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Kulturelle Vielfalt in Europa
Cultural Diversity in Europe
Impressum

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How is it possible for people from different cultures to really understand each other? To get the opinion of a linguist, SIETAR Journal interviewed a leading scholar of Intercultural Communication (IC) in Europe, Patrick Boylan, professor of English Linguistics at the University of Rome III in Italy, a graduate in psychology from Saint Mary’s College in his native California, with a D.E.S. from the University of Paris IV (Sorbonne) in linguistics and stylistics.

Boylan Because words mean only what the person using them intends them to mean. Two people can use the same English word but give it different meanings, as your example of the word report shows: I ask for a report to get the facts but my French assistant gives me a rapport full of interpretations of the facts, because that is how she was taught to write one at school. And so I feel misunderstood, because if I had wanted that, I would have asked for a survey or an in-depth report. But for my French assistant a report is not a report if there is no personal reflection.

Of course, since you’re using English as a non-native but one who is fully immersed in American culture – I can really hear it! –, there will automatically be a high degree of reciprocal understanding between us. Not total, but very high, because in using a word, we are both intending it to mean what it means generally within a given culture (American culture, in our case).

In the same way, there would be no confusion about the word report if, in the situation you described initially, everyone spoke either (1) American English or (2) High German the way you speak them, that is, from within their respective cultures. Let’s take the first case: both managers and staff use American English culturally. If, say, a French manager asks for a report, then her employees know she wants sheets of data, not ideas – otherwise, since she thinks in English like an American, she would have asked for a survey. And the same holds in the second case: since both managers and staff think in German, if the French manager asks for a Bericht, employees will know she wants not just data and not just ideas but a mixture. There is no confusion because everyone is using the same language with the same cultural mind set. Unfortunately most people do not learn second languages culturally, as mind sets, because languages are considered to be sets of grammar rules. This means, to continue with the second case, that, hearing the manager ask for a Bericht and knowing German only grammatically, an American employee may interpret the word as report (after all, that’s what his dictionary says) and produce the wrong thing.

This is not much of a problem because a boss can see the misunderstanding from the sheets of paper and tell the employees what the word Bericht really means (in German culture) and how to write one in the future. The big problem

SIETAR Journal Please tell readers in a more detailed way why we can’t have reciprocal understanding right from the beginning, without the work of learning the other person’s inner language? After all, we are speaking a common language – English.
Understanding Others: An Interview with Patrick Boylan

SIETAR Journal Well, what are these techniques? What kind of strategies can people develop to really understand each other, besides learning the other party’s language culturally?

Boylan The easiest strategy is one many multi or transnational companies use with their mixed-culture employees. They eliminate the problem by eliminating differences through Uniform Company Policy – like the melting pot strategy used in the United States with immigrants.

Take, for example, people’s titles. If a team leader’s name is Mario Rossi and he is an electronics engineer, an Italian would call him »Engineer Rossi«, a French person »Mr. Rossi«, and an American just »Mario«. To eliminate these differences a Uniform Policy statement might specify: When addressing immediate superiors, use family names only (»Rossi«). This reduces possible misunderstandings. Employees cannot seem »too familiar« or »overly formal« with their immediate superiors because there is only one way to say things: the Company way. Another protocol could define what »clean« means on the shop floor. How litter-free must the floor be to qualify as »clean«? Different cultures have different opinions so a Uniform Policy statement would provide specifications. This is like getting employees to use a common language (German, English...) learned culturally, except in this case the language would be an artificial company idiom meant to be »neutral«, with no provision for sub-cultures (well, not officially).

This policy does indeed reduce misunderstandings but it creates another problem: it makes employees less creative. They are seldom themselves. This may be tolerable if they are doing menial tasks. But if the company needs the creative brain power of its employees and wants to get the benefits of intercultural synergy, then it has to let these people express themselves in their own inner language (through the medium of whatever common external repertoire is used in the company: English, German...). In other words, Italian employees have to be left free to use English or German to express, for example, what they mean in Italian by »pulita« (»a one-pass cleaning«, a »once over«).
SIETAR Journal So how can the company keep them from creating a Tower of Babel?

Boylan By giving them a knowledge of what intercultural communication means. And also a knowledge of what language means. This knowledge will enable them to freely limit their use of language in such a way that their interlocutor really understands them. They adapt to each situation and say what works for every interlocutor, because they understand that interlocutor’s culture and know how to render their inner language with an external expression that the interlocutor will truly understand. They do not deny their inner self (as they must with a Uniform Policy), they learn to translate it.

