt but, more importantly, the very essence of one's self-worth is threatened. If we suppose that someone does not share the importance given by us to honesty or, alternatively, to saving face, we will regard him/her as at least uneducated, or even suspect severe faults in his/her personality. A German student who, in public, reproaches a Spanish student for his behaviour commits a major offence, since his/her choice of directness and honesty (highly valued in German education) clashes directly with the Spanish need for the maintenance of face. Thus, it is no longer a question of miscommunication due to lexical or contextual misinterpretations, nor to social appropriateness but to speakers' identification with certain cultural values and, therefore, the conflict will be highly face-threatening for all the participants involved. It might be also worth noting, that in both cases the conflict emerges from conflicting views on gender relationships.

To sum up, it can be deduced that an accumulation of negative intercultural experiences both by the visiting students as well as by the host community not only will obstacle further intercultural contact but even promote the development of xenophobic and, therefore, ethnocentric attitudes. If the findings of the study of such a small sample reveal so many problems among people who as students of foreign languages at least are supposed to nourish a positive disposition towards the speakers of the language they are acquiring, the question that consequently arises is: how will people in less favourable circumstances ever communicate and understand each other?

However, as mentioned above, we ordered the examples in terms of the causes for miscommunication, it is only by means of analysis that we became aware of the increasing negative effects of misunderstandings which in turn means an amounting danger for successful intercultural interaction. In spite of this rather small sample, I think that these findings are telling enough to conduct further research in this field. Viewing these insights from the perspective of intercultural competence, the process of reshaping one's worldview must not only be undertaken by the learner of a foreign language but by any speaker who enters into intercultural contact. In this respect, I will insist on the importance of intercultural competence for both speakers – native and foreign – which entails a re-orientation of intercultural communication education.

5. Consequences for Intercultural Education

5.1 Theoretical suggestions

Regarding the relevance unrelated assumptions acquired in interaction, I insist on the view that successful communication presupposes speakers sharing cultural assumptions as well as associative processes. It seems obvious, and it has been the main concern of studies on intercultural communication, that the foreign speaker must adapt his/her attitudes, assumptions, linguistic and non-linguistic behaviour to the new cultural and linguistic expectations/circumstances. However, all the examples above also reveal that a certain effort is required by the native speaker. Though s/he will automatically expect the foreign speaker to adjust to her/his own cultural/linguistic norms, s/he cannot totally escape from facing at least glimpses of the foreigner's worldview. Thus, intercultural encounters will not only imply a psychological, cultural and linguistic adjustment by the foreign students but will also put some strain on the native speaker's empathy. Also her/his public self is suddenly put into question, since the verbal and non-verbal behaviour assumed to be correct/adequate in her/his culture enters into conflict with the foreigner's expectations. As we know from the studies on the negotiation of face (Scollon – Wong Scollon 1995) or the reading of contextualization cues, successful communication relies on both participants' need for understanding. From this perspective the socialization proceeses in primary as well as secondary education should always offer learners' the alternative behaviour or at least make them aware of the relativity of social norms. Thus, the conflict in examples (5), (6) and (7) would be diminished by participants' awareness of an intercultural politeness.

Responding to scholarly work driven by the approaches of social scientists and from other perspectives, still insufficient in their contribution to our understanding of intercultural interaction, Casmir (1999) proposes a third-culture building model. Taking up my position that intercultural communication "suffers" from unrelated sets of assumptions, he also points to the need to find ways of resolving the differences that arise in what he calls *emic events* (interactions) in intercultural encounters. Starting from a conceptual framework, the chaos theory, he suggests that communication processes allow for ambiguity and the creation of meaning under chaotic circumstances, as a possible answer to the challenges that involve interaction between speakers from differing cultural systems. Intercultural contacts bring people into direct contact with disorganization, inconsistencies which characterize the evolution process of any system (Iannone 1995). In view of this, Casmir (1999: 100) offers both a conceptual redefinition of the study of intercultural communication, as well as a methodological one.

Casmir's presupposition that humans have the capacity to adapt to almost any new situation by re-negotiating meanings, settles the basic requirement for human beings engaged in interaction as a dynamic ongoing process of sense-making. His third-culture building model, consisting of four phases, entails the presupposition of the participants' commitment to keep the dialogue going, as well as their awareness of the cost that the re-negotiation of purposes, standards, methods, goals and rules involves, while gaining the benefit of an understanding of and appreciation for others. In this context, Casmir also discusses the insights of Bell and Healy (1992) of dyadic relationships as mini-cultures which are built on social prototypes, and suggests that the third-culture building process also involves a meaningful change of these social prototypes. Examples (1), (2) and (3) of our study, in this sense, coul be resolved by participants' negotiation of schemata and prototypes.

