

Empire and Ethics

Towards a Normative Theory of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

In this paper I identify key features of communication and then ask in what ways power is a feature of intercultural communication. I discuss this by making use of key concepts from postcolonial theory: Empire, marginalisation and hybridity. Secondly, I discuss how the understanding of intercultural communication practice and theory should be informed by ethical considerations. I argue the presence of Empire puts a moral obligation on the relatively powerful to be aware of his or her role and function when communicating with the relatively weak and vulnerable.

Keywords: *communication, theory, power, ethics, liberation*

Introduction

Communication is a task and a challenge. It is a task, in the sense that communication will be affected by the efforts put into it. And as communication is what you make of it, the experience of the communication as good or bad will rely on the effort made to make communication work. Making the process of communicating into a good experience can be, however, quite difficult. There can be misunderstandings or deep-felt mistrust, both of which, in different ways, can make communication frustratingly difficult. In a time characterized by globalization and increased intercultural communication, culture, and more specifically cultural differences, is often seen as an important root cause of such difficulties. While shared culture is regarded as something that makes communication easier and less problematic, communication between people with different cultural backgrounds is seen as more of a challenge. Accordingly, communication represents a challenge and is in this sense also a problematic practice. This is in fact the very notion that prepared the ground for, and constitutes the *raison d'être* for, intercultural communication as an academic discipline in its own right.

Against this backdrop, it is of no surprise that the problems and challenges of communication practice make up one of the key topics in communication studies. In order to make communication more effective or qualitatively better, problems need to be identified and overcome. The problem I want to address in this article relates to these general observations but focuses more specifically on the challenge power represents in the practice of intercultural communication. The role and function power plays in communication, is largely disregarded in the scholarly literature on intercultural communication. As the Danish scholar in the field, Iben Jensen, has noted, the discipline “lacks theoretical consolidation – especially in relation to the aspect of power” (Jensen 2006:91). Some exceptions in addition to Jensen’s own works can be noted (Blommaert 1995; Tubbs and Moss 2003; Holliday 2011), but to a large extent her statement remains true today. If power is addressed, it is hardly discussed in any systematic fashion or explicitly in relation to theory development.

This contrasts with the obvious role power plays in all kinds of human interaction, intercultural communication included. When communicating, people are persuaded, change their minds, resist and oppose. In fact, power is an important aspect of all kinds of communication and makes itself known in different ways depending on the participant, the immediate situation and the wider context. Examples

include the social worker's meeting with the refugee, the ethnic majority male's argument with the ethnic minority salesman, or when employees of different cultural backgrounds are asked to work together. But, as propaganda, manipulation and brainwashing also are forms of communication, there seems to be moral limits on what can be called good and morally responsible communication. Accordingly, it is unfortunate that ethics is also not given the attention it deserves in the scholarly literature on intercultural communication. Most introductions to the field of intercultural communication do include presentations of ethical theory or have sections that explicitly address the moral aspects of practical intercultural communication, but this is hardly elaborated or discussed critically (see for example Samovar and Porter 2004:327-330). Within the field of communication ethics, there are more and some important contributions (Arnett and Roberts 2008; Cheney, May and Munshi 2011), but intercultural communication ethics has been given less attention, though there are exceptions even here (Casmir 1997; Nørgaard 2004; Ting-Toomey 2011).

In other words, the academic field of intercultural communication needs to reflect more on the role and implications of power and ethics in intercultural communication practice. This two-fold interest will also structure the present discussion. I make the common day-to-day experience of verbal intercultural communication my starting point, and I begin by asking how power is a feature of this. The question is addressed from a postcolonial perspective which makes Empire, marginalisation and hybridity key concepts in the analysis. Against the background of this initial analysis, I then discuss how intercultural communication studies and intercultural communication theory should be informed by ethical considerations.