That is precisely the difference between teaching employees to use a commonly shared language (German, English...), learned culturally, and an artificial company idiom meant to be neutral. The company idiom is a straitjacket. It depersonalizes you. But learning to translate your inner self into a commonly-shared language – for example, French, American English, whatever – is creative. And you remain yourself, or rather the person you would be if you had been born in France or America. In a company with a Uniform Policy there is only one way to call your superior: »Rossi«. But in a company using American English as the lingua franca, you – as the somewhat conservative German you seem to be – could call him initially »Mr. Rossi« and if he says »Just call me Mario« and you don’t like being on such familiar terms, you could invent another strategy. For example, you could call him »M.R.« (Mario Rossi) which is a custom in large American companies, one that approaches familiarity but without using first names. Or, jokingly, you could use, in fractured English, the title he is used to in Italian: »Engineer Rossi«. Which could become »E.R.« (»Engineer Rossi«) when you get to know him better. Or you could give him a semiformal nickname: »Rossi« that rhymes with »boss«. Whatever. Using a natural language, you can elaborate the relationship you desire through the language you create. That creativity spills over, then, into your work relationship and your general attitude toward life in the company.

Language beyond words

SIETAR Journal Are you saying that merely knowing the meaning of the words language and intercultural communication will do all this? I don’t see how. Besides, people already know what these words mean!

Boylan What does language mean, then?

SIETAR Journal One commonly used meaning is the system we’re using now to speak. The system of words and grammar rules. The code that we use to codify our messages and then transmit them to someone else.

Boylan Well, that’s a good definition of the kind of language that computers use. SQL or any database query language is the same on each computer linked in a network; database queries are codified in a certain way by one machine, sent over a cable, and then decoded by the receiving machine in the inverse way, with no ambiguity possible.

But this is not the way humans communicate. This is not a good definition of human language.

SIETAR Journal So could you then please explain an adequate definition of human language.

Boylan Let me take again the example of a man and a woman who meet in a romantic setting, think they understand each other, get married and discover only after months and months what the other person really means by words like love, funny, late, we and so on. Take the word we; in some cases, the husband discovers only with time that when the wife says we she means herself and her family or ethnic group – and her husband, too, but only insofar as he acts as a loyal member of her group. Note that I’m not talking about complicated words like democracy, justice, friendship about which books have been written. I’m talking about the most common everyday words possible. People who use these words still misunderstand each other because human language is not codified uniformly in every head, like SQL in every computer.

That’s no problem, of course: as long as people keep things superficial, they have the illusion of perfect understanding. Indeed, some cynics say that marriages last longest when spouses learn not to ask questions. That is, when they choose to avoid a profound relationship that exposes them to discovering differences in meanings that they are perhaps not prepared to accept. This is not my philosophy; but it illustrates a truth: two people never share completely the same ethos (what I called sub-cultures before).

No, humans are not computers. And language is not a ready-made code that you automatically use to transmit thoughts. Language is a deeply sedimented mass of intents, shaped over time by an individual’s interactions with a given community. Language is a will to mean that, initially, two interlocutors do not share entirely and must discover in each other through empathic interaction.

And language does not even necessarily take the form of words. Indeed, it makes use of whatever materials it can find to manifest itself. Deaf children cannot hear words so their will to mean seeks other channels to express itself. For example, they begin to gesture with ever more conscious intent, if they find, in the environment, adults who seem to be interacting meaningfully by gesturing back. These children acquire a Sign Language, which is not the gestural translation of spoken words but rather a representational system of its own, different from – but as comple-
Understanding Others: An Interview with Patrick Boylan

The material diversity of verbal and gestural systems proves that language is something other than words or hand movements: it is the force that created and maintains verbal or gestural repertories as semiotic systems, i.e. as a means for making the «will to mean» of the members of a community visible and intelligible.

SIETAR Journal That’s curious. First you said that I was wrong in defining language as words and grammar rules and you said that language was a «will to mean». But you just called the gestures of deaf people a ‘language’ like High German. Is Sign Language a language? Is High German a language?

Boylan No, they are not. I used the word «language» in speaking of them because it’s what people say and I didn’t want to get complicated. But technically they are semiotic systems, repertories of words or gestures: I should have said the «High German Repertory» and the «Sign Repertory». As for High German as a language, as the expressive force you feel inside you, it is not a repertory of signs but an accumulation of intents, a ‘will to mean’ in a particular way shaped by the repeated interaction with your community and which uses an external repertory of words or gestures to manifest itself.

I realize this definition of «language» sounds strange, but if you have doubts, just consider this example. You have probably met many foreigners who speak German in a way that is perfectly grammatical and «pragmatically appropriate», yet who still sound strange. If the «German language» were just a set of words, grammar rules and pragmatic norms, they would not sound strange. But since they do, «German» must be something else.

SIETAR Journal What else?

