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Intercultural Miscommunication Past and Present

Barbara Kryk-Kastovsky
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Introduction

Barbara Kryk-Kastovsky

The notion of miscommunication has been claimed as an area of interest in various disciplines: theory of communication, ethnomethodology, intercultural studies, discourse analysis, and many more, cf. e.g. Carbaugh (1990), Coupland et al. (1991), Kotthoff and Spencer-Oatey (2007), Scollon and Scollon (1995). The present volume takes a somewhat different angle than all the interdisciplinary studies and proposes a reverse order, i.e. from linguistic issues to intercultural phenomena, thus postulating a case for intercultural miscommunication *as a linguistically-based phenomenon* in various intercultural milieus.

The contributions to this volume address a wide spectrum of instances of intercultural miscommunication in various (possibly confrontational) discourses and employ a number of analytical tools to tackle the problem. These range from miscommunication in professional communities of practice, through cultural scripts, discourse-analytic investigations (professional or political discourse as opposed to literary or everyday discourse), and finally discourse of the past accountable for within the framework of diachronic pragmatics.

Two of the papers on institutional and workplace settings discuss the problems in communication occurring in the academic community of practice. In her contribution "Concessivity in scholarly prose: An inter-cultural study" Zofia Golebiowski investigates contrastive rhetorical strategies used in three sociology research papers written in English and published in international sociological journals. The papers have been written by scholars of different linguistic-cultural backgrounds: the first is authored by native speakers of English, the second by a Polish scholar now working in an Anglo community, and the third by a Polish writer from the Polish discourse community. The rhetorical strategies employed in the three papers are analysed from the point of view of their textual function, frequency of occurrence, hierarchical location, discoursal prominence, and explicitness. The main goal of the study is to illustrate to what extent the choice of contrastive structures is culturally-conditioned across the investigated texts and to demonstrate the interface of the variation of their utilisation and the discoursal meaning. The analysis hints at certain tendencies in academic prose authored by representatives of different discourse communities. The similarities might be due to the stylistic conventions and traditions shared by the research community in sociology, whereas the variations in the mode of employment of contrastive structures might be caused by the authors' differing linguistic backgrounds and discourse community memberships, likely to cause miscommunication in academic discussions.

Within the same realm, Matylda Weidner's paper "On some 'dis-ings' leading to a possible 'mis-ing'" discusses non-conformist cases in Polish institutional culture illustrated by data from doctor-patient interaction. Although traditionally the two social groups have observed a strict division of labour, it is shown that the peculiar social order in the medical domain and the different sets of beliefs and explanatory models stemming from different worlds lead to a clash. The analysis of audio-taped data from Polish hospitals demonstrates how the doctor-patient interaction goes beyond the insti-

tutionally acculturated models of health communication practice. The relatively new phenomenon of the patient's active participation in the medical interview (manifested through topic initiation) might give rise to a new perception of the doctor-patient interaction in Poland. Consequently, a new, more flexible model of the doctor-patient interaction, going beyond the traditional institutional roles, might have to be postulated.

Another paper touching upon the concept of cultural scripts (by Antolij Dorodnych and Anna Kuzio) "The role of cultural scripts and contextualisation cues in intercultural (mis)communication" aims at analysing the possible areas of difficulty in the communication process between speakers of English, on the one hand, and speakers of Russian and Polish, on the other. The authors assume that despite an increasing intercultural competence among speakers of various languages, most speakers communicate as they would in their familiar linguistic and cultural environment, i.e. without self-monitoring. The paper focuses on the communication among such interlocutors and proposes a three-stage procedure whereby a speaker should check 1) if the same frames/schemata/scripts are evoked by representatives of different cultures, 2) if they adhere to pragmatic principles in similar ways, and 3) if the similarities are a result of a previous experience with such intercultural encounters. The authors illustrate their procedure with examples from the domain of literary translation. The notion of gender is selected as a potential stumbling block since English, as opposed to Russian and Polish, has no grammatical gender distinctions. Thus, as a result of misunderstanding inadequate or even faulty translations might occur.

In his contribution "Cultural scripts and communication style differences in three Anglo Englishes (English English, American English and Australian English") Cliff Goddard applies the notions of cultural keywords and cultural scripts to demonstrate that apart from the obvious common linguistic core the three varieties of English vary and the danger of miscommunication arises especially when national stereotypes and preconceptions come into play. The analysis employs the techniques of contrastive ethnopragmatics to the three varieties of English in two areas: self-presentation and humour styles. It turns out that although the Australian culture has much in common with the British culture, many divergences between the two can be observed. Therefore, the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) is called for since it can provide a range of semantic primes shared by various languages and cultures, thus also by different varieties of English. Even more significantly, cultural scripts expressed in terms of semantic primes can capture some subtle ways of speaking and understanding the world. Notwithstanding, the paper also warns against the dangers of generalising about "national Englishes" and reproducing stereotypes.