Accordingly, the aim of this paper is to develop an understanding of intercultural communication that explicitly considers the role and importance of power in this phenomenon. I will argue that power is a far too complex concept to function as a research criterion for IC, but its key role in human interaction makes it necessary to address power issues explicitly in intercultural communication research. For this reason I want to develop an understanding of intercultural communication which is conscious and critical of how power is an aspect of every intercultural encounter, as well as sensitive to the ethical dimensions of intercultural communication. In short, I want to make a contribution towards a normative theory of intercultural communication. Clearly, power is not the only factor intercultural communication research or a normative theory of intercultural communication needs to take into account, but due to the limited attention given to power issues in the field, this will be my main focus and interest in the following.

The Width and Depth of Communication

Communication is an everyday practice that takes place where- and whenever people meet. They meet in different ways – on the internet, as strangers on the bus etc. – but not least face-to-face in interpersonal communication. It is the latter kind of communication I have in mind in the following though the considerations made here certainly might have relevance beyond this setting. I thus also have primarily oral communication in mind, though much of what is said in the following will also be applicable to non-verbal or written communication. Accordingly, communication refers here primarily to interpersonal communication, and the role and responsibility of the individual actors involved in intercultural communication will be emphasised. In other words, communication is seen as a widespread practice that individuals and groups participate in and form according to the conditions, interpretations and expectations that shape the given situation. Communication is omnipresent, unavoidable and something very ordinary.

Accordingly, communication is also an integral and constitutive part of the human condition. In and through these everyday experiences of communicating with one another, individual beings are psychologically and socially recognized, acknowledged and recreated as human beings. The recognition achieved through communication can be intentional but also, and most importantly, is an unintentional effect of people's everyday communication. In other words, communication refers to a process that ties people together. This implies that it is through communication that individuals become social beings, and relationships, groups and societies are formed. By implication, however, failed, bad or destructive communication has corresponding negative psychological and social implications. Being dependent on communication to be seen as a fellow human being, the individual is also vulnerable to the effects of the

lack, or inferior quality, of the same. In other words, there are both great prospects and deep pitfalls in communication, immense gains as well as potential loss and damage.

This dual character of communication as being a commonplace experience on the one hand, and an existential phenomenon on the other, can be described as the width and depth of communication respectively. Regarding its width, communication is a social phenomenon and a key entry point to the understanding of social processes in general and society as a whole. Regarding the depth of communication, this refers to the prime importance and existential necessity of communication to the individual. This implies that communication can be studied both through an actor and micro oriented analysis and a more macro oriented analysis. Communication involves individuals, but they are involved as social beings and communication establishes human relationships. These perspectives should not be understood as mutually exclusive, but rather be used in combination.

In addition to being in this sense inherently relational, communication is also highly situational. Communication might be an abstract term, but the social phenomenon of intercultural communication always takes place in concrete and specific situations. The situation is characterized by the possible choices of communication partners provided in the specific situation, the means of communication on offer, the communication channels being provided, frames of interpretation, etc. The situation is, in other words, defined both by the immediate and the wider contexts, and along a number of various dimensions: historical, economical, sociological, cultural etc. All of these contexts impact on the communicative process and an analysis and a theory of communication must take these situational factors into consideration.

Intercultural Communication

As it makes communication practice its primary study object, the academic discipline of intercultural communication is intrinsically linked to this common human experience of communicating with others. And as mentioned, the experience of cultural differences as a *problem* in interpersonal communication has been an important reference in much of the scholarly literature in the field. But intercultural communication can be understood in many ways – as a means to an end, as a holiday pastime, a business strategy, as interpersonal communication or as communication between different civilizations (Asante, Gudykunst and Newmark 1989; Holliday, Kullman and Hyde 2004; Jandt 2004; McDaniel, Samovar and Porter 2006). Intercultural communication can also be studied in different ways: from a hermeneutical perspective (Nynäs 2001), a humanistic perspective (Illman and Nynäs 2005) and with a contextual approach (Neuliep 2009). Not surprisingly, there is a wide range of theories of intercultural communication (Semati 2004; Martin and Nakayama 2007). In fact, the very definition of intercultural communication will depend on the theories and perspectives adopted.

