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THE ELUSIVE CONCEPT OF CULTURE

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Abstract – It is widely assumed that communication in English as a lingua franca is of its very nature inter-cultural. But the concept of culture is itself indeterminate. It is generally defined as the socially shared conventions of belief and behavior of particular communities, but the concept of community is similarly indeterminate. Communities exist and co-exist in different sizes from micro to macro across a spectrum of specificity, and each can be said to be associated with its own particular culture. Although it may be sociolinguistically convenient to focus on the macro end of the spectrum, communication is enacted at all levels by the same process of bringing about schematic convergence by means of varied linguistic resources. From this pragmatic perspective, the use of ELF is no more and no less intercultural or multilingual than any other communicative activity.

Keywords: intercultural; culture; community; schematic convergence; ELF communication.

1. Introduction

This conference is the culmination of the research that has been carried out in the project of the same name under the directorship of Professor Guido. Let me first of all congratulate Professor Guido and her colleagues on their achievement. Their research is a major contribution to ELF study, engaging as it does with issues of socio-political significance concerning how ELF communication is enacted in unequal encounters, which is such a pervasive phenomenon in the contemporary globalized world. This research is not only in the national but very definitely in the international interest.

The title of both project and conference refers to this communication as intercultural, and this term is routinely used in discussions of ELF, so much so that it seems to be supposed that ELF communication is distinctive in being intercultural, just as it has recently been proposed that ELF communication is distinctive in being multilingual. So are these two concepts implicationally related, one presupposing the other? I want to be provocative on this occasion, play the role of Devil's Advocate, and raise questions about this way of conceptualizing ELF – about what it means for an interaction to be intercultural or multilingual. Since the term intercultural denotes a relationship between cultures, the first question to consider is what actually

we mean by a culture?

2. The concept of culture

People react to the idea of culture in different ways: some positive, some negative. One way finds expression in the saying "When I hear the word culture, I reach for my gun". The origin of this saying is itself highly controversial since it is actually a somewhat inaccurate translation of "Wenn ich Kultur höre ... entsichere ich meine Browning!" in a play by the German writer Hanns Johst in 1933 – and performed to celebrate Hitler's birthday.

I also react rather negatively to hearing the word culture, but let me hasten to add, for very different reasons. When I hear the word, I reach for a dictionary. Here we are offered a number of different definitions of the term. In the Cambridge dictionary,[1] for example, one of them tells us that culture is

> music, art, theatre, literature, etc.

Another that culture is

> the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time.

These entries define two general ideas about culture which are very different, and the difference has sometimes been indicated by graphological variants of the word itself. Culture, with an upper case C is generally recognized as different from culture with a lower case c – big C and little c. This suggests that these are also versions of essentially the same thing. But the question then arises as to what this sameness is conceived to be. Big C is generally taken to refer to works of art of one kind or another, as represented in theatres, cinemas, concert halls, art galleries. Big C can be said to be something that people can engage with without overt participation, without themselves directly and productively involved.

Little c, on the other hand refers to the values, beliefs, practices of everyday social life which people are directly involved as participants, and which indeed define them as members of their community. People are part of little c but apart from big C. The distinguishing feature of big C is that it represents a different dimension of reality, one that does not conform to conventionalized norms of common and communally accepted ways of thinking but one that can nevertheless be apprehended as related to it – a reality, one might say, other than the actual. There is, in this sense, an

[1] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/culture.

imagined correspondence between Big C and little c but no direct connection. I am aware that this way of conceiving of their relationship is not one that everyone would agree with – indeed it runs counter to the prevalent view is that art should directly address current socio-political issues, thereby effacing what I see as a defining distinction. In my view, if the Big C of art is conventionalized in terms of the social commonalities of little c it ceases to exist. What art does is to represent what is ultimately an individual vision for which there can be no socialized version.

I have argued for making a distinction along these lines before – indeed here at the University of Salento some years ago when I had the honour of giving a lectio magistralis (Widdowson 2017, 2020) and it is not my purpose in this present talk to dwell upon the distinction. My concern here is with investigating little c: the concept of culture that informs the sociolinguistic study of language use in general. And what makes the investigation pertinent to the present occasion is that this concept also figures prominently in the more particular study of English as a lingua franca.

Culture in this sense is, as the dictionary definition puts it,

> the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time[2].