For us, apart from the relevance this study attributes to culture as an ever-changing process, and of communication as the essential issue, the notion of communication not only as a product of culture but also as producing culture, becomes the main contribution to our new dimension and further proposal. It clearly means that interaction is not only the outcome of two speakers with their cultural background and constraints attempting to find a common/shared ground for communicating. It also means that these two speakers are creating an ever changing process of understanding, a "new cultural product", where different assumptions are not only meant to reinforce each other, to resolve contradictions or to converge, but also that the speakers' range of assumptions might become extended by keeping the previous assumption, and adding a new one that is considered as valid as the other one but in/for a new context. In line with Fantini's suggestion (1995) intercultural competence should offer the possibility of transcending the limitations of one's singular worldview. However, as we have outlined so far, intercultural competence does not "only" consist of/require the foreign learner's acceptance or adoption of a second worldview. Intercultural encounters and interaction entail the expansion of assumptions both of the foreign as well as the native speaker. The overcoming of one's cultural bounderies and the assimilation of alternative worldviews could become the only and best solution to expand one's public self and to tolerate the "face of otherness".

The most essential assumption underlying/required for this perspective is that interaction cannot only be considered as an outcome/product of linguistic and cultural knowledge – activating existing assumptions, but also as the origin of a new culture. Also any act of communication definitly creates and produces culture and meaning. Whether by maintaining, reinforcing or synthesizing cultural assumptions, or even – and this would be the turning point of this paper – by creating new assumptions valid for two, three or four cultures.

5.2 Methodological suggestions

The previous overview of different factors underlying the conflicts given in intercultural interaction as well as the examples has led us to make at least two essential suggestions:

1. Intercultural communication not only depends on speakers sharing the same language and "situational" context or even similar worldview, which would be the surface conditions, but it involves the consideration of a deeper structure that consists of:

    a)   sets of differing assumptions;

    b)   different processes of relating terms to concepts and/or assumptions.

2. A new dimension of viewing intercultural education, which would imply its application to all levels and types of institutions by means of:

    a)   putting to work the awareness of the differing assumptions and associative processes in preparing learners for intercultural encounters, both from the perspective of entering a foreign culture as from the perspective of dealing with foreigners in one's own culture, as well as

    b)   creating an extended set of assumptions and interpretive processes that allow for a broadening of a "deep structure" to which speakers from different cultural backgrounds may recurr first in learning a different language and second, when interacting in a foreign language;

    c)   highlighting the constructive nature of communication that enables speakers to build up a shared "new" culture allowing for a wider framework for self- and other evaluation.

So far, in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT), attention has almost exclusively been paid to the acquisition of linguistic elements, skills and devices. Language has been considered as a key factor in reproducing and maintaining conventions and traditions. Research in intercultural communication has been leaning on insights in FLT, though the findings of the impact of cultural background/knowledge on language use has gradually shifted the interest and relevance given to conceptual knowledge. As Corson (1995) states, worldview is at its most visible when people use culturally specific discourse norms that give an objective manifestation of cultural values mediating between worldview and language. Discourse norms are reinforced within cultural groups by everyday exposure to them. These norms are the expressions of the values of culture, they provide important data that help reproduce cultural worldviews, which again reinforce discourse norms.

However, the findings in research on the interdependence of language and culture in intercultural interaction may serve to shed some light on our inverted focus that puts the emphasis on alternative culture learning.

So, if we consider A.E. Fantini's article "Exploring bilingual behaviour" we might deduce some insights for intercultural teaching.[7] Regarding bilingual behaviour as differentiated behaviour (1992: 74) means that the speaker must be able to choose whether to use one language or the other in terms of participants' proficiency and the context of situation, so that an ability for the linguistic differentiation of both languages is given. It also implies that since bilingual speakers are able to use languages separately, they must be responsive to social circumstances, making the appropriate choice as each situation demands. Thus, bilingual children not only acquire but also learn to acknowledge the effects of external variables which require the linguistic choice mentioned. These contextual cues indicate a) the physical circumstances (place, setting) of the conversation, b) relevant social factors in the communication (physical aspects: age, sex, fluency, relationship, etc.) and c) the topics dealt with. Bilinguals, therefore, are capable to keep the conceptual systems of two language distinct and to move within a metacultural *Zwischenwelt* (Agar 1991). In adapting these considerations to Intercultural Education, they may serve to propose a new approach.