One approach to intercultural communication is to make general theories of communication or cultural analysis the starting point. Often communication is understood on the basis of a functionalist model, focusing on the transfer of a message from a sender to a recipient and the various cultural factors that disturb this transmission and distort the message (Shannon and Weaver 1949). Other and more recent approaches emphasise the relationship between language, culture and communication and how the interpretation of the message is an on-going and reciprocal process where both sender and recipient are involved. These perspectives relate to, and in part rely on, contributions from a wide range of scholars, including those of Georg Herbert Mead (Mead 1962), Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer 1975) and Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1984).

As a separate field of inquiry intercultural communication has focused on the exchange between people of different cultural backgrounds. Often this has been interpreted as communication between people who regard themselves (or are regarded by others) as belonging to distinct and different national cultures, e.g. between Norwegians and Japanese, Swedes and South-Africans etc. (Hofstede 2001). However, awareness of globalization and cultural pluralism within the nation state, as well as cultural communities across national borders (Bhabha 1994), challenges this understanding of intercultural communication (Casmir 1999). Considering, however, the fact that intercultural communication takes place not only across national borders but also in everyday communication in multi-cultural societies, others have

adopted more explicitly poststructuralist perspectives accentuating the complex relationship between actor and structure, language use, discourses and subject positions (Jensen 2003).

It is also often pointed out how globalization and migration bring people closer together and provide increased access to information and communication. This aspect of globalization should, however, not overshadow its downside. Many groups stand outside the processes that bring others closer together (Bauman 1998; Scholte 2005). Accordingly, some groups miss out on the opportunities and benefits that follow from the globalization process for others. They are affected by globalization, but primarily by its negative consequences. Thus they become the victims of globalization. Consequently, globalization creates not only equality and sameness, but also inequality and new differences. In fact, and as Martin and Nakayama have noted: "We are not equal in our intercultural encounters, nor can we ever be equal. Long histories of imperialism, colonialism, exploitation, wars, genocide, and more leave cultural groups out of balance when they communicate" (Martin and Nakayama 2007:123). At its best, intercultural communication practice can be a mechanism of inclusion of the individual into groups, communities and the wider multi-cultural society. At its worst, it has the opposite effect and contributes to social exclusion.

It follows that power is an important dimension of globalization, including the intercultural communication that accompanies it. It also follows that globalization and intercultural communication must be regarded as a moral challenge, assessed and practiced on the basis of ethical reflection. In this sense, the role of power and ethics, and the imperative to discern the role of power and its ethical implications, points to the importance of acquiring and developing intercultural competence (Lustig and Koester 2006). In addition it invites the scholarly community to reconsider both the practice and theory of intercultural communication in light of a nuanced and critical assessment of the role of power and ethics in this field.

Power

A frequently used, and even more frequently quoted, definition of power, is the one provided by Weber: "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance..." (Weber, Roth and Wittich 1978:53). Robert Dahl's definition, also often referred to, is quite similar: "A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Dahl 1957:202-03). Both of these definitions emphasise the relational character of power and highlight the asymmetrical relationship between the parties. Power is something found between people. As intercultural communication refers to the processes that establish ties between people, it is of no surprise that power makes itself known also in this context. We are reminded, however, that the relationships thus established and sustained will be asymmetrical relationships.

Another, and more recent, contribution to the study of power and power issues is Steven Lukes' *Power. A Radical View* (Lukes 2005). Lukes distinguishes between three dimensions of power: decision-making, agenda-setting and preference-shaping. Dahl's definition is an example of the first: decision making power. There is power at play when resistance can be overcome. The second dimension of power adds, however, that power is not only at play when resistance is overcome, but also when viewpoints, resistance and issues are kept outside the on-going debate. Controversial issues are not, or they cannot be, put on the agenda (Bachrach and Baratz 1970). The third dimension is even less tangible, as it refers to the kind of power that creates needs, ideas and expectations about what is right and wrong, good and bad, important and unimportant (Foucault 1980). This understanding of power points to its complex and ubiquitous character. Power is everywhere and an unavoidable dimension of human interaction, and thus also intercultural communication.