Since the group is defined by what its members have in common, it constitutes a community. And since their shared and customary ways of thinking and behaving are naturally given linguistic expression, culture and language are taken to be inseparably intertwined and interdependent. So culture, community and language are assumed to be bound together in a kind of indivisible trinity. Hence the traditional assumption that learning the language of a particular community must involve an understanding of its culture.

This is made explicit in the title of the well-known *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*, now in its third edition, which, it tells us on its cover

> Gets to the heart of the language.[3]

Here two elements of the trinity are presented as implicationally related: knowing English culture gets you to the heart of the English language. The third element, community, makes an appearance in the blurb of the book:

[2] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/culture.
[3] *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*. 3rd ed. (Summers 2005).

> This dictionary is designed to get to the heart of American and British English language and culture.[4]

So the English language is represented as inextricably meshed with the culture of these two native speaking communities, those that reside in Kachru's privileged Inner Circle (Kachru 1985).

3. The concept of community

But the concept of community is as elusive as that of culture. The term is used indiscriminately to refer to any group of people no matter how tenuously they are seemingly connected by common concerns. Thus, reference is frequently made to the international community, and to the community of the 27, nations of the European Union. But the term is also used to refer to other smaller groups linked by local networks of interaction: residents in the same village or neighbourhood, members of the same religious fraternity or sorority, people who share the same hobby, or belong to the same golf club. The term is applied equally to almost any group of people, great and small, as if they were all, in some way, conceptually equivalent.

One must suppose that there is something these different groups have in common that prompts the use of the same term to refer to them and it can only be that their members are assumed to share certain beliefs, values, interests and therefore certain ways of using language to express them – in short, what makes them a community is their shared linguaculture. So the trinity of community, culture, language works its mysterious and universal way in all manifestations of communicative interaction, vastly different in scale though they be.

One conclusion that might be drawn from this is that it is fundamentally mistaken to represent English, as the Longman dictionary does, as having a uniquely privileged association with the culture of Inner Circle communities. This, as is well known, was challenged by Kachru, whose initiative led to the recognition of World Englishes as equally valid varieties of the language, expressive of the cultures of ex-colonial Outer Circle communities. But these communities are already established, readily identified as associated with nation states. What of the other small scale communities I mentioned earlier? Presumably they too have their own distinctive cultures. But if a community and its culture are defined by common concerns, interests, values and so on, the term should logically apply to any group of people that satisfies these criteria: not only members of the

[4] *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture*. 3rd ed. (Summers 2005).

same nation or even the same church or club or neighbourhood, but also of the same family, or indeed any couple of people who share what W.H. Auden refers to as 'the tiny world of lovers' arms'.

So it would seem that we have a proliferation of communities and corresponding cultures ranged along a scale of magnitude from macro to mini to micro: different varieties of community and culture, with varieties of language, the third element in the trinity, to go with them: an infinity of dialects, sociolects, registers and genres. This, one might object, is simply a reductio ad absurdum and to give these terms such a wide range of reference robs them of any conceptual significance. Perhaps so, but then where on the continuum does one draw the line between what is cultural and what is not? On what criteria is a linguacultural variety be in principle defined?

4. Monolingualism and multilingualism

In practice, it is convenient to draw the line so as to include large scale communities and cultures and disregard the others – not only convenient, but necessary, if sociolinguistics is to make any statements of significance at all. But this, of course, inevitably leaves out of account not only the small scale communities, but also how communities and cultures of all sizes interact with others through the co-existing multiplicity of their membership. For of course people communicate with each other across communities as well as within them. This is the pragmatic process whereby interlocutors negotiate meaning and relate to each other by taking account of their differences of world view, ways of thinking and so on, adjusting and accommodating to each other as they see fit. In cases where communication is enacted between members of large scale communities, especially those identified by different languages, this pragmatic process is said to be intercultural, or crosscultural, or transcultural. Thus interculturality is closely associated with multilingualism.

It might be sociolinguistically convenient to assume this association, but there is no reason to suppose, as far as I can see, that the actual pragmatic process of so-called inter-cultural multilingual communication is essentially different from any other. Much has been written about the difference between monolingualism and multilingualism, usually, these days at least, representing multilinguals as having a wider range of cultural experience and linguistic resource available to them than monolinguals, who are assumed to be lingually and culturally impoverished in comparison. I am not myself aware of any empirical findings that would lend credence to this assumption.