Another major topic present in the volume are cultural scripts, one of the analytical tools in intercultural studies worked out in the last few years by Anna Wierzbicka and Cliff Goddard in Australia, which then spread to linguistic communities in other parts of the world. The paper by Anna Wierzbicka "When cultural scripts clash: Miscommunication in "multicultural" Australia" concerns the dangers faced by the English language as a means of international and intercultural communication. The author points to the paradox that endowing what she calls "Anglo-English" with the role of an international medium of communication ("international English") can lead to miscommunication. The main claim of the paper is that English cannot be treated as a cul-

turally neutral medium of communication but rather as a set of hidden cultural assumptions of which the (both native and non-native) speakers should be made aware. In order for the usage of English to be effective, Wierzbicka proposes boiling down the cultural assumptions to Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) which English shares with other natural languages. "NSM English" consists of about 60 universal concepts already widely used in intercultural and pragmatic studies. The analysis applies NSM to some new areas of investigation, like bilingual experience and some key words in English which underlie Anglo-specific types of discourse and represent Anglo-specific norms, thus they can hinder intercultural communication.

The phenomenon of miscommunication cannot possibly be tackled without discussing the obvious intercultural differences which crop up in various nationally- and culturally-determined communities of practice, often ensuing from political contacts, as in the papers discussing the (mis-)communication within the European Union (Krzyzanowski).or the European-Chinese relations (Trappl).

As Michał Krzyzanowski points out at the outset of his paper "(Mis-)communicating in Europe? On deficiencies and challenges in political and institutional communication in the European Union", EU has always had to grapple with the so-called 'democratic problem'. This might have been due to the different forms of communication within the EU-institutions, so the analysis aims at presenting where and why communication is central to the politics and policy-making process of the European Union. The author focuses on three areas: the internal communication between the EU institutions, the external channels and strategies of communicating the EU-politics, and the processes of construction of Europe- and EU-related transnational European Public Sphere. He argues that although central for forging democratic legitimacy of the EU, and despite gaining some attention in recent years, communication in the EU system is still often wrongly conceived and suffers from many misconceptions about how it should be organised and managed to the benefit of the Union's governance and its democratic reconnection with the European *demos*.

Hence the chapter allows assessing different channels and strategies of political communication at several levels of the EU polity - i.e. both within and outside of the institutions of the European Union – from a critical and interdisciplinary perspective drawing on insights from within such fields as, e.g. EU integration research, political sociology, media and communication studies and European social history as well as the more empirically-oriented approaches from within interdisciplinary critical discourse studies (cf. Reisigl and Wodak, 2009; Wodak and Krzyżanowski, 2008).

Along similar lines, the paper by Richard Trappl concerns the issue of intercultural terminology of two culturally and linguistically remote discourse communities, viz. West European vs. Chinese. The paper deals with the problem of the political implications of the terminology used across national and cultural borders in a bilateral dialogue between the European Union and China. The starting point is the controversy in the Western media concerning the Olympic Games in China 2008, where the different connotations given to certain phenomena in the Western vs. Chinese media led to misunderstandings on individual, national, and intercultural levels. The study investigates a number of terms crucial for international contacts between Western Europe and China and their possible intercultural misinterpretations leading to miscommunication.

The terms include such fundamental notions as *culture, diversity, context, structure, regionalism*, etc. The analysis of the Chinese terms from various angles, like encyclopaedic entries and everyday usage in Chinese media, reveals that they have a range of possible equivalents in English, much more complex than simple dictionary definitions. In view of the above, the study hints at a multifaceted usage of political terms on the international and intercultural level between the Western linguistic-cultural tradition and its Chinese (or, more globally, South-East Asian) counterpart(s).

The next two contributions focus on miscommunication in (literary and institutional) discourse. The paper by Maria Marta Garcia Negroni and Maria Laura Spoturno "Bridging gaps across cultures: The use of glosses in Chicano literature" stands out from the other contributions since it deals with a literary topic. The authors emphasize that the use of glosses in Chicano literary discourse, like in other minority and diaspora literature and postcolonial writing, constitutes a challenge to the discourse analyst since in such cases the discourses reflect the interaction of linguistic and cultural elements associated with more than one cultural community. The authors illustrate their claim by the analysis of the works of a Chicano writer Cisnero whose use of glosses has a double discursive function. Firstly, it is designed to explain cultural-linguistic meanings alien to the Anglo readers, and secondly, it indicates the incapacity of the speakers of English to express certain meanings. As a result of this double function of the glosses, the authors have divided their corpus into two parts. In the first part, the intention to bridge the gap between two cultures through the use of glosses is made manifest. In the second part, the tension between languages and cultures becomes most evident in situation of open conflict. In conclusion, the authors express their conviction that an analysis of glosses will contribute to building an intercultural discourse designed to bridge the gap across communities.