Postcolonial theory offers a perspective and some key concepts that are helpful in order to nuance the understanding of the power dimension of intercultural communication further (Shome and Hegde 2002). The roots of postcolonial theory can be traced back to historical colonialism and the postcolonial condition, meaning the process of decolonization and independence after WWII. Postcolonial scholars (Gandhi 1998; Schwarz and Ray 2000; Hiddleston 2009) and the debates regarding imperialism have shown how power is not only about military, political or financial power, but that it also makes itself known through language and discourses that imply exclusion. It is in this context that the concept of

Empire is introduced (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2002; Negri, Hardt and Zolo 2008). This can be described as “massive concentrations of power that permeate all aspects of life and that cannot be controlled by any one actor alone” (Rieger 2007:2). *Empire* is, in other words, present in subtle and implicit ways. For this reason it is critical to expose this feature of intercultural communication practice.

A postcolonial perspective also emphasises the relationship between the centre and the margins, the oppressor and the oppressed. This is referred to as the issue of marginalisation. The relationship between the strong and the subaltern – the marginalized or and voiceless – is, however, not seen as clear-cut or fixed, but is rather understood as dynamic and multi-faceted (Guha and Spivak 1988). The concept of *hybridity* highlights this blurring of distinctions and combination of identities (Bhabha 1994). It thus reminds us that the relationship between the strong and the weak, the oppressor and the oppressed, is complex and ambiguous and must be considered carefully in this context. In other words, the universal perspective considered an integral part of colonialism and imperialism is replaced within postcolonialism by a pluralist perspective, though with a normative positioning in solidarity with the relatively weak and oppressed.

Ethics

While I have used the postcolonial perspective as a tool to nuance the power dimension of intercultural communication, I will make use of liberation ethics to highlight its moral dimensions. By ethics I mean not primarily moral practice, but rather theoretical reflection and critical assessment of such practice (Pojman and Fieser 2011). Such ethical evaluations can be based on different sets of values or norms, and can also be made according to different procedures or weighting of competing or contradicting concerns. Ethical theories can be seen as systematic attempts at structuring such procedures and concerns. As such they are similar and related to what can be called ethical methods, meaning procedures to normatively evaluate specific actions or attitudes. Examples of such theories are duty or deontological ethics, consequentialist ethics (utilitarianism), virtue ethics and others. One key distinction is, however, between egocentric and altruistic ethics. Egocentric ethics prioritizes *oneself*, while altruistic ethics prioritizes *the Other*. As ethics implies a concern, at least to some degree, for the Other and not only for oneself, one might question if the former in fact should be considered an ethical theory.

With regard to intercultural communication, ethics is relevant as a critical tool for assessing the communicating parties' actions and attitudes. A normative theory of intercultural communication would seek to integrate ethical concerns in the very understanding of what intercultural communication is and how it should be practiced. The integration of ethical theory thus constitutes the very core of a *normative* theory of intercultural communication. The relationship between ethical theory and a normative theory of intercultural communication can, accordingly, be seen as the integration of theories. A normative theory of intercultural communication needs to integrate ethical *theory*, be it in the form of duty ethics, utilitarianism or virtue ethics.

The very notion of ethical theories is, however, challenged. One of the main criticisms of ethical theory is that they are by definition, independent of context, and for that reason remain abstract and of little relevance to real-life situations and moral conflicts or dilemmas (Fletcher 1997). Theory is in other words seen as a construction in contrast to, and in conflict with, contextual sensitivity and the latter is seen as having priority. The concern for sensitivity to the specific context is a highly relevant concern. As noted above, communication takes place in a wider context, is interpreted in light of this context and has an impact on it. The problem with dismissing ethical theory lies not in the emphasis on context, but the assumed conflict with a contextual and situational understanding of communication.

Rather than seeing theory as something insensitive to context, I see theory as an interpretative tool that can be used in order to understand the context. Theories in general, and ethical theories specifically, are *good* theories to the extent that they help us in understanding the context. Good theories are also critical theories, in that they force us to ask for, and investigate, aspects of the situation or context that might not be obvious or visible to us. Theories need, in other words, to be assessed according to this pragmatic criterion: the extent to which they help us understand a given phenomenon, situation or context and identify those aspects or dimensions that are ethically relevant.