For there is nothing mono about the actual language use of monolinguals. That too draws variably on a wide range of linguistic resource as appropriate to context and purpose. Where this resource can be identified as a 'different language', this can be described as the multilingual

phenomenon of code switching, and distinguished from style shifting which is taken to occur within the 'same language' (Ervin-Tripp 2001). But the style shifting of monolinguals is pragmatically not an essentially different phenomenon from the code switching of multilinguals. Even the linguistic distinction between them is of very doubtful validity since when languages are brought into contact in the communicative process, encodings from each are naturally appropriated in different degrees of assimilation so that it is often impossible to distinguish a code switch from a style shift on formal linguistic grounds.

The opposition of mono and multilingualism depends on the supposition that language takes the form of bounded and enclosed languages or language varieties, each with its own distinctive linguistic features. And each with its own distinctive culture. So cultures are correspondingly multi also. Multilinguals are thought to be more linguistically and communicatively adept than mere monolinguals because they have acquired more than one linguacultural competence, monolinguals only one. So multilingualism is taken to be unquestionably a good thing, and there is an extensive literature praising its merits and promoting its cause. Nobody, as far as I know puts in a good word for monolingualism – it is generally considered somewhat reprehensible: something to be deplored and where possible opposed.

5. ELF, multilingualism and interculturality

How you might reasonably ask has all this got to do with the theme of this conference? I think it has everything to do with it. It has recently been declared that because ELF usage often bears traces of other languages, this should be recognized as its defining feature and so accordingly ELF should be radically reconceptualised as English as a multilingua franca: EMLF (Jenkins 2015). These multilingual features, it is insisted, are not simply instances of code-switching, but something less clear-cut, more nuanced – more like shifting than switching indeed, more shifty, one might say perhaps. Be that as it may, these multilingual features can obviously only be recognized by identifying them as originating from different lingual codes. So although it is insisted that ELF is not a linguistic variety what is said to make it distinctive is that it is a kind of varied linguistic usage which is a composite of different languages.

But this multilingualism does not make ELF distinctive as communicative use. As I have argued, all language users, whether they are categorized as monolingual or multilingual draw on a varied range of lingual resources. The fact that in the case of ELF users these can be identified as deriving from different linguistic codes – different languages associated with different communities and cultures – may be of sociolinguistic interest, but it

does not make the communicative process they are engaged in pragmatically different. ELF users communicate in just the same way as everybody else. They too use whatever means they have at their disposal to negotiate meanings and relationships, shifting expediently along their repertoire as they go along.

ELF communication is said to be different not only because the means are multilingual but also because these means are inextricably bound up with the multicultural concepts and values embodied in the different languages that ELF users bring to their interactions. So their negotiation of meanings and relationships involves taking cultural differences into account. In consequence, it would seem to follow that if ELF is defined as multilinguistic usage, then what is distinctive about its communicative use is that it is intercultural. ELF users exploit multilingual means to interact across the cultures of their different communities. So it is not surprising to find that interculturality figures prominently in the first section of the ELF Handbook in which ELF is conceptualized and positioned as an area of study (Jenkins et al 2018).

The term culture, as I pointed out earlier, has a wide and indeterminate range of reference, making the concept elusive of definition. So how is it conceptualized in the inter-cultural communication of ELF? We turn to the article on inter-cultural communication in the ELF Handbook (Baker 2018). Here it is made clear that culture is not conceived as being only associated with large scale communities like nations, but also those of smaller scale, although where the line is to be drawn on the continuum I referred to earlier is left unclear. Nor is culture conceived of as a stable construct, but rather, like language, as variable, dynamic, emergent. For this reason it is said to be preferable to think of ELF not as an inter-cultural activity, which implies a relationship between separate and stable entities, but as trans-cultural, whereby ELF users transcend cultural boundaries and fuse or mesh their cultures to create a third space of cultural identity.

6. Cultural third space and schematic convergence

But if culture is defined in terms of shared assumptions, beliefs, values and so on it is no different from the preconceptions and expectations of what is customary or normal, the schematic representations of reality, by which we all take our bearings in communicative activity. These schemata are what characterize the way of thinking of all communities from the macro to the micro, and indeed all the way down to the individual, for ultimately we all have our own schematic identity, formed by our individual histories. And these schemata are projected into our intended meanings and influence how

we interpret the meanings of others. The creating of a third space is not confined to certain kinds of communication deemed to be inter-cultural. There is always a third space in that the very act of communicating necessarily involves schematic convergence, some correspondence and inter-connection between different conceptions of normality, mind-sets, ways of thinking. Without such convergence, no communication would take place at all.