If we no longer regard culture as something physical and material but as an abstract notion produced by thought, it will be easier to undertake its expansion. From this perspective speakers will understand culture as a frame for common rules, common assumptions and common values. Now, communication viewed as the creation of meaning, enables us to reconsider our starting point, that in intercultural communication speakers may share the same signifiers but refer to different signifieds, that is to different meanings. The combination/adding of the meaning assumed by speaker A and the one assumed by speaker B will allow for the expansion of the range of meanings involved. Thus in intercultural communication, culture and discourse would both become the signifier, respectively, for woldview and language as being signified. The main objective should be the creation of shared meaning between people who are more different than alike. The high degree of differences in the experiential backgrounds of communicators

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[7] Fantini mentions an "incipient" type of bilingualism as a human action born of empathy and based on the willingness to attempt to communicate. Thus, he argues that bilingualism not only involves knowledge and communicative skills, but also awareness and attitudes. Given the diversity among types of bilingualism, different aspects have to be considered, such as: 1) languages used; 2) types of languages involved; 3) function; i.e. the condition of learning and use (age and exposure patterns); 4) degree of proficiency in each language and the four skills; 5) alternation patterns; i.e. codeswitching; and 6) interaction between the languages. Among these aspects we will focus our attention on the exposure, that is with whom, in which context, and with what intentions each language is used.

will emphasize the so-called domain of difference. Now, if we apply the insights obtained from the analysis of examples we must proceed in the following order:

– Intercultural Education must give priority to furthering the capacity to negotiate worldviews and discourse norms of all language learners (culture-general content).

– Teaching processes shall promote learners' expansion of cultural frames for self evaluation and the acceptance of otheness.

– Stress must be put on the expansion of assumptions by means of the transmission of conceptual cultural knowledge (schema, prototypes) and different associative processes (culture-specific topics).

– Relevance will be given to the teaching of sets of interpretive procedures that allow the appropriate reading of external variables.

Considerations in conducting any intercultural training programme entail the development of the following steps: 1. Needs assessment; 2. Purpose and Goals of the Training; 3. Planning and Design; 4. Methodological Flexibility; 5. Training components; 6. Techniques and Activities. Thus, any programme will be adapted to the specific needs of the language learners and develop the subsequent objectives and methodology accordingly.

In teaching any language to students an intercultural approach has to set up several primary goals. First, trainers are going to help them recognise their own cultural patterns and the way these affect their way of living and their worldview. Second, students' cultural awareness shall be cultivated by acknowledging the different components, which intervene in communication. After this essential introduction that establishes the link between culture and communication, students will be made aware of the influence cultural differences have on intercultural communication and on their sense of self-worth. Thus, students will learn about the role of norms, values, beliefs, attitudes etc. as well as verbal and non-verbal components in communication. The achievement of these goals will shape the design of the didactic cultural syllabus to be developed (Seelye 1987, 1996). The combination of affective, cognitive and behavioural goals, as it has been advocated in multidimensional approaches Bennett (1986), Gudykunst – Ting-Toomey – Wiseman (1991), also entails the integration of culture-general and culture-specific content. Teachers will help students anticipate differences as well as master alternative reactions towards cultural conflicts or miscommunication by means of exercises adaptable to cross-cultural objectives.

A methodology for intercultural learning must be the meeting point of various strengths in which teachers and trainers might invest future creative energies. These strengths should focus on several aspects that we consider relevant for the development of a methodology for intercultural activities (Seelye 1996). In offering an expanded range of context, circumstances and perspectives, students will be helped to develop new frames of reference for understanding behaviour and for their self and other evaluation. The next step consists of furthering students' awareness of the cultural dimensions of communication. By means of extending their conceptual knowledge, both techniques and activities shall open students to a broader range of interpretation of cultural values, products and processes.

Most of the current learning should be built around incidents of cross-cultural misunderstanding. This offers advantages over traditional approaches such as reading a book about the culture.

As we have attempted to emphasize, language learners shall be given the suitable equipment to acquire alternative intepretive frames in order to enable them to move into a "metacultural worldview", to build up a new shared culture between the participants of any communication in any intercultural encounter.

As I have mentioned above, this methodological approach would not be limited to FL learners but to any language learners – a link already suggested by Sawyer and Smith (1994) – for sooner or later any one of us will either be the foreigner or have to deal with foreigners. It seems obvious that there cannot be a strict rule about how to put this methodology to work. It always requires needs assessment in the first place. Activities and goals must be flexible, adaptable to specific cultural contexts and the participants' needs and expectations. The relationship to the methodology must be, both for the trainers and for the students, personal, dynamic and, therefore, creative.

It is not our aim in the present paper to offer an extensive methodological proposal. However, in general it can be argued that by means of applying these suggestions to a second language classroom, learners will profit from a greater awareness of the principles governing accurate communication, rapport and persuasion in intercultural encounters.

As a formalized field of study intercultural communication is barely 25 years old. In this time, decisions about methodologies are made in a constant re-examination process so as to facilitate intercultural learning. The current state of this field not only allows for the enrichment by theory from fields of psychology, organizational development, anthropology but it also demands a further investment of creative energies, in particular, in the identification of skills, as well as in the development of activities that feature the role of language in intercultural communication, and in the design of specific objectives. There is still a long way to go until the need for intercultural education will be recognized, and until intercultural education will be able to cover the conflicts and misunderstandings

arising from intercultural contact. However, more than ever, it seems worthwhile to invest our creative energies in it.

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