The upshot of this is of course that some kind of meta-theory is needed to evaluate ethical theories. By which procedure or criteria can we assess suggested ethical theories? While this is certainly a question that deserves full attention, it is sufficient in this context to clarify the main criterion the suggested normative theory of intercultural communication will rely on. As ethics here is regarded as a value based concern for the Other, I will employ an ethical theory which explicitly makes this Other-concern its key feature. Further, as the issue of power and poverty is put centre stage in the present discussion, an ethical theory that explicitly concerns itself with such issues as preferable. These considerations have led me to liberation ethics. Liberation theology, and liberation ethics in their many versions, offer a fruitful perspective on power and communication through their shared attention to, and concern for, the poor, oppressed or marginalised (Dussel 1978; Bonino 1983; Gutiérrez 1988).

From the perspective of liberation ethics the presence of Empire puts a moral obligation on the relatively powerful to be aware of his or her role and function when communicating with the relatively weak and vulnerable, and to protect and promote the needs, rights and interests of the latter. In other words, there is a special moral responsibility on the part of the relatively strong to protect the relatively weak or vulnerable. By implication, the notion that "might is right", must in this perspective be dismissed. In this postcolonial perspective the ethics of the strong need to be challenged, reinterpreted and rephrased from the perspective of the colonized. In other words, increased power should be accompanied by increased responsibility.

Human rights and the respect for others and their feelings and agency put moral constraints on the way we should communicate. Although the freedom of speech is codified in the UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, this must thus be weighed against other rights and such normative concerns. The ethical perspective is not, however, limited to the protection of the underprivileged, but is also a tool to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate power (use). Accordingly, it is necessary to consider how ethical perspectives might contribute to understanding intercultural communication and the relationship between Empire and ethics in globalized and multi-cultural contexts.

Key ethical questions a normative theory of intercultural communication should address therefore include: Which ethical obligations and norms should guide the participants in intercultural communications? Whose interests and concerns should be taken into consideration, and who and what should have priority? Considering the role of Empire and the asymmetrical character of communication, this can be rephrased as a double question: Which norms and values should guide the strong and which should guide the subaltern? From this follows a double perspective on intercultural communication that can be labelled an ethics of the strong and an ethics of the subaltern respectively. The concept of power is too complex to constitute a research criterion in itself for intercultural communication, but a nuanced and critical awareness of power as a dimension of this form of human interaction is crucial for a proper analysis and understanding of intercultural communication practice.

Conclusion

Power plays a role in intercultural communication not simply in the form of explicit discrimination, threats or bullying, but in subtle and complex ways. For this reason it is critical to expose this feature of intercultural communication practice. I have used key concepts from postcolonial theory as critical tools in this analysis and in an attempt to contribute towards a normative theory of intercultural communication. Being aware of the power dimensions of intercultural communication draws our attention to the relationship between the communicating parties. Our attention moves away from an assumed understanding of this as an ideal relationship between equals, to one where communication becomes an issue of inequality. Awareness of power relationships enables sensitivity to the asymmetric relations that follow from being part of, and affected by, Empire in different ways. Accordingly, a normative theory of intercultural communication may in fact have relevance beyond intercultural communication, and also be found helpful in the analysis of human interaction in general. A closer ethical examination of the role of power in intercultural communication should thus in turn also inform ethical theory and debates regarding the applicability, limitations and relationship between different kinds of ethical theory.

While Empire points towards a critical discussion of the omnipresence of power and power relationships, ethics points in the direction of, and highlights the situation and lives of, the vulnerable, oppressed and relatively weak. Being aware of Empire and its impact on intercultural communication thus only increases the responsibility of the relatively powerful. Accordingly, there is a special moral responsibility on the part of the relatively strong to protect the relatively weak or vulnerable.

The implication is that intercultural communication needs to move away from a self-centred, to an Other-centred, perspective. The question should not be: How can the academic field of intercultural communication contribute to strengthening the strong?, but rather: How can the subaltern participate in intercultural communication? Against this background there seems to be a need to reconsider and reconstruct the academic field of intercultural communication. Communication is not simply about sender and recipient, the message and its interpretation. It is, in a fundamental way, about Empire and ethics.

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