In communication people negotiate a relationship with each other by a continual process of schematic adaptation and identity-positioning in flight – acculturating we might say – as they go along. All communicative interactions are what Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) refer to as 'acts of identity' and as the participants in a communication position themselves in relation to each other, so are their identities adapted accordingly. All communication is trans-schematic. Canagarajah (2013, p. 162) suggests that what is distinctive about people engaged in what he calls 'translingual practice' is that

> they accommodate the different norms of English that people bring from different places to the translocal space.

But communication always involves some accommodation to deal with such differences to achieve convergence in different contexts, or translocal spaces. In this respect, from the perspective of pragmatics there is nothing specifically translingual about such a practice: it is just lingual.

Of course, the degree of convergence or shared space will vary, and the difficulty in achieving it will obviously depend on the degree of difference in the initial schematic states of mind of the interactants, and what purpose they have in engaging in the interaction in the first place. But this also applies to the 'monolingual' communication that is enacted between people from diverse minor communities where different cultural preconceptions need to be reconciled. 'Monolinguals' who differ in ethnicity, social class, or religious and political belief are confronted with the same problem of schematic convergence as people involved in 'translingual practice', as, to take just two examples, the current conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria make all too obvious. Even the communication within the micro cultures of the smallest of communities, that of the married couple, will, in spite of having a language in common, on occasion call for the negotiation of differences to achieve pragmatic convergence, as is well, documented in Tannen 1990. I am trying to converge with you as I speak, but I do not think of this as creating a cultural third space or that I am engaged in inter-cultural communication. I am just trying to communicate. And I am doing so, I should add, by using English as a lingua franca that has no obvious traces of multilingualism.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the term culture should be restricted

to apply to the socially shared schemata of large scale communities, as indeed has generally been the practice of sociolinguists and ethnographers. And it may well be, as the Salento research reveals so impressively, that such schemata are of particular significance in the unequal encounters that are the object of its enquiry, in that it is the difference between them in the minds of the interactants that poses particular problems of convergence. In this case, it can be said to be appropriate to refer to the inter-schematic communication as inter-cultural.

But I think we need to note that these encounters are not only unequal because of the cultural schematic differences between the interactants. They are unequal also because of the different role and status assigned to the interactants, and the different, often conflicting purposes and outcomes they seek to achieve in the interaction, and these inequalities will often be forbidding obstacles to convergence. And ultimately it is how interactants make pragmatic use of language as individuals that will determine the outcome.

So what I am suggesting is that although ELF communication might bear traces of other languages, and the presence of other schematic presuppositions identified as cultural, these, though of sociolinguistic interest, are not its defining features. All communication involves the use of variable pragmatic use of a range of linguistic resources and the bringing together of schematic differences into convergence. In this respect, ELF is no different in kind from any other natural language use.

7. The distinguishing feature of ELF communication

So what does make ELF different? I think what distinguishes ELF from what has been taken to be typical language use is that it is a way of communicating that denies the trinity of language/community/culture which has traditionally been invoked in the sociolinguistic description of communal communication. ELF reveals the process of communication in general that underlies its manifestations in particular languages and communities. It shows how people can bring very different schematic representations of the world into convergence by using linguistic resources without conforming to the encoding rules and conventions of usage that define the real or proper English of native speaking communities (for further discussion see Widdowson 2015, 2020). The product of this process, the text of this discourse, as I would say, will of course bear traces of different ‘languages’ and different ‘cultures’, and these will no doubt be of sociolinguistic interest. But they are incidental to an understanding of the more general lingual and schematic pragmatics of ELF communication.

Understanding English as a lingua franca, as Barbara Seidlhofer pointed out several years ago in her book that bears that very title (Seidlhofer 2011), calls for a radical reconsideration of the relevance for ELF of established ideas about competence and community, and, I would add, of the elusive concept of culture.

Bionote: Henry Widdowson began his career teaching English literature at the University of Indonesia. He then worked with teachers of English for several years in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and then subsequently taught at the universities of Edinburgh, London, Essex and Vienna. He was a founding editor of the journal *Applied Linguistics* and for thirty years acted as applied linguistics adviser to Oxford University Press. He has lectured and written extensively on applied linguistics, discourse analysis and language teaching and his books include *Defining Issues in English Language Teaching* (2003), *Text, Context, Pretext* (2004), *Discourse Analysis* (2007) and *On the Subject of English* (2020). Now in relative retirement, he is Professor Emeritus, University of London, and Honorary Professor at the University of Vienna.

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