The paper by Denise Gassner combines the workplace milieu with discoursal issues, since it compares the use of vague language by L1 and L2 speakers in institutional discourse in Australia. The study discusses various manifestations of vague language, like hedges, modality, approximators, etc., the claim being that although vague language has usually been associated with casual discourse, it can also be observed elsewhere, e.g. in workplace contexts. The analysis of job interviews by L1 and L2 speakers of English reveals various functions served by vague language in the L2 context. On the one hand, vagueness can be a manifestation of the level of pragmatic competence achieved by L2 speakers. On the other hand, it can reveal how an imprecise way of expression sometimes serves as a convenient strategy concealing the learner's language limitations in L2.

Two papers in the collection concern miscommunication from a historical perspective, since both are based on written language materials from the Early Modern English period. The authors operate within the relatively new framework of diachronic socio-pragmatics, which, paradoxically, aims at studying the use of language in the past. The paradox can be solved by selecting the appropriate kind of data. For instance, one can compare terminology in a particular domain (e.g. law) in different discourse communities at a particular period of the past. This approach is taken by Joanna Kopaczyk in her paper "Communication gaps in 17th century Britain: Explaining legal Scots to English practitioners" which studies one of the earliest Scotts-English glossa-

ries of legal terms. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate the significance of the glossary of 184 Scottish genre-specific legal terms, which the author of the glossary considered different from the terminology known to the English lawyers, hence there would be a possible source of a misunderstanding. The sources of potential problems could be semantic and pragmatic in nature. The semantic problems include borrowings occurring in one language but not in the other and specialised meanings of individual lexical items, whereas the pragmatic problems concern the uses of legal terms in particular contexts. As is demonstrated by Kopaczyk, the underlying idea of the glossary was to foster the uniqueness and independence of the Scottish legal system as compared to its English counterpart.

Another possible way to study the sociopragmatics of the language spoken in the past is to select written language sources with a high degree of orality (i.e. texts which relatively closely represent the spoken idiom of the past). Among the genres with a high degree of orality are courtroom records, which are the topic of the paper by Barbara Kryk-Kastovsky. In her analysis of the trial of King Charles I the author shows how miscommunication is also possible between two communities of practice representing two different social roles, i.e. the king as the defendant and the House of Commons as the court trying him. The miscommunication happened between the two parties on the opposite sides of the bar, i.e. the interrogators and the interrogated (in this case the defendant was King Charles I, who was accused of high treason). The clash and reversal of power relations (in this context the king who lost his power and his prosecutors, whose social status was normally much lower, became the powerful party) created a fertile ground for misunderstanding and miscommunication. Moreover, the miscommunication in that case was not only a linguistic problem but also a legal and political issue. No law could be found in the entire English history which dealt with the trial of a monarch, so that the trial proceedings were organized according to the guidelines written by a Dutch lawyer Dorislaus who did not apply the English case law system but based his work on Roman law stating that the government could legally overthrow a tyrant.

It has been shown in the last two contributions that miscommunication between various communities of practice was an issue as much in the past as it is in the present. Moreover, miscommunication seems to be crossing the historical as much as the sociopragmatic boundaries and produce revealing results for synchronic and diachronic studies in various areas, like NSM, legal language, professional, political and classroom discourse, literary studies, and possibly many others.

It is hoped that the contributions to this volume will widen the perspectives on intercultural (mis-)communication by including some new angles of looking at the relevant issues. For instance, it turns out that many problems in intercultural (mis-)communication can be solved by resorting to the analytical tool of Semantic Metalanguage. Moreover, the political dimension is presented not only as a problem in Critical Discourse Analysis but also a lexicographic problem, whereas the hitherto underestimated diachronic perspective of miscommunication as retrievable from speech-based old language materials throws some new light on the entire domain. Last, but not least, communication difficulties leading to miscommunication in language teaching can be solved by avoiding vagueness or supplying glosses of untranslatable terms.

In conclusion, miscommunication seems to be omnipresent (especially according to some studies which claim that mis-communication is more frequent than unproblematic communication). Thus, apart from the obvious contexts of everyday interaction, one can talk of miscommunication in professional, political and historical contexts. Whether in those milieus miscommunication would be prevalent over "everyday communication" is to be judged by the researchers attending to the issues in the future.

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Barbara Kryk-Kastovsky