Boylan A particular, historically constituted «will to mean». A way of being, and, through that, a way of describing and acting upon the world. You have probably met another kind of foreigner, too, one who speaks German making occasional grammatical and pronunciation errors, yet who talks with a real German mind set or Weltanschauung. After a while, you don’t even notice the errors, right? You understand him readily and he sounds convincing because he speaks your language in the deep sense of this expression.

SIETAR Journal Okay. You mean that the German words of this foreigner are NOT what makes him appear to speak «German»; they are only an outer shell: German is the spirit that guides the way he uses those words. In fact, he could use hand gestures instead of words and he would still seem to speak German. Whereas in the previous case – the foreign-

ners who speak grammatically but still sound strange – the spirit guiding the way they use words is, say, an Italian or Turkish one. They are, in reality, speaking Italian or Turkish using German words and grammatical rules. That is why they are less understandable. And that is why «language» is not words and grammatical rules.

Boylan Precisely. More than «spirit», which takes us back to the nineteenth century, I prefer saying «will to mean». Language is your «will to mean».

Applying theory

SIETAR Journal OK, you have clarified the idea of «language», so let’s return to our topic. What can people do to understand each other if they come from different cultures? What should a company do to promote effective internal and external communication and to avoid imposing Uniform Policies on everyone?

Boylan Actually, I still haven’t clarified what intercultural communication means...

SIETAR Journal Um, well, there are space restrictions in the journal, you know. So... so can you say what intercultural communication means in just a few words?

Boylan Not really.

SIETAR Journal Because I would indeed like you to give a practical answer to the questions I just repeated instead of more theoretical explanations...

Boylan But only if employees really understand – and that means theoretically – what «languages» and intercultural communication mean, will they be able freely – without Company Policy Statements – to adapt their talk to people of different cultures. I realize that theory is often boring and a waste of time. But that’s self-centred theory. Productive theory is different, it helps you decide creatively what to do in practical circumstances, so you don’t need a list of rules.

So imagine that you are the head of the Training Department in a multinational. You want to organize language classes for your international managers: what will you tell your teachers to do?

SIETAR Journal Well, on the basis of what we said about «languages», I wouldn’t tell them to concentrate on grammar rules and vocabulary, that’s for sure! Even the usual ‘dialogue’ exercises are insufficient because they treat language as words to be repeated, there’s no ‘will to mean anything’. The same applies to the usual Landeskunde explanations:
they get you to understand the cultural differences but not to feel them. And, as you said, just understanding (or just feeling) is not enough.

Boylan Right. And thus the importance of theorizing language: it can help you understand why traditional language courses produce mediocre results. And why traditional Intercultural Communication training seldom manages to change trainees’ habits. On the positive side, now: what would you tell teachers to do?

SIETAR Journal I would tell the teachers to get the students to start thinking like the people they will be communicating with. More than thinking: trying to feel the same things, wanting the same things. Because language, we said, is a desire to shape the world in a certain way to express oneself.

Boylan That’s right.

SIETAR Journal Except I don’t know what this means in practice. How can you teach people to will things differently, in order to mean things differently?

Boylan Well, now that you have got the idea, you’ll be able to invent appropriate exercises. Feel free to borrow the ones I describe on my web site, for example in the paper Seeing and Saying Things in English, at – or just enter and follow the links.

Teaching languages means teaching learners to want differently. This is the key to learning a language culturally, for intercultural communication. It guarantees understanding because both speaker and hearer are using not just the same verbal forms but the same inner language. Not completely, of course (because a hearers’ inner language includes sub-cultures, too), but to a good degree.

Now if we were to define intercultural communication theoretically, you would be able to do even more. For example, create empathy with an interlocutor at the beginning of a conversation, in order to map her/his subcultures and peculiar Erlebnis landscape: the source of her/his idiolect. And you’ll need to understand and use that idiolect when the conversation gets hot.

SIETAR Journal Of course, time has run out just when we’re getting to the best part! And you were also going to say something about the future of German, weren’t you?

Boylan It’s an old entertainer’s trick, you know: Always leave them asking for more! In any case, as for empathy, the best things are written in German: Edith Stein, Husserl and, of course, Gadamer.

And as for the future of German, I recommend reading what Antonio Gramsci says about how languages acquire hegemony through a dialectic between the economic power of the people who speak them, and the winning ideologies they manage to elaborate. American English has proven this insight to be true on the world scene. And for historical reasons it is easy to predict that, within Europe, it will be German, not British (or American) English, that will triumph precisely for the reasons Gramsci gives. The French will also compete, of course, and intelligently: they are strong on inventing winning ideologies – but not strong enough economically. Anyway, if you like, we can talk about this as well, another time.

SIETAR Journal Thank you for this interview.

